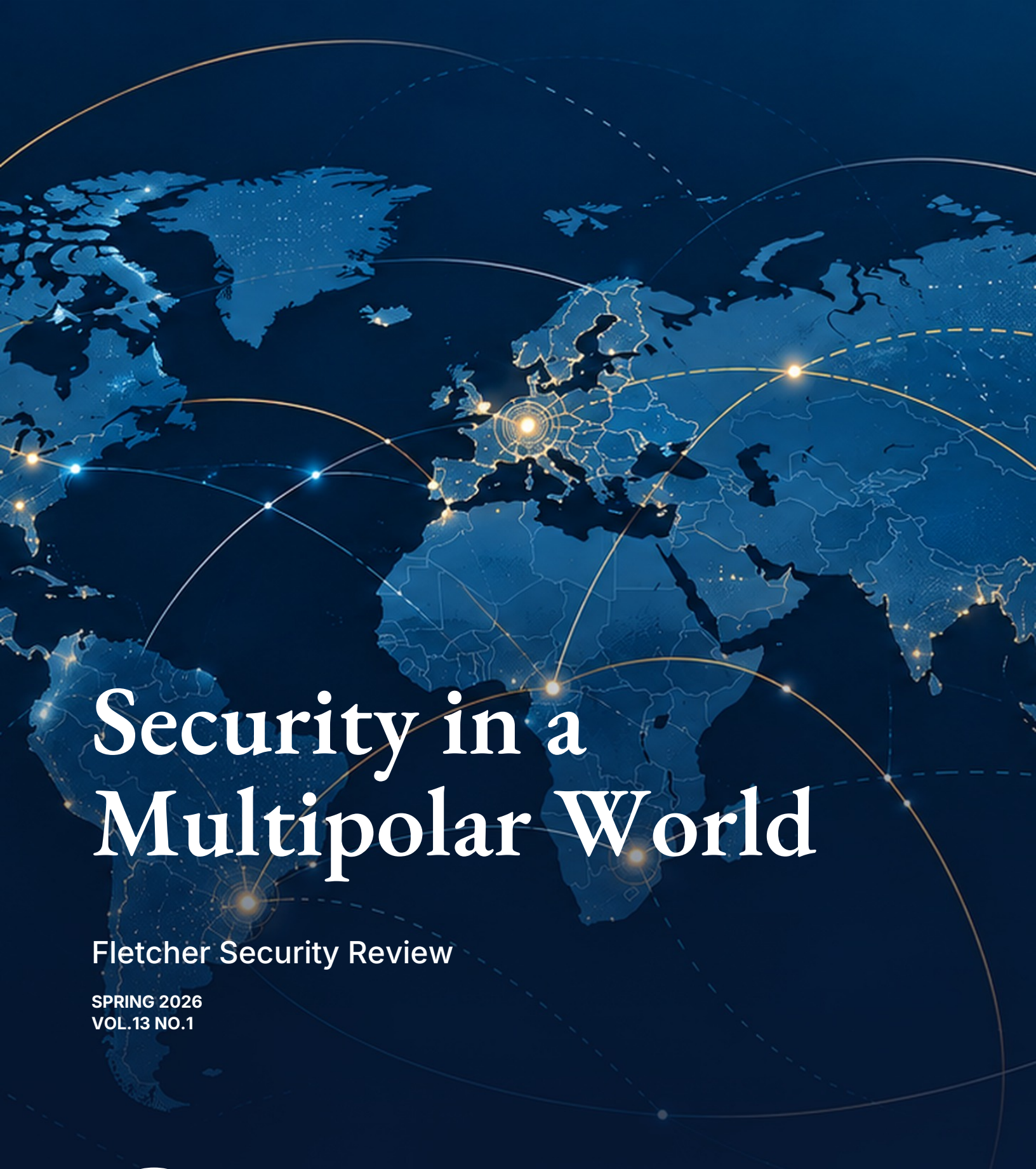


Security in a Multipolar World

Fletcher Security Review

SPRING 2026
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The Fletcher Security Review
Tufts University
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ABOUT FSR

Fletcher Security Review (FSR) is a print and online journal managed and edited by students at The Fletcher School at Tufts University. Drawing on the school's interdisciplinary academic approach, FSR engages established and emerging scholars, practitioners, and analysts across a range of security issues. For our contributors, FSR works to provide a forum through which to advance ideas and unique perspectives. This is sought in service of our dynamic audience, whose interests space traditional and nontraditional security topics. Ultimately, as a student-run publication, each edition of FSR is guided by the passions and perspectives of its editorial staff. To learn more, visit www.fletchersecurity.org.

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DEAR READERS,

We are honored and excited to share with you Volume 13 of the Fletcher Security Review. This edition of the Fletcher Security Review arrives as the underpinnings of the international security status quo are under threat.

The status quo of the rules-based order set in motion after World War II is being tested. As China continues to challenge the balance of power in the Pacific, the United States, the traditional lynchpin of the liberal international order, has shifted to a foreign policy more skeptical of the multilateral system.

Among this upheaval to the international order, middle powers have begun to acknowledge the need for a new system that diversifies security and increases their bargaining power. The European Union embodies this drive for change. While traditionally a close ally of the United States, the collection of European states with diverse foreign policies and military capabilities has recognized a need to reduce its reliance on America – a shift which itself may lead to an identity crisis for the Union.

Any discussion about the shifting world order today would be remiss if it did not also explore the impact of technological innovation. Both a cause and symptom of instability, the development of Large-Language-Model Artificial Intelligence is proceeding at a pace that vastly exceeds the capability our governments have to regulate them. AI technologies now have the potential both to be used as tools to wield in state competition and to fundamentally transform society.

This international landscape is one in which the international order is being tested – not just by its traditional state leaders, but also by the shifting dynamics of who holds corporate influence and power. We publish this edition at a time when state leaders and technology magnates alike hold the power to shape the future of international security.

These coalescing challenges and growing fractures in the international system inspired this year's theme: Security in a Multipolar World. To properly understand the implications of multipolarity, we considered it vital to source authors from a diverse set of backgrounds and viewpoints. We are incredibly excited to share the results of this search with you. Our authors have examined the implications of the changing world across regions and domains; they have even disputed the premise of multipolarity. From discussions about the shifting multipolar nuclear order, to populism, and to Great Power Competition in the age of AI, these pieces seek to offer a glimpse of where our international system is headed. We hope this issue can serve to enhance discussions around the fundamental conceptions and future of international security.

We would also like to take this space to acknowledge the loss of Professor Richard Shultz. The Director of the International Security Studies Program at Fletcher and the progenitor of this journal, Professor Shultz was a leader, mentor, and role model to generations of ISSP students, including us. We hope he'd be proud of this volume, and he will be dearly missed.

Betselot Dejene
Josh Burns
Editors-in-Chief

Matthew Davis
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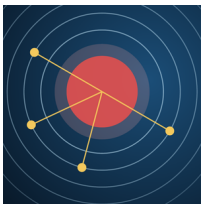
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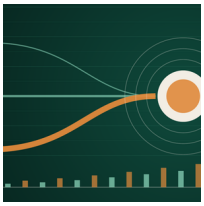
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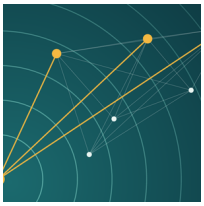
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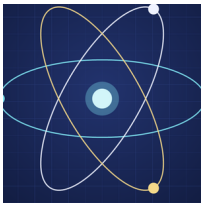
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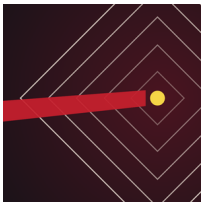
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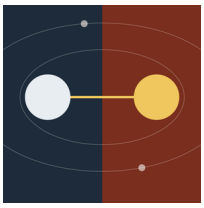
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Bits, Bytes and Bombs: Power, War and Conflict in the Age of Technology

An Interview with Dr. Sulmeyer

As we enter an increasingly multipolar world, traditional definitions of conflict, power and war are being fundamentally reshaped by rapid technological advancement, expanding competition beyond conventional battlefields into cyberspace, data infrastructure, AI and digital supply chains. In this evolving landscape, both state and non-state actors are leveraging technological capabilities to assert influence, disrupt adversaries and redefine deterrence, with intensifying competition between the US and China illustrating how control over critical technologies has become central to geo-political strategy. This year's edition of the Fletcher Security Review seeks to explore how emerging technologies are transforming the nature of power and conflict and the following questions aim to unpack these shifts and interrogate how we are navigating this era.

1. Much of the post-Cold War security architecture was designed around a unipolar moment - American technological supremacy, NATO interoperability standards, and the assumption that the United States could dominate the cyber domain much as it dominated the air and sea. Now, as we are moving into what many scholars describe as an emerging multipolar order, China has been fielding offensive cyber capabilities that rival or exceed those of many Western states and Russia has demonstrated a willingness to use cyberattacks as instruments of coercive statecraft short of war. Do you think the strategic logic of cyber operations has fundamentally changed? Do you believe the doctrinal frameworks the United States developed during the post-Cold War period are still adequate for the current environment?

Powerful question you ask and there's a lot there. On the U.S. side, I think the last big shift or change was in and around 2018. Three developments unlocked that change. First, you had the first Trump Administration announcing a cyber strategy for the Department of Defense called "Defend Forward." This gave a strategic context and rationale for not just building a force-in-waiting, but to set the conditions for disrupting adversary cyber efforts. Second, you had a statutory change by the U.S. Congress in the National Defense Authorization Act that clarified that cyber operations could be – and this is a term of art – traditional military activities. This may seem obvious now, but at the time, this was key to unlocking some intra-U.S. government friction. And third, the mid-term elections that year showed the power of the partnership between the National Security Agency and U.S. Cyber Command in protecting the country from foreign threats to U.S. elections.

If there is to be another big shift, it will probably be due more to the fast-paced developments of artificial intelligence. The traditional race between offense and defense has been accelerated, and it will be for decision-makers to decide how much autonomy they are comfortable with delegating on offense and on defense to keep competing in that race. It is also possible that AI unlocks the potential of truly strategic cyber attacks – attacks that we have not really seen historically. NotPetya caused something like $10B in financial damage, but in some sense that can be viewed as an attack that got out of hand by the perpetrators. The concern is that what's coming could make NotPetya look tactical by comparison.

2. From your vantage point, did the rise of a genuinely capable Chinese cyber apparatus change perceptions of risk tolerance, escalation management, and the relationship between offensive cyber operations and broader deterrence strategy?

We wonder this particularly due to China's approach to cyberspace seemingly blending civilian, commercial, and military actors in ways that make traditional deterrence frameworks (built around attributable state actors) enormously difficult to apply.

Deterrence as an approach to managing international conflict obviously has a deep history in theory and practice. And for whole-of-nation efforts to deter our adversaries from engaging in certain activities, it's wise to include cyber capabilities in the arsenal of tools that can help. But cyber operations do not on their face represent the kind of strategic capability that nuclear weapons did at the dawn of the Cold War. So while discussions about deterrence should include cyber operations, I think we have to look beyond deterrence to deal with the evolution of malicious cyber activity against the United States and our allies and partners.

I think the challenges of attribution for purposes of international statecraft are often overstated, and so in that regard, there's less of an obstacle for deterrence frameworks. Determining that there's a connection to a particular China-affiliated or Russia-affiliated group is not so much of an issue. Nor do I think the escalation concerns I recall from 10-15 years ago are as prevalent today, mostly because there's a lot of evidence now that shows cyber attacks have not proven to be all that escalatory. Whether states should or shouldn't react the ways they have to cyber attacks is a different question, but the record has been, to my mind, pretty clear.

3. Arms control has historically depended on verification, transparency, and a shared interest in avoiding mutual destruction. Cyberspace seems to resist almost all those conditions (capabilities are largely invisible, attribution is contested, and there is no agreed-upon threshold that separates an act of war from an act of espionage). Do you think any meaningful cyber arms control regime is achievable between great and rising powers in a multipolar world? If not, what does that mean for long-run strategic stability?

It's a great question to tie in the strategic frameworks from the Cold War to today's emerging technologies. The part I appreciate is the recognition that developments in one domain or through one technology can have outsized "destabilizing" effects on broader international relations. But based on how things have been and where I think they are going, I don't see most states having a lot of interest in an arms control regime. Even putting the issues of verification and transparency aside, I think the dual-use nature of the technology, among so many reasons, does not create a lot of incentive for states to pursue an arms control agenda for cyber capabilities.

4. Current technological competition is no longer just a story about state actors. The private sector now controls national security infrastructure in ways that governments did not anticipate and still struggle to govern. States like Russia, Iran, China, and North Korea are actively courting, coercing, and in some cases absorbing private technology firms into their national security apparatus. What are the governance challenges for democracies as they attempt to compete in the battle for the 21st-century technological revolution?

I think it begins with having more national security leaders of the future gain more exposure to these private firms so there's a little more fluency in public service about what they do and how they operate. That's a big opportunity for Fletcher and other programs to consider from a career development perspective what kinds of opportunities they could promote. I think it would be a good thing if we saw on people's

resumes some time spent at a frontier AI lab or a startup that aims to contribute to national security before they end up in public policy. Not a requirement, but not something to be discouraged.

I'm a believer in public-private partnerships, but I remember a lesson Joe Nye taught me at Harvard years ago. He cautioned me that a lot of folks will come out of the wood-work to "partner" with me. He advised discretion and encouraged me to look at those partnerships where 1+1 equals more than 2. Most of the time, he said, if you're lucky, a partnership is just 1+1=2. At worst, it's less than that because of the friction and process tax you pay. But those rare partnerships where what you achieve can only be had through the power of the partnership, that's where I'd focus and be most excited about.

"...cyber defense does matter: it's not hopeless."

5. The war in Ukraine has served as a kind of laboratory for cyber operations in conventional conflict, and the results have been surprising. The anticipated cyber catastrophe largely did not materialize in the way many predicted, even as kinetic warfare has caused devastation on a scale not seen in Europe since 1945. At the same time, the conflict has revealed an extraordinary degree of private sector involvement in the cyber defense of a sovereign state, with companies like SpaceX, Microsoft, Google, and Amazon playing roles that blur the line between commercial support and active participation in the war. What has Ukraine taught us about the relationship between cyber operations and conventional warfare in a modern great power conflict? Are these lessons analogous to a potential conflict scenario in the Indo-Pacific, where the geographic, infrastructural, and political conditions are radically different?

It is important for the audience to distinguish between cyber operations, information operations, and electronic warfare. I think there's been quite a lot of information operations and electronic warfare. The challenge with "knowing" about the cyber operations is that not all will be so public like the compromise of Viasat at the beginning of the war. Because cyber operations are a vehicle for other outcomes (such as reconnaissance) it is possible that there's been a lot of cyber activity between Ukraine and Russia but it is for intelligence and other more subtle purposes.

I also think one of the important take-aways is that cyber defense does matter: it's not hopeless. A lot of folks get frustrated and extremely pessimistic thinking that they have to secure everything perfectly all the time while the offense only has to be right once. To that I would say, like a good law school graduate, it depends. I think the Ukraine example shows us that the right investments in cyber defense can be quite helpful for protecting one's crown jewels. But that's not to say that cyber defense translates so clearly to territorial outcomes on a battlefield.

6. Artificial intelligence is one of the primary elements of modern military competition. The United States, China, Russia, among other states, are racing to successfully integrate AI into intelligence collection, targeting, logistics, and autonomous weapons systems. Each state is doing so with varying institutional, strategic, and civil-military cultures, and as well as different tolerances for algorithmic risk. Where do you see the greatest risks of AI-enabled instability or miscalculation in a potential conflict scenario? Do you believe there is a realistic pathway toward the development of "rules of the road" for military applications of AI?

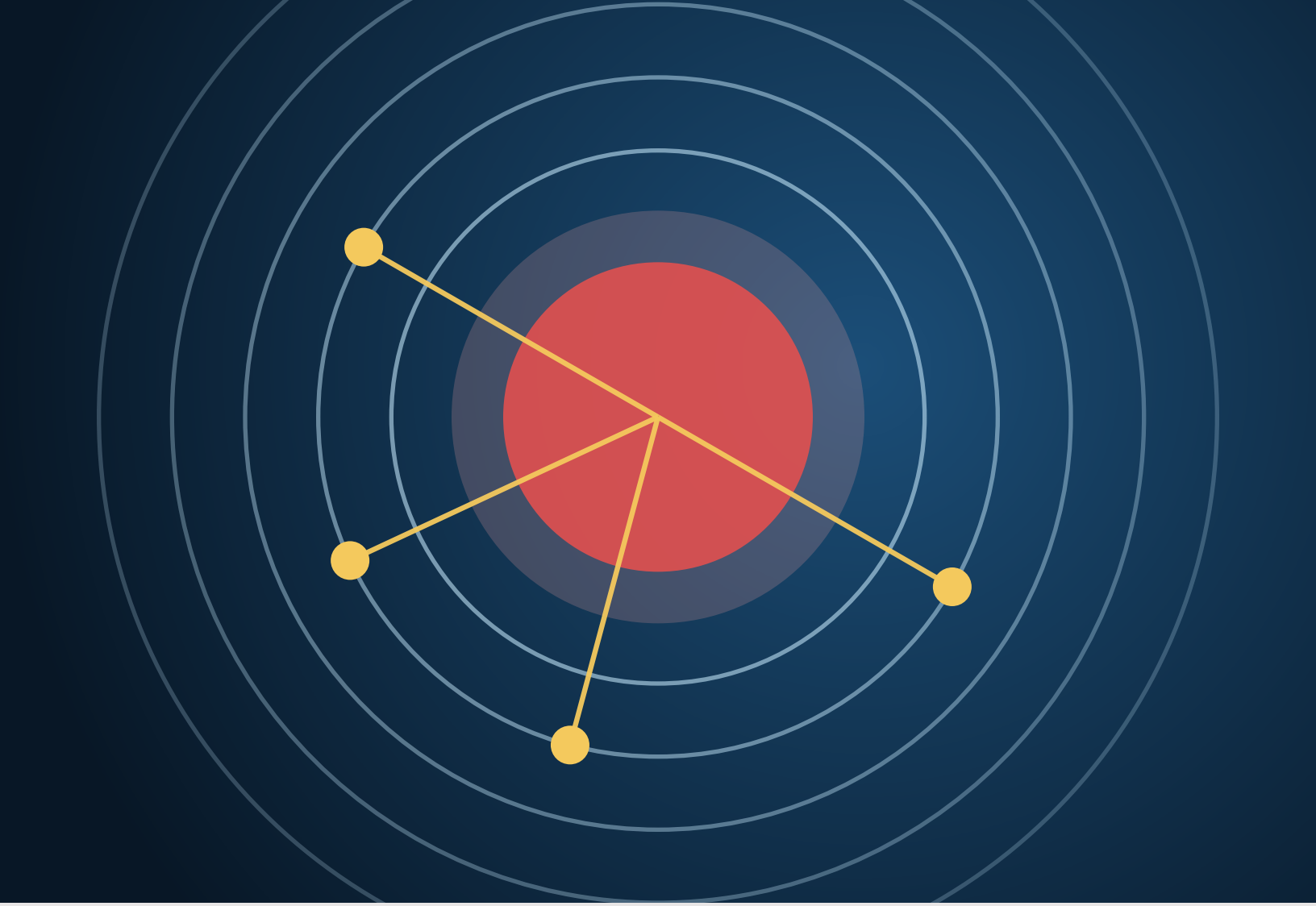
I think the Glasswing Project that Anthropic

catalyzed is a novel development in the "field" of cyber policy. For the first time that I can recall, a company has deliberately held back the release of a product from a mass audience and instead made it available only to those whose scale is large enough to have a multi-national impact on cybersecurity. But for that, a new model as powerful as Mythos out in the wild could be very destabilizing. So it was a stabilizing move, I would submit, to manage the access to Mythos as Anthropic has.

One of the big open questions remains: how much autonomy will we be comfortable assigning a model for the purposes of cyber defense? It's a different debate about autonomy that tends to happen in military and national security circles, but this is an important one too because there is plenty of evidence that our nation's chief competitors are experimenting with using AI to aid in their cyber attacks. What will our decision-makers need to know to be comfortable with different degrees of autonomy to defend against these attacks?

7. Looking back across the arc of cyber policy, how well do you think Western policy and national security communities anticipated how computing technology would reshape power and conflict? What does this track record suggest we should be most concerned about getting wrong in the next ten to twenty years as technology evolves in quasi-unpredictable ways?

One of the hardest challenges is anticipating not just developments in technology, but also evolutions in the international system. Nations still operate in cyberspace to achieve certain goals, but if you are merely looking at these developments in terms of cyberspace, you miss the broader connection of what drives states to do what they do. Being slow to respond to geopolitical forces can be problematic alongside missing the next great technology. That's why I encourage students to study emerging technologies, but also to explore a particular country or region to understand the political dynamics outside of technology.



Japan's Defense Strategy in a Changing Security Environment: A Conversation with Vice-Minister Taro Yamato

Taro Yamato, Administrative Vice-Minister of Defense

This interview was conducted in January 2026.

Fletcher Security Review (FSR): Mr. Yamato, it's our great pleasure to welcome a distinguished Fletcher graduate like you to *The Fletcher Security Review*. For our readers, could you please outline the roles and responsibilities of your current job?

Taro Yamato: Thank you for the opportunity to speak with *The Fletcher Security Review*. As a proud Fletcher alumnus, I'm honored to share my thoughts with those preparing to lead on the global stage.

The Ministry of Defense, under its mission to secure Japan's peace and independence as well as to ensure the security of the nation, is entrusted with a wide range of responsibilities. These include the planning of defense policy, the operation of the Self-Defense Forces (SDF), and the promotion of international security cooperation. My duties involve leading the development of defense policies that respond to changes in the international security environment and emerging threats, as well as advancing the maintenance and strengthening of defense capabilities necessary to protect Japan's sovereignty, peace, and the lives and daily life of its people. In addition, I am engaged in organizational management, personnel development, and equipment improvement to ensure that the SDF can smoothly and effectively carry out diverse missions both domestically and internationally.

Furthermore, the Ministry promotes bilateral and multilateral security cooperation centered on the Japan–U.S. Alliance, while contributing to regional and global peace and stability. We are working to strengthen partnerships with regional actors and to advance cooperation toward the realization of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific." In addition, we strive to clearly communicate the objectives and context of defense policy to the public and the international community, ensuring transparency in policy implementation and fostering understanding and trust.

In this manner, the Ministry of Defense plays a fundamental role in Japan's security. As the senior official responsible for the administrative organization, I am committed to ensuring the effectiveness of policies and to exercising leadership in fulfilling these vital responsibilities.

FSR: The theme of our 2026 edition is "Hello World: Security in a Multipolar World." Could you share your views on the current global security environment?

Taro Yamato: The existing order of world peace is being seriously challenged, and

Japan finds itself in the most severe and complex security environment of the post-war era. First, challenges to a free and open international order based on the rule of law are intensifying. Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine — now in its fifth year — shakes the very foundations of the international order. Despite being a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, Russia continues its aggression while repeatedly engaging in behavior that amounts to nuclear intimidation.

Second, in the Indo-Pacific, China and North Korea are accelerating military buildups, while strengthened cooperation between China and Russia, and between Russia and North Korea. China continues to increase its defense spending at a high rate, lacking sufficient transparency, and is rapidly enhancing its military capabilities. It has also been intensifying unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the East and South China Seas, including repeated intrusions into Japan's territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands. North Korea continues to develop nuclear weapons and missiles, repeatedly launching new types of missiles — including intercontinental-class ballistic missiles — and missiles with irregular trajectories to evade interception. It is also strengthening its conventional forces.



Adm. Steve Koehler, commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet, and Gen. Yoshihide Yoshida, chief of staff, Joint Staff, Japan Self-Defense Forces, answer questions during a Keen Sword 25 press conference in Sasebo, Japan, Oct. 22, 2024. | U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Chase Stephens (public domain)

Meanwhile, China-Russia cooperation is deepening through expanded joint exercises. Russia-North Korea cooperation has also intensified significantly, with North Korea reinforcing military ties in unprecedented ways, such as by supporting

Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Japan is gravely concerned about the potential for any transfer of nuclear or missile-related technology from Russia to North Korea. Recent developments, including Chinese military parades, highlight growing solidarity among China, Russia, and North Korea.

Third, drawing lessons from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, so many countries are accelerating preparations for "new ways of warfare," including the mass employment of unmanned systems, and for the demands of protracted conflict. The specific operational methods — such as massed, large-scale employment and complex, combined strikes — offer lessons that could be applied to Japan's own defense concepts. Moreover, the war has seen extensive use of electronic warfare, artificial intelligence (AI), space, cyber, and information warfare by both sides. The expanding role of AI on the battlefield is remarkable, and hybrid warfare that integrates these elements is becoming increasingly sophisticated. In addition, equipment and tactics are being updated on extremely short cycles compared to the past, making rapid and flexible technological innovation ever more important.

The Ukraine invasion has also shown that Russia possesses a degree of resilience to economic sanctions, and the aggression has extended beyond four years. In long wars, the reality is that all types of equipment and munitions are consumed in large quantities. This underscores the growing importance of ensuring sufficient wartime endurance: building peacetime stockpiles and further strengthening the defense production and technology base responsible for the development, production, sustainment, and maintenance of equipment. Ensuring adequate attrition-resistant capacity is becoming increasingly vital. In short, Japan's security environment is undergoing accelerated changes.

FSR: Do you think the world is becoming more multipolar? What are several emerging risks that could unsettle the existing international order?

Taro Yamato: Today's international community is becoming increasingly diverse as power balances shift and competition among states intensifies, while the growing presence of the "Global South" adds further complexity to the landscape. There are various ways to describe the structure of global "poles," but what is most important is that we avoid falling into geopolitical confrontation and instead work toward a world in which diverse nations can coexist and prosper under an international order based on the rule of law.

Several emerging risks could unsettle the existing international order. These include unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force, the rapid modernization of military capabilities without transparency, and actions that undermine the principles that have supported global stability for decades. To safeguard Japan's security against such challenges, it is essential that we strengthen cooperation not only with our ally, the United States, but also with as many partners as possible.

Going forward, while maintaining the Japan–U.S. Alliance as the central pillar of our security policy, we will continue to advance multilateral and multilayered defense cooperation with like-minded countries. By taking regional

characteristics into account and the unique circumstances of each partner, we aim to promote sustained defense exchanges that contribute to regional peace and reinforce the rules-based international order.

FSR: Japan is set to reach its defense budget target of two percent of GDP in fiscal year 2025, two years earlier than originally planned. What motivates Japan to increase its defense budget? What capabilities does Japan prioritize when increasing its defense budget and strengthening its capabilities?

Taro Yamato: Compared to December 2022, when Japan formulated its current "Three Strategic Documents," the security environment is changing at an accelerating pace across multiple domains, as I mentioned above.

In this context, Prime Minister Takaichi has directed the government to take decisive action. To strengthen Japan's defense posture proactively, we will accelerate current efforts and, through the supplementary budget, achieve the defense spending target of two percent of GDP within fiscal year 2025, two years ahead of schedule. Furthermore, to respond appropriately to these rapid changes and to safeguard Japan's independence, peace, and the lives and livelihoods of its people, the government will begin discussions to revise the National Security Strategy and related documents this year.

When considering priorities for strengthening capabilities, Japan will adopt bold and innovative approaches. While specific details will be discussed in due course, several areas are clear:

* "New ways of warfare," including the use of unmanned systems and resilience for protracted conflicts.

* Sustainment and endurance, through robust defense industrial and technological bases for development, production, and maintenance.

In a rapidly evolving security environment, there is no such thing as acting "too early" when it comes to transforming defense capabilities — only "too late." Japan will continue to examine all possible options to ensure its independence, peace, and the security of its people.

"There is no such thing as acting 'too early' when it comes to transforming defense capabilities — only 'too late.'"

FSR: Technology has shaped warfare and unsettled the international order throughout history. It continues to be an influential factor in shaping the character of the twenty-first century defense landscape. Throughout your career, how has technological development affected Japan's defense policy? In which technological domains has Japan prioritized its defense policy recently, and what is the future trajectory?

Taro Yamato: Advancements in science and technology have brought significant economic and social development to Japan, while also exerting a profound influence on our security environment and transforming the nature of warfare. For example, in the ongoing response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a wide range of commercial products and civilian technologies have been utilized on the

battlefield, and rapidly advancing unmanned aerial vehicle technologies have had a substantial impact on the course of combat.



Japan Ground Self-Defense Force and U.S. Army paratroopers conduct close quarters battle training during Northern Trilogy 2026, the first Multinational Airborne Exercise held in Japan, Sendai, Japan, Jan. 18, 2026. | U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Austin Salazar (public domain)

Until now, Japan has steadily developed equipment systems such as tanks, naval vessels, and fighter aircraft. However, with the rapid evolution of technology, neighboring countries are increasingly employing new equipment that applies cutting-edge technologies, including drones, as well as emerging forms of warfare that combine multiple tools such as deepfake-enabled information manipulation. In such an environment, enhancement of the capabilities of traditional equipment will no longer be sufficient to address these new challenges. There is a growing risk that Japan may become unable to protect its peace and independence or safeguard national security.

To address the increasingly severe security environment, Japan must promote "spinning on" from its science, technology and innovation capabilities to maximize national security and defense purposes, while also promoting "spinning off" the outcomes of defense research and development for the prosperity of society.

To ensure that Japan continues to defend itself through technological advantage in the years ahead, we will advance efforts based on the following pillars:

* Rapidly develop and field the functions and equipment necessary to protect Japan, directly linked to future forms of warfare, and achieve early deployment — within

five years or, in principle, within approximately ten years.

* With a view to the period beyond the next ten years, expand the community of defense-related research and development through public–private collaboration. By harnessing Japan's scientific and technological strengths and innovation capabilities, we will continually generate groundbreaking functions and capabilities. This will not only fundamentally strengthen Japan's defense posture but also deliver defense-driven innovation that can transform society itself, ensuring Japan's long-term technological superiority and enabling the realization of advanced capabilities ahead of other nations.

We will pursue these initiatives as core components of our effort to secure Japan's defense through technology into the future.

FSR: Some neighboring states, especially China, express concern that the recent rise in Japan's defense budget symbolizes a resurgence of Japanese militarism. Is this budget increase signaling a shift in Japanese defense policy away from its historical pacifist stance?

Taro Yamato: The scale of Japan's defense budget is the result of extensive considerations conducted to determine what capabilities are necessary to protect the lives of our citizens in the face of the most severe and complex security environment Japan has faced in the postwar era. These capabilities are strictly for the purpose of safeguarding the Japanese people and their peaceful way of life, and they remain fully within the bounds of the Constitution and international law, firmly upholding our exclusively defense-oriented policy. Therefore, this increase in defense spending does not alter Japan's longstanding commitment to being a peace-loving nation in any way.

At the same time, it is important to clearly explain our security policies to other countries, ensuring transparency, and building trust. Japan has consistently pursued its security policy with transparency and has engaged in confidence-building efforts with the international community. We will continue to actively promote these efforts going forward.

FSR: The U.S.-Japan Alliance is also a key part of Japanese defense policy. How would you assess the current U.S.-Japan Alliance from Tokyo? Is there any evolution you would like to see?

Taro Yamato: The Japan–U.S. Alliance is the cornerstone of Japan's foreign and security policy and plays an indispensable role in ensuring peace and stability in the international community, including the Indo-Pacific region. We will continue to work closely with the Trump administration to further strengthen the Alliance's deterrence and response capabilities. Through repeated opportunities, including Japan–U.S. summit meetings, we have reaffirmed the United States' defense commitments to Japan under the Japan–U.S. Security Treaty. We have full confidence that the United States will fulfill its treaty obligations by employing the full range of its capabilities, including nuclear capabilities.

We intend to continue enhancing and transforming Japan's own defense capabilities, while also maintaining close communication with the United States to

further reinforce the deterrence and response posture of the Alliance. As Japan faces its most severe and complex security environment throughout the postwar era, strengthening our own defense capabilities is of paramount importance. However, ensuring regional peace and stability cannot be achieved by any single nation alone. Alongside bolstering Japan's own defense capabilities, it is critically important that we build multilayered networks of cooperation with our ally and like-minded partners in order to enhance collective deterrence and response capabilities.

FSR: As you just mentioned, multilateral and multilayered defense cooperation is also a key component of Japan's security policy, as is strengthening the U.S.–Japan Alliance. What is the path for Japan to broaden its security cooperation with other countries along with the United States? Would Japan focus on the Indo-Pacific, or take a more global approach?

Taro Yamato: Multilateral and multilayered defense cooperation has become more important than ever as Japan faces an increasingly severe security environment. To maintain peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region, it is essential that Japan deepen cooperation with its allies and like-minded partners. In particular, while further strengthening the deterrence and response capabilities of the Japan–U.S. Alliance, Japan seeks to enhance collaboration — centered on the Japan–U.S. partnership — with key partners such as Australia, the Republic of Korea, and the Philippines.

Through frameworks such as Japan–U.S.–Australia, Japan–U.S.–ROK, and Japan–U.S.–Australia–Philippines, we have held various dialogues to address shared regional challenges and expand areas of cooperation. We have also improved interoperability through joint exercises and training. In addition to working closely with our ally, the United States, we intend to advance a wide range of defense cooperation and exchanges with like-minded partners toward the realization of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific." Through these efforts, Japan seeks to contribute to the peace and stability of both the region and the international community.

FSR: Japan has made a variety of commitments in the development of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). This includes providing defense capacity building to Southeast Asian countries. The Japanese government announced the "New Plan for a FOIP" in 2023, stating that it will further promote efforts toward realizing FOIP through an expansion of this capacity building. What role do you think the Ministry of Defense will be expected to play in realizing FOIP going forward?

Taro Yamato: The Indo-Pacific region is home to half of the world's population and serves as a central driver of global vitality. Ensuring that this region remains a free and open "international public good" is essential for maintaining peace and prosperity across the wider region. At the same time, as we see rapid military modernization and increasingly active military operations by certain countries — including those around Japan — there are many challenges that must be addressed to realize a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.

Against this backdrop, the "New Plan for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific," announced in

2023 by then-Prime Minister Kishida, set out four pillars for FOIP cooperation: Principles for peace and rules for prosperity, Addressing Challenges in an Indo-Pacific Way, Multi-layered connectivity, Extending efforts for security and safe use of "Sea" to the "Air."

For our part, the Ministry of Defense has long pursued defense cooperation and exchanges with partners across the region. This includes high-level dialogues, working-level consultations, participation in multilateral conferences, joint exercises and training, capacity building, and defense equipment and technology cooperation. Going forward, while taking regional characteristics into account and the circumstances of each partner country, we intend to further advance multilateral and multilayered defense cooperation. This includes strengthening institutional frameworks such as Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreements, Reciprocal Access Agreements, and Agreements concerning the Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology. Through these efforts, we hope to contribute to the realization of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.

FSR: Mr. Yamato, I would like to thank you again for your thought-provoking answers. Before we leave, I would like to ask you one more question. It has been almost thirty years since you graduated from Fletcher. Could you share how your time at Fletcher has shaped your career and provide any advice you may have to the future policymakers at Fletcher?

Taro Yamato: Thank you once again for giving me the opportunity to participate in this interview. It has indeed been almost thirty years since I graduated from Fletcher, but the experiences I gained there continue to shape my career every day. Fletcher offered me a truly international environment — one where talented individuals from around the world came together to discuss global challenges from diverse perspectives. That exposure fundamentally broadened my own outlook and provided me with the analytical tools needed to navigate complex security and diplomatic issues.

What I remember most is the spirit of open and constructive debate. My classmates came from government, international organizations, the private sector, and academia. Engaging with people who held different assumptions and values forced me to question my own thinking and, ultimately, to strengthen it. In my current role, where decisions often require balancing multiple national interests and strategic considerations, that habit of viewing issues from various angles has been invaluable.

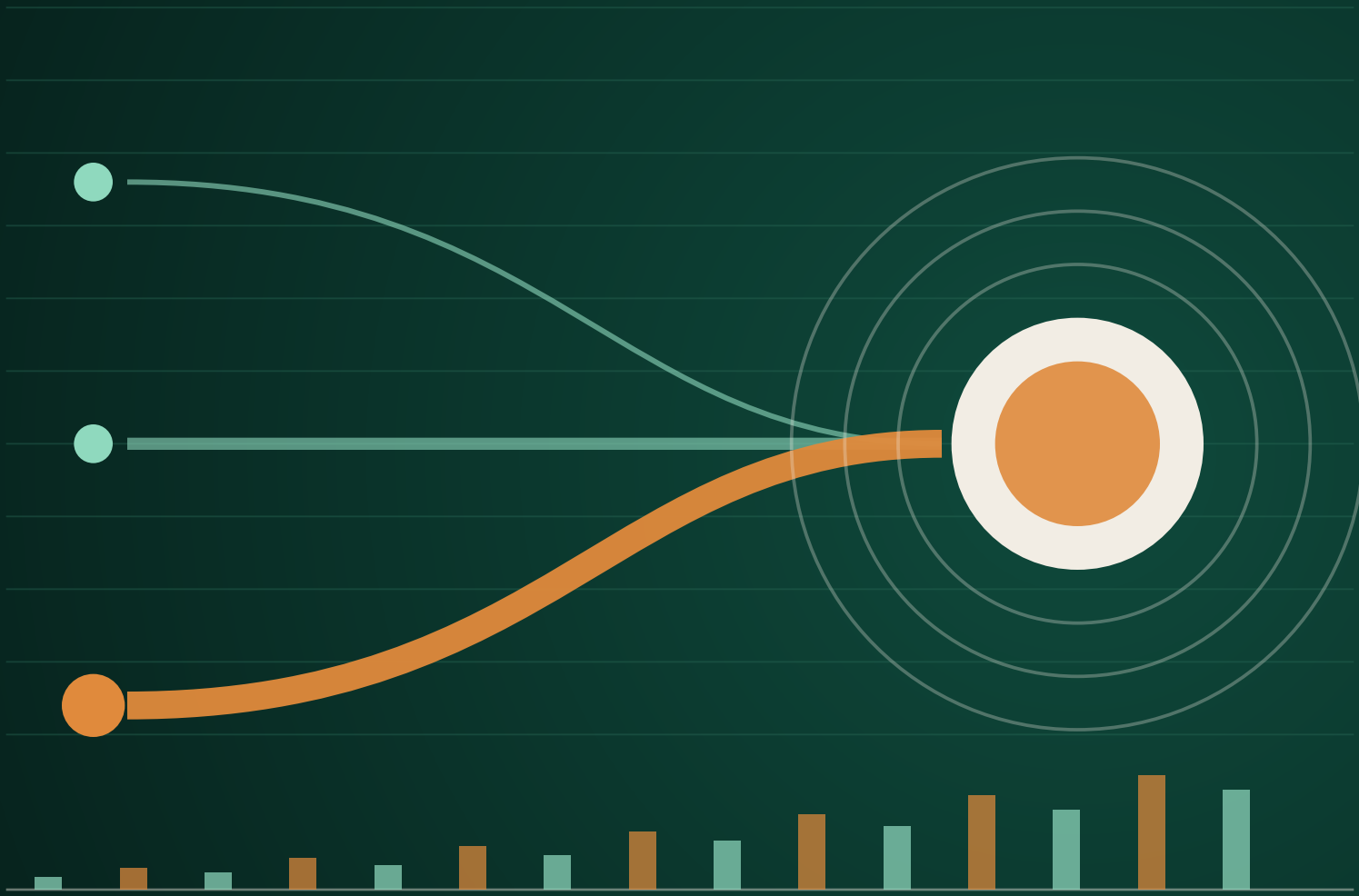
To future policymakers studying at Fletcher, my advice would be this: take full advantage of the diversity around you. Listen carefully to others, especially when you disagree. Build friendships and networks that cross borders, cultures, and disciplines. The challenges you will face in the future — whether in security, economics, climate, or technology — will not fit neatly into one field. Fletcher is one of the best places in the world to learn how to approach such complexity with both intellectual rigor and an open mind.

And finally, please cherish your curiosity. The world is always changing, and policymakers must continue learning throughout their careers. Fletcher cultivates that mindset. Curiosity serves you well wherever your path leads.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Taro Yamato is Administrative Vice-Minister of Defense at the Japan Ministry of Defense. He joined the Japan Defense Agency in 1990 and is a 1997 graduate of The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. Throughout his career, Mr. Yamato has held numerous key leadership positions central to Japan's security policy, including Director of the Strategic Planning Office, Director of the Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation Division, and Director of the Defense Policy Division. He subsequently served in high-level executive roles, including Deputy Director General of the International Peace Cooperation Headquarters at the Cabinet Office and Director General of the Local Cooperation Bureau. Prior to assuming his current position, he served as Director General of the Defense Policy Bureau, where he played a pivotal role in shaping Japan's defense strategy.



The New Frontline of Great-Power Competition: The Structure of Global Demand and Its Implications for the EU

Dr. Enrico Fardella

The global economy is entering a phase in which monetary policy, trade balances, and industrial strategy are increasingly shaped by geopolitical competition. Recent analyses by institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the Federal Reserve, the Bank of England highlight how macroeconomic tools are now being deployed in support of strategic objectives. This shift is particularly relevant for the European Union, whose openness exposes it directly to the reconfiguration of global demand and great-power competition. [i]

One of the clearest manifestations of this shift can be observed in the growing tensions surrounding China's currency management. As brilliantly explained by Brad Setser, for years, the dominant assumption was that a stronger currency for China could undermine exports at a time when external demand is crucial for sustaining growth.[ii] Exchange-rate stability was therefore treated as an economic necessity rather than a political choice. That assumption is now under strain. China's recovery since the pandemic has relied heavily on exports, while domestic consumption has remained subdued. Foreign markets have absorbed an increasing share of Chinese output just as political tolerance for such imbalances has declined. What once appeared as a technical debate over exchange rates has evolved into a question of strategic exposure.

Chinese authorities remain committed to tight currency management, seeking to avoid large swings that could destabilize growth or trigger volatile capital flows. Yet this position increasingly collides with the strategic environment abroad. Large trade surpluses are no longer interpreted merely as macroeconomic side effects, but as manifestations of structural power. In a world shaped by industrial competition and geopolitical rivalry, persistent imbalances are viewed as sources of dependency.

For several years, this contradiction was obscured by capital outflows from China. Higher U.S. interest rates, uncertainty about domestic growth, and fears of renewed trade conflict encouraged money to leave the country, offsetting upward pressure on the yuan. That phase is ending. Outflows have slowed, the surplus remains large, and - as Setser points out - Beijing is therefore likely to intervene more actively to manage its currency.

This leaves China facing a familiar dilemma. A slow appreciation risks leaving its competitive position largely unchanged, sustaining external surpluses and intensifying foreign backlash. A faster adjustment could attract speculative inflows and undermine financial control. Either way, currency policy alone cannot deliver the deeper rebalancing toward household consumption long urged by external partners.

In theory, a stronger yuan could support such a transition by increasing purchasing power and reducing dependence on exports. In practice, China's consumption weakness is structural. High precautionary savings, limited welfare provision, and an income distribution favoring firms and local governments constrain household demand. Without political choices that

redistribute income internally, exchange-rate movements remain marginal.

It is precisely this impasse that has drawn the issue into the realm of strategic competition. The United States increasingly views global imbalances not simply as economic inefficiencies, but as vulnerabilities within the international system. In its 2025 National Security Strategy (NSS), Washington makes explicit that America's persistent current account deficit is unsustainable and that allies must play a role in reshaping global trade patterns.[iii]

The objective is not primarily monetary. Rather, it reflects a broader effort to constrain China's ability to project economic power through surplus production and external dependence. Washington's assessment is straightforward: if China can continue to export its excess capacity into open advanced economies, it can postpone domestic rebalancing indefinitely. If it cannot, internal adjustment becomes unavoidable.

"Great power competition... is being fought not only through military posture or technology controls, but through the structure of global economic demand."

From this perspective, currency appreciation is only one element of a much larger contest. Trade defense (i.e., tariffs), subsidy control, industrial policy coordination, and standards-setting become tools of geopolitical leverage. The aim is to reduce the external outlets available to China's export model and thereby alter its internal incentives.

This strategy, however, cannot succeed unilaterally. As the United States' NSS correctly points out, regions such as Southeast Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East lack the scale to absorb China's surplus output.[iv] This is evident both in absolute market size and in the composition of trade flows: while Chinese exports to these regions have increased, they remain fragmented across smaller economies and are heavily concentrated in sectors such as machinery, intermediate industrial goods, consumer electronics, and increasingly green technologies like solar panels, batteries, and electric vehicles. These inflows often generate local tensions, as they compete directly with nascent domestic industries, compress prices, and can contribute to deindustrialization pressures or trade frictions, particularly in sectors already affected by global overcapacity.[v]



Container ships call on the North Charleston Terminal in North Charleston, S.C., part of the Port of Charleston, Sept. 27, 2022. | U.S. Army photo by Patrick Bloodgood (public domain)

If the United States tightens access while others do not, the imbalance is merely redirected, worsening these tensions further on. This is why Washington may increasingly emphasize coordination with Europe, Japan, and other advanced economies on this matter. Great power competition, in this sense, is being fought not only through military posture or technology controls, but through the structure of global economic demand - in other words, which economies are able, or willing, to absorb excess supply in sectors ranging from consumer goods and industrial inputs to strategic industries such as clean energy and advanced manufacturing.

For Europe, this shift is consequential. The continent is not merely an observer of the U.S.-China rivalry, but one of its principal theaters. If Europe fails to act collectively, it risks becoming the residual market into which redirected Chinese exports flow. Adjustment would then take place not in Beijing, but in Europe - through compressed industrial margins, declining investment, and rising political fragmentation.

This vulnerability reflects Europe's institutional design. The European Union possesses a single currency but lacks a unified external-economic strategy. Trade defense, investment screening, procurement rules, and industrial policy remain unevenly coordinated. As a result, global imbalances are not filtered at the border but transmitted inward, transforming external competition into internal strain.

As Michael Pettis and I have argued in a recent article, the danger is not a sudden crisis but a gradual process of strategic erosion. Sustained inflows of competitively priced Chinese exports compress margins in Europe's tradable sectors, particularly in manufacturing industries exposed to global competition. This reduces incentives for domestic investment and innovation,

especially in capital-intensive sectors where scale and long-term planning are critical. Over time, production capacity shifts abroad or contracts, while employment is reallocated toward lower-productivity services. At the same time, the counterpart of persistent trade imbalances - capital inflows into Europe - tends to strengthen the euro, further undermining external competitiveness and reinforcing the cycle. In this way, adjustment occurs internally within Europe rather than externally through rebalancing in surplus economies. Europe absorbs the pressures generated by global imbalances without shaping the conditions under which they are produced.[vi]

Internal asymmetries exacerbate the problem. Surplus economies rely on wage restraint and external demand, while deficit economies absorb the resulting leakage through debt or unemployment. [vii]In the absence of surplus discipline, global pressures are converted into intra-European political conflict. What begins as great-power rivalry abroad ends as fragmentation at home.

GOVERNING OPENNESS, STRENGTHENING FROM WITHIN

To remain a geopolitical actor rather than a geopolitical space, Europe must close this gap. That does not require abandoning openness but governing it. A coherent external-economic framework - aligning trade instruments, investment screening, standards, and procurement - is essential to prevent foreign industrial strategies from dictating European outcomes. Such governance is not protectionism; it is sovereignty under conditions of interdependence.

Equally important is strengthening Europe from within. As several European leaders - including Emmanuel Macron, Mario Draghi, and European Commission officials - have argued, a small but permanent fiscal capacity at the euro area level would help cushion economic shocks more symmetrically, reducing the need for adjustment to fall repeatedly on the same member states. At the same time, updating EU state-aid rules would allow Europe to support key industries that generate growth and employment across the continent, without turning national subsidies into a zero-sum competition between member states. In the short term, this means reinforcing sectors already under immediate pressure from global competition, such as automotive (especially electric vehicles), renewable energy technologies, batteries, and basic industrial inputs like steel and chemicals. Over the next five years, the priority will increasingly shift toward scaling capabilities in semiconductors, artificial intelligence, data infrastructure, and advanced manufacturing. Looking further ahead, Europe will need to invest in next-generation technologies, including quantum computing, biotech, clean hydrogen, and space-related industries, that will define future competitiveness and strategic autonomy.



The Berlaymont building, headquarters of the European Commission, Brussels, Belgium. | Photo by EmDee, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Above all, Europe must recognize that its social model is not a liability in strategic competition, but a source of resilience. Household income growth and welfare provision support domestic demand without debt, reducing dependence on volatile external markets. As brilliantly shown by Michael Pettis, in a global system increasingly shaped by wage repression and state-directed cost advantages, Europe cannot compete by abandoning its own foundations.[viii]

As monetary tensions between the United States and China intensify, the space for ambiguity narrows. If Washington withdraws from its role as global absorber while Beijing resists deep rebalancing, adjustment will be forced somewhere. Without coordination, it will be forced onto Europe.

The emerging contest over currencies, trade, and consumption is therefore not peripheral to geopolitics. It is one of its central arenas. Europe's choice is not between alignment and autonomy, but between shaping the rules of competition and being shaped by them. In an era where balance-of-payments arithmetic increasingly becomes a strategy by other means, inaction is no longer neutral. It is a decision, just not one made in Europe's favor.

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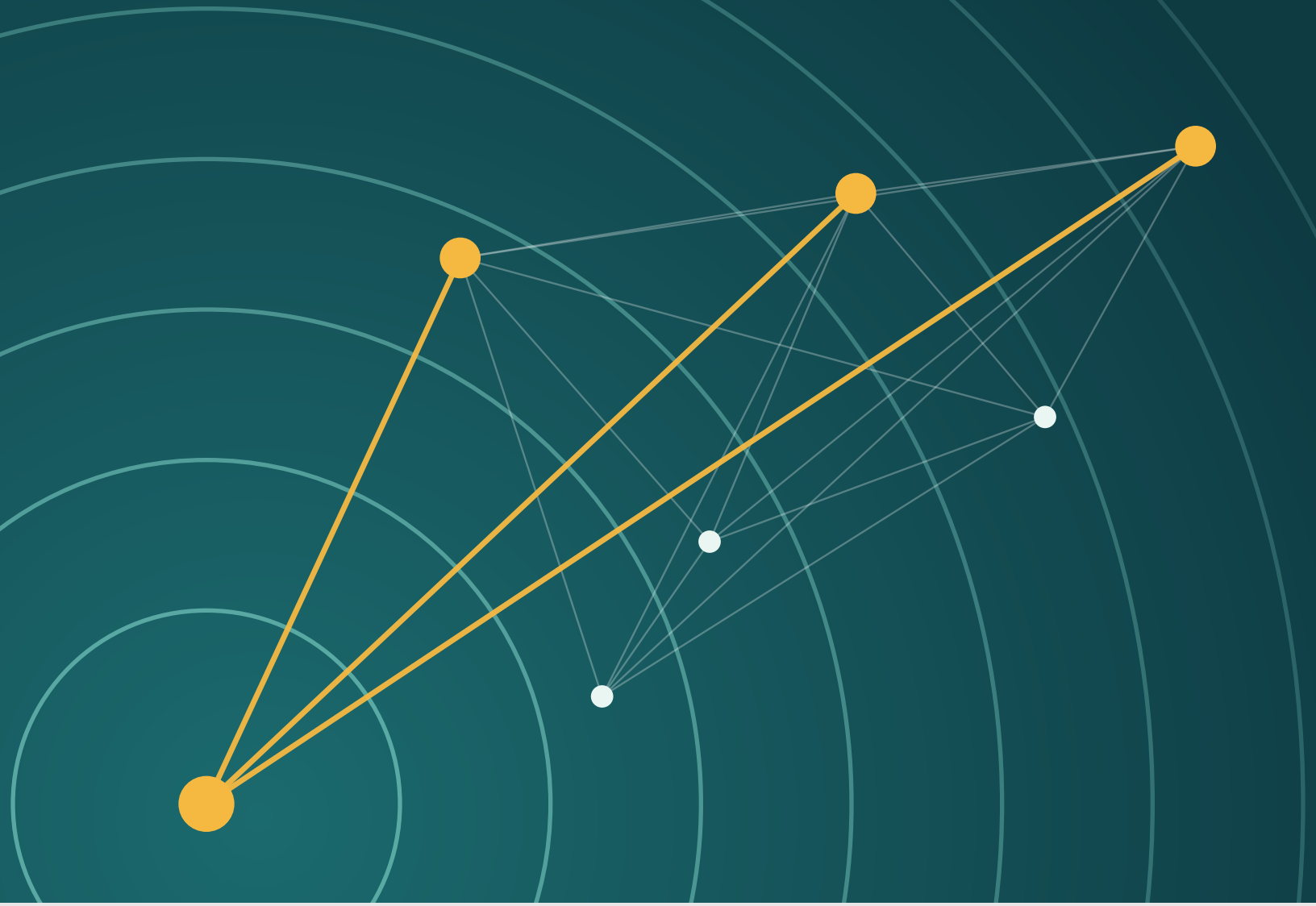
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Practical Ways of Countering Chinese and Russian Influence in a Multipolar World

Joey Hood, Ambassador (ret)

Recently, a senior executive of a global telecommunications company warned me that China had largely caught up to the West in terms of quality and reliability of its software and hardware, and its state-subsidized financing allowed Chinese companies to greatly undercut others on price. Everyone in the industry, he said, was tired of hearing from Westerners what a threat the Chinese government posed to data and infrastructure security through their companies. After all, it is widely believed that Western telecom companies collaborate with their governments, as well, he asserted. The executive laid out his challenge: what did the West have to offer the world on telecoms that China could not do at least as well and far cheaper, notwithstanding these security concerns?

I knew this particular executive was due for a transfer soon, but he did not yet know where, so I sensed an opportunity to make a rhetorical point. I asked him to embark on a thought experiment with me and imagine that he had two opportunities in front of him: he could either spend the next ten years as CEO of his company's operations in the city of his choice in China or in the United States, and the only stipulation was that whatever destination he chose, he must bring his family.

He responded without hesitation, "Of course I would choose the United States." So, I parried, if you would choose the Western solution for your own family, why would you choose the Chinese solution for the personal data and the most intimate communications of millions of other citizens? He nodded in assent to my logic but made a grave prediction: "What you have just said is right, but if nothing else changes, the United States has only about another ten years, and the choice you described will no longer be decided in America's favor. China is catching up fast with your soft power. Do not sleep."

The fact is that American diplomats have not been sleeping when it comes to countering strategic adversaries like China and Russia but have repeatedly looked in their toolbox and largely found only rhetorical arguments with limited utility, or economic sanctions, the metaphorical hammer of diplomacy. In practical terms, diplomats could wag their fingers, and if that did not work, threaten punitive measures. Neither approach has been successful over the long run, and like this regional tech CEO pointed out, the soft power "pull" of America's and Europe's competitive universities, business environments, and entertainment options will only last for so long. American

diplomats and their European partners need to build upon practical field solutions.

* First, they should take advantage of their commanding positions in multilateral development banks to offer attractive financing early in the project cycle.

* Second, they should share information aggressively - including by bringing in nontraditional partners - that demonstrates in vivid terms how a nation's sovereignty is put at risk by Chinese or Russian entities.

* Third, just like China, they should compete everywhere, not only in the biggest markets.

STRATEGIC FINANCING

For instance, take China's expansion into 5G telecommunications around the world. Constraining this expansion has been a U.S. strategic goal for more than a decade. In the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for 2019, Congress barred the federal government from purchasing equipment from the major Chinese telecommunications companies.[i] The Executive branch also adopted a number of restrictions, including the sale of chips and software to Chinese companies, and a ban on equipment purchases by any American entity, private or public.[ii] Legislators and policymakers have routinely cited Chinese laws requiring private companies to share data with intelligence agencies as a major threat to states' sovereignty, and potentially even our collective security.[iii]



U.S. Marine Corps Lt. Col. Benjamin Pimentel and defense technology industry professionals attend a 5G network systems demonstration at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, California, Dec. 5, 2024. | U.S. Marine Corps photo by Lance Cpl. Samantha Devine (public domain)

To implement these policies, U.S. diplomacy has largely focused on trying to persuade foreign partners to adopt our domestic measures as their own, but this strategy has produced few results beyond our traditional western democratic partners. My conversations on this topic with diplomats and business leaders across the Middle East and North Africa have typically followed the same rhythm. Relying on our talking points from Washington, my colleagues and I would explain the potential risks of relying on Chinese equipment and software and urge our interlocutors to formulate domestic regulations to protect their telecommunications infrastructure from "untrusted actors."

The responses routinely fell along these lines: 1) We understand the risks and do not wish to be lectured. 2) Do you expect us to believe that Western governments do not cooperate with their companies to engage in the same behavior as China? 3) What American alternative do you propose?

"China is catching up fast with your soft power. Do not sleep."

On these points, the American diplomat is caught flat-footed. In one case, a foreign official responded to our points about the security risks by stating, "We are fully aware of the technology's back doors, and they are a benefit to us, not a risk." (In other words, potential surveillance options were not a net negative for this official.) In another case, our interlocutors claimed that they would try to take cybersecurity precautions, but ultimately the cost savings offered by Chinese firms were just too great to ignore for a country with a struggling economy. Because the American private sector has — to date — not offered an alternative to firms like Huawei and ZTE, American diplomats have been empowered to advocate for "trusted actors" like European firms Nokia and Ericsson through initiatives like the "Clean Network."[iv]

Pitching non-American solutions can work, but it is not an ideal solution. At times, the approach comes off as more anti-China than pro-America, according to my foreign diplomatic colleagues.

Looking to Washington for senior-level engagement has generally not been fruitful, as those officials tend to focus on the world's biggest, most advanced economies. Beijing, however, is competing everywhere, and so must the United States.

Certainly, establishing partnerships with these powerful allies and the domestic companies that they regulate was a master stroke. Under the first Trump Administration, Under Secretary for Economic and Business Affairs Keith Krach could rightly take credit for initiatives like the "Clean Network" and the "Blue Dot Network" to promote shared standards for trusted technology.[v] At the same time, I recall collaborating with U.S. colleagues for almost two years to arrange a single visit by a senior official to engage with Arab governments about these and other secure technology initiatives and concerns. Time lags such as this do not suggest urgency to our interlocutors.

Threats certainly have not worked, either. After enactment of the NDAA for fiscal year 2019, American diplomats dutifully relayed points to our foreign counterparts about the risks of "untrusted actors." In one case,

we made no headway, so we moved to hard power points, regretting that we may need to end certain aspects of our military cooperation in order to prevent our networks from being compromised by untrusted technology. This bilateral partner begrudgingly complied with our wishes, but contacts close to this country's leaders tell me the experience left a bitter after-taste, and one they have not forgotten, even years later. Over time, the application of hard power like this only causes our partners to seek to diversify their partnerships so that they are not so vulnerable to being forced into a decision by any particular foreign government, even one with a close and historic relationship like the United States. Although it is often overlooked in favor of more well-known aphorisms, Chinese strategist Sun Tzu in fact put moral influence at the top of his list of principles.[vi] Without it, our allies and partners will go along with us only when forced to do so.

My experience in another country offered a potential alternative to the finger-wagging-and-threat approach described above. Over lunch one day with a senior official from a multilateral development bank, we discussed our shared concerns about growing Chinese government influence in advanced telecommunications, and lamented the paucity of Western tools or alternatives, other than to refer foreign governments to Nokia and Ericsson, companies that sometimes did not have much interest in the smaller markets. Then a light bulb went off. I said, "You're a bank; why can't you offer attractive financing and write into the terms of the loan that it can only be used to purchase from trusted vendors, or at least from European firms?" The executive reminded me that the U.S. government was the largest single shareholder in that particular bank, so it could propose such a solution if it wanted to. Then my work turned toward convincing my Washington colleagues. For good measure, I also enlisted the support of a European ally with a great stake in this particular country's cybersecurity, given its geographic proximity and its importance in controlling the flow of irregular migrants. Together, we brought in the European Union to bolster our eventual proposal within the multilateral development bank.

Approaching the issue from these several angles produced a result that Washington probably would not have pursued all on its own, at least not in time to be of any relevance. The bank approved the proposal, and it was swiftly put before relevant government officials, who just as quickly accepted it. Asked later why this deal had come together so smoothly when years of previous attempts had not proven fruitful, one interlocutor told me, "When you can match or do better than the Chinese offer, it is natural that you would require us to use your technology. That is not a constraint on our sovereignty; it is an agreement between partners." In this case, incentives were effective where hand-wringing and threats were not.

What made this approach effective was not ingenuity alone, but timing and structure. By intervening before procurement and vendor selection, and by aligning incentives, contracting conditions, and financing terms, we changed the competitive field without coercion. This is the broader lesson: projects that are conditioned upstream are easier to defend politically, finance efficiently, and execute successfully downstream. Financing

accelerates outcomes only after contracting and risk allocation are sound; it cannot substitute for early project shaping.

INFORMATION SHARING ON SOVEREIGNTY VIOLATIONS

Constraining problematic Russian activities is another area in which sovereignty-based arguments can be more helpful in the field than hard power threats. When we began to suspect that Russia and its proxies like the Wagner Group were using a foreign partner's territory to facilitate the movement of goods, people, and funding to support their disruptive activities elsewhere, we deployed the usual talking points: this is what we think they are doing, this is bad, and you should take measures to stop it. When that did not happen because our partners cited a lack of evidence, we brandished sanctions. Our partners took that threat seriously enough to board a vessel but reported finding no contraband. We explained that there was no contraband, as it was the proceeds from the cargo — not the cargo itself — that were supporting the Russians' destabilizing activities. Finally, we moved to levying sanctions…and still nothing happened.



Boarding team members from the Coast Guard Cutter Bertholf and Pacific Tactical Law Enforcement Team board a vessel during a counter-narcotic patrol in the Eastern Pacific Ocean, March 3, 2018. | U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Matthew S. Masaschi (public domain)

I surmised that we needed a different approach. So as with the case of Chinese involvement in telecommunications, I consulted colleagues inside the vast U.S. government apparatus, as well as our close allies, including nontraditional ones who might share our concerns about destabilizing activities in the region. Soon, we had a folder of open-source information to share, all of which pointed to breaches of

this partner's sovereignty. The approach I adopted was this: "If these activities are all known to you, then explain your change in policy, because up to this point, you have told us that you do not support mercenary activities anywhere. If these activities were not known to you, I leave it to you to take steps to address these insults to your sovereignty." In this case, our interlocutors thanked us for the information and then - without causing a bilateral crisis with Moscow - tightened up controls at points of entry.

CONCLUSION

These experiences from the field suggest that information sharing, incentives, and appeals to protecting sovereignty, especially when done in consultation with allies who can act as "force multipliers" can be more effective than moralizing, threatening, or punishing foreign governments into submission. In my experience, those approaches often have not worked, and when they have worked, they probably weakened our bilateral relationship over the long run. Our partners want us to be strong; they do not want us to be bullies. And as my friend the telecom executive warned, America's soft power may not be a competitive advantage over China forever; we need to compete by drawing on our partnerships in the field to bring superior financing and information at key moments.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ambassador (ret) Joey R. Hood was a U.S. diplomat for 25 years, serving at eight embassies and consulates across the Middle East and North Africa. In Washington, he was Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs during the Biden Administration and Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary in the first Trump Administration. He also directed the Office of Iranian Affairs.



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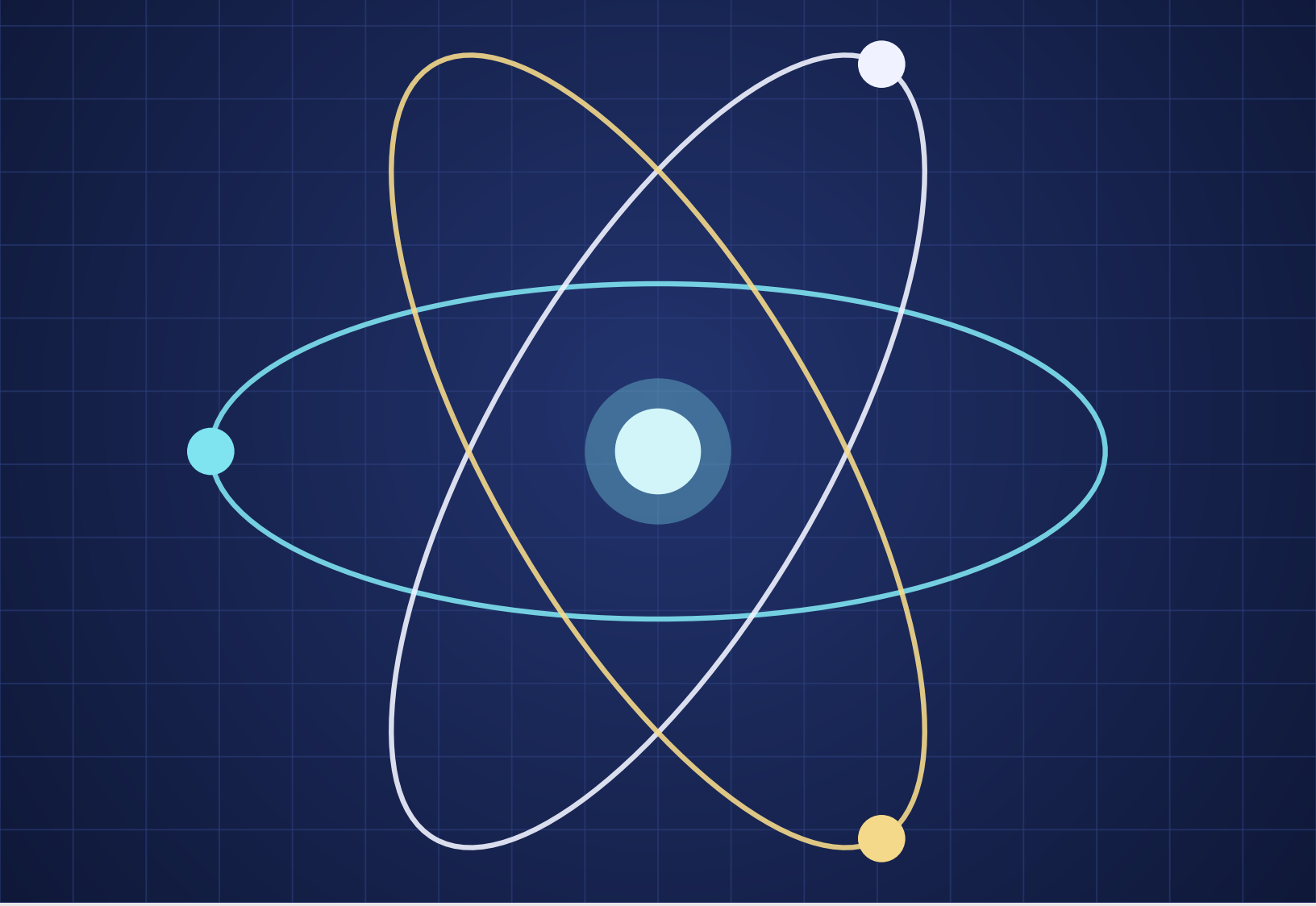
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Europe and the Multipolar Nuclear Order: Opportunities and Limits

Emmanuelle Maitre

The current period has been dubbed the "Third Nuclear Age," a time that combines a renewed emphasis on great power rivalry, a multipolar nuclear competition and the introduction of additional strategic assets that can destabilize deterrence relationships.[i] In this context of multipolarity, Europe may rise as a distinct nuclear player, with specific policies, interests, priorities and forms of leverage. Historically, its views have often been shared within the "Western bloc," coinciding with NATO deterrence and arms control policy. On occasion, European countries have been vocal in defending alternative views, for instance, in the Euromissile crisis, the Second Gulf War (2003) or following the Trump administration's decision to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The rift between U.S. interests and European priorities will probably intensify under the current conditions, following the publication of the 2026 U.S. National Defense Strategy.[ii]

This document indeed establishes clearly that Washington does not share the same security outlook as its partners, and that key threats to Europe, such as Russia, may be secondary for the United States. In addition, the harsh criticism voiced by key members of the U.S. administration against European countries, their leaders, their values, or their democratic and economic systems creates global transatlantic tensions which resonates at the strategic level as well.

European countries have strong incentives to reframe and reaffirm their positions regarding nuclear strategy more forcefully and more autonomously. This ambition will face challenges. First, "Europe" is not a clear-cut actor: NATO European allies may share perspectives on their security, but do not have an institutional framework to adopt policies. The European Union (EU) has tools and processes, in particular on nonproliferation, but is divided on the role of nuclear deterrence.[iii]

Second, Europeans may be left with little leverage to meaningfully influence the debate and push for their preferences on arms control, they may not possess the capabilities that could give them weight in negotiations; on nonproliferation, they largely depend on the United States and other major powers for the implementation of restrictive measures. These inherent limitations do not suppress the need for Europeans to revisit their role in defending and reframing the nuclear order by rethinking how nuclear deterrence can serve the security of the continent, how arms control may be used to reduce escalation risks, and how the nonproliferation regime should evolve to address current challenges.

AFFIRMATION AND REAFFIRMATION OF A NUCLEAR EUROPE

Different Layers of Nuclear Deterrence

Europe has historically been in an ambivalent position with regard to global nuclear dynamics. During the Cold War, Western Europe was considered by the Soviet Union as an extension of the Western bloc, and the United States deployed its nuclear weapons in European countries as early as 1954. This aimed to counter the conventional Soviet threat and reassure NATO allies regarding U.S. extended deterrence commitment as American conventional capacities on the continent decreased.[iv] Soviet nuclear weapons forward-deployment was also established in Eastern Europe under the Warsaw Pact.[v] To this day, NATO nuclear sharing mechanisms have been pursued with strict U.S. control over the weapons based abroad and their employment procedures. Allies taking part in NATO's Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) are involved in planning the operations. Host nations must consent to the use of their dual-capacity aircraft for the implementation of the mission, and therefore have some influence on nuclear doctrine. However, this mechanism does not establish European countries as autonomous stakeholders regarding nuclear strategy.



An F-35A Lightning II from Hill Air Force Base, Utah, carrying a B61-12 Joint Test Assembly at Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada, Sept. 21, 2021. | U.S. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Zachary Rufus (public domain)

The exceptions of course are France and the United Kingdom, the two independent European nuclear powers. Autonomy is a key principle of the French deterrent, and

even if the British one is more integrated with and dependent on the United States, the operation of nuclear forces and their possible employment is fully in the hands of London. The existence of three centers of decision-making was historically framed as strengthening the credibility of the Western bloc's deterrence posture during the Cold War.[vi] The two independent nuclear-weapon states in Europe have given the continent a special position in the global nuclear dynamics, as these two states have made their own choices in terms of nuclear policy and capacity requirements.

In the context of the Cold War and the years that followed, these nuclear capabilities have been perceived by potential adversaries as largely integrated to the global Western assets. For example, it has been visible in arms control agreements that Russia requires that British and French arsenals be counted in the global ceilings agreed to with the United States.[vii] Moreover, NATO extended nuclear deterrence remains central for the vast majority of European countries, and therefore a structural factor in shaping reflections on European security.

What New Dimensions?

To this day, the United States has not reconsidered its extended deterrence commitment to NATO countries, and the nuclear sharing arrangements, including U.S. forward-deployed B61-12 gravity bombs and the NPG, are still functional. The cracks in the transatlantic relationship have not led Moscow to change its point of view on the amalgamation of all three nuclear arsenals in the Western bloc or its demand for the participation of Paris and London in future strategic arms control negotiations.[viii] However, the tensions between the United States and their European partners, and the growth of the Russian threat are creating new dynamics. French President Emmanuel Macron, consistent with historical positions, has affirmed on many occasions that the French nuclear deterrence had "a European dimension."[ix] European allies have gradually shown some interest in recognizing that French nuclear forces could play a role for European security.[x] In July 2025, France and the United Kingdom agreed on the Northwood Declaration, in which they conveyed their mutual "desire and ability" to act jointly to protect their "common interest, allies, and partners in Europe."[xixii] In March 2026, President Macron announced new settings for coordination, especially with eight European countries.[xiii]

"French President Emmanuel Macron... has affirmed on many occasions that the French nuclear deterrence had 'a European dimension.'"

Many questions remain about how Paris and London will implement these promises of coordination, and how specific European countries will take part in the shaping of nuclear policies in the future (for example, through possible assistance to support missions or in contributing capabilities to conventional deterrence).[xiv] However, it is notable that as part of the rising multipolar order, European countries may share specific interests and policies in this field distinct from their transatlantic ally. Without questioning the role of U.S. extended deterrence, European countries are collectively building the tools to assume

their singularities with regard to nuclear policy, in particular by recognizing that the French nuclear deterrent contributes to European security and that its partners play a role in enhancing its credibility. This more active posture may lead them to refuse being the subject of arms control and defending their interest in taking a more proactive approach.

SUBJECT OR ACTOR IN NUCLEAR ARMS CONTROL?

A Traditional Playing Field

During the Cold War, European security balance was an important focus of nuclear arms control but had not been a direct actor within the various treaties. While Western Europeans were not directly involved in those mechanisms, they did have influence on what was negotiated. In the NATO framework, the United States consulted its allies to varying degrees and formally obtained their support in the implementation of arms control measures that had an impact on NATO's force structure. When the Soviet Union started to deploy SS-20 intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBM), it caused a concern in Europe that a nuclear war could be waged on the continent without involving the United States. To counter this, NATO collectively agreed to the "dual-track" decision, which was the simultaneous deployment of American IRBMs on NATO's territory and the launch of negotiations to remove all IRBMs stationed in Europe. This paved the way to the adoption of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and the withdrawal of U.S. Pershing II ballistic missiles from NATO territory.



A French Dassault Rafale and E-2C Hawkeye aircraft prepare to take off from the flight deck of the French aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle (R 91) in the Mediterranean Sea, March 17, 2022. | U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Claire DuBois (public domain)

Both the United Kingdom and France refused to have their own forces counted as part of a Western bloc arsenal in the negotiation on strategic arms control. While Russia considered both nuclear forces contributing to the overall capacities that NATO could use against it, France and the UK judged that their nuclear deterrent was sized for the strict protection of their nations, and while it played a role in the protection of NATO, it was autonomous and could not be blended with U.S. capabilities. Washington sided with its allies on this point, and French and British forces remained outside the weapons limits set by the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), even when Russian rhetoric became quite insistent on that issue.[xv]

Despite specific concerns, Europeans have globally supported arms control and the effects it has had on their continent: it led to a reduction of tensions by curbing the strategic arms race, the dismantlement of intermediate nuclear forces, a strong reduction of short-range tactical nuclear forces (through voluntary measures), and the implementation of a range of confidence and transparency measures aimed at managing crises.

Reservations and Lack of Leverage

With the increase of geopolitical tensions caused by the war in Ukraine, some Europeans feel their lack of leverage in arms control negotiations between Moscow and Washington may result in harmful outcomes to their security.

On the one hand, Russia has displayed that it can be a threat to Europeans and has developed capabilities (through modernization and treaty violations) that Europe cannot compete with. This is the case with both short-range nuclear weapons and IRBMs such as the Oreshnik, used twice as a conventional strike system against Ukraine.

On the other hand, the ability to rely on the United States as a security provider is clearly diminishing as the Trump administration continually attacks its European partners. This is pushing Europeans to consider the development of various systems to increase their ability to defend themselves with or without the explicit support of Washington. At the conventional level, this is in part taking the form of investments in missile defense (the European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI) currently includes 15 countries) and conventional deep-strike missiles (six countries have signed the letter of intention of the European Long-Strike Approach (ELSA) and various cooperative projects are currently ongoing regarding the development of this type of system).[xvi] In addition, with the impetus of Paris in particular, European countries are more openly considering how the French and British nuclear deterrent may play a role in increasing the security of the continent at large.

In this context, arms control is perceived with caution, especially if it appears to be imposed from major powers who may not have European's best interest at heart. This skepticism is visible in all countries, but for some, historic positions may lead them to preserve a positive rhetoric on the role of arms control, while for others, more concerned by the threats posed to the security of the continent, hostility to restraint mechanisms is more publicly assumed. Regarding strategic arms control, regulating historically nuclear systems

with a range above 5,500 km, the last arms control agreement, the New START Treaty, expired in February 2026. European countries may not be directly involved in potential efforts to negotiate a successor treaty, unless the United States acceded to the Russian demand to count the French and British strategic forces as part of an overall NATO arsenal. Regarding intermediate-range forces, Europe is more specifically concerned, but most countries would be reluctant to support, if it was considered, the resurgence of a treaty based on the INF model. Indeed, countries such as France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and others have stated that conventional long-range strike options are necessary to offset the imbalance of forces on the continent and increase the credibility of deterrence.[xvii] As the INF treaty banned all types of missiles, conventional and nuclear, it might not be in the interest of European countries in the short term. Finally, regarding short-range systems, proposals have long been made to suggest reciprocal restrictions on non-strategic weapons deployed by Russia and NATO.[xviii]

While some countries were rather in favor of using US nuclear weapons deployed in Europe as a bargaining chip to obtain the dismantling of Russian systems until the mid-2010s, positions have since evolved.[xix] Any reduction or withdrawal of American nonstrategic nuclear weapons from Europe would deal a powerful blow to NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements, given the small number of systems involved, and decrease even more U.S. credibility. Moreover, given the significant imbalance between the number of nonstrategic U.S. weapons deployed in Europe and Russian weapons, it is difficult to envisage an agreement that would be in the interests of both parties and, in particular, acceptable to the Europeans, without first involving a massive increase in the number of U.S. nuclear weapons deployed in Europe, which seems unlikely. Finally, compared to strategic weapons, for which verification protocols have been designed and implemented, nonstrategic weapons have so far been regulated solely by US and Russian unilateral, unverified measures. Negotiating unverifiable ceilings or restrictions would probably not be seen as contributing to strengthening European security.

Possible Interests and Tools

Despite this defiance, there remain various interests in Europe for capping capabilities, especially vis-à-vis Russia. At the NATO level, Russia's nonstrategic capabilities have been described as threats. As a reminder, 100 to 120 nonstrategic nuclear weapons are believed to be deployed by the United States in Europe as part of NATO's nuclear mission. On the Russian side, the nonstrategic arsenal is estimated at more than 1,550 warheads.[xx] Given their range, these weapons are logically intended for the European continent and pose a serious risk of escalation, the extent of which was particularly evident during the war in Ukraine.[xxi]

In terms of medium-range and intermediate-range systems, Russia had already gained a clear lead even before the INF Treaty was scrapped. The Novator 9M729 (RS-SSC-8) cruise missile has been deployed since 2018 with at least four operational battalions.[xxii] The Oreshnik ballistic missile, with an estimated range of over 3,000 km, has been used twice in Ukraine and may have been deployed in

Belarus.[xxiii] Again, Europeans have seen these developments as threats and have recognized their interests in regulating the developments of INF-type of weapons in Europe.

European countries may indeed want to see Russian nonstrategic nuclear capabilities curbed but may be aware that they do not currently have enough leverage to push Moscow to make meaningful concessions. They therefore support the development and acquisition of systems that may be perceived as enough of a concern for Russia to push its leadership to agree to dismantling some of its own systems. Concerning defensive capabilities, the situation is different. Both the French and the UK nuclear arsenals are largely shaped in function of the defensive structures of their competitors. Consequently, the deployment of major defensive systems by potential adversaries has significant implications for French and British deterrence. The Trump administration's ambitions in missile defense, translated through the Golden Dome program, may lead strategic competitors to invest in defensive capabilities as well. France and the United Kingdom have obvious interests in seeing Russian and Chinese missile defensive programs restricted, especially since they do not plan to deploy similar systems and their interest in the Golden Dome program is questionable. Since the U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2002, regulating missile defense has been extremely difficult: during the Cold War, the technical criteria that allowed distinguishing between assets able to intercept strategic missiles and those only deployed to counter tactical threats is increasingly blurred by modern programs. Moreover, political opposition in the United States makes prospects of controlling antiballistic capabilities unlikely.

Despite these substantial obstacles, missile defense remains an area where Europeans would have a genuine interest in using arms control to reduce adversary capabilities, even if this leads to restrictions on what they themselves are able to develop. Interceptors in space could be prohibited, given the specific risks they entail.[xxiv] Restrictions on deployment areas and interceptor velocity could continue to be sought but would entail greater concessions in terms of conventional defense.

In 2020, French President Emmanuel Macron stated that "Following the collapse of the INF treaty, France would like to see broader discussions initiated, in which Europe must make its voice heard and ensure that its interests are taken into account in negotiations on a new instrument capable of ensuring strategic stability on our continent [...] And Europeans must be stakeholders and signatories to the next treaty, because this is our soil and a discussion that must not be conducted over our heads."[xxv] Since that date, the prospects for negotiating a formal arms control agreement have become even dimmer, but for European countries, the parallel rise of the Russian threat and the weakening of the transatlantic bond has led to a conclusion: they must increase their own capabilities to obtain leverage and promote their priorities and objectives with regard to arms control.

PRIORITIES AND LEVERAGE ON NONPROLIFERATION

Preserving a Major Role in the Implementation of Instruments

Europe as an institution (e.g. EU) and as individual states have played a key role for the past twenty years in supporting and strengthening the nonproliferation architecture. This has been the case with regard to the main norms linked to the nonproliferation regime, such as the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) or the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). In addition to promoting these norms (and its entry into force for the CTBT), European countries have actively supported underlying institutions such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the CTBT Provisional Technical Secretariat (CTBTO). This support is technical, practical and financial. The EU, in particular, has various activities that display this commitment. For instance, it funds regional workshops in preparation of each NPT Review Conferences, supports a project that promotes the universalization and effective implementation of the ICSANT (International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism), the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) and the Hague Code of Conduct against Ballistic Missile Proliferation (HCoC).[xxvi]

At the national level, specific countries have been particularly involved in addressing proliferation crises. The E3 (Germany, France, and the United Kingdom) as well as the EU have taken part actively in the negotiation on the Iranian nuclear program that led to the adoption of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). This file remained followed closely by Europeans, who, while promoting the restoration of a diplomatic solution following the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, have also been keen in implementing strictly its provisions, as seen with the implementation of the snapback mechanism in September 2025.[xxvii] With regard to the North Korean nuclear crisis, it is mostly through the implementation of sanctions that the EU has conveyed its objection to the program.[xxviii] European countries have also played a major role in the implementation of export control regimes.

This activism is explained by the strong conviction that the nonproliferation regime is a major asset to address the key multilateral risk of proliferation. The health of this regime is essential to limit the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), but also to demonstrate the credibility of multilateral measures in framing the international order, a vision which is at the heart of the European project.

A Challenging Positioning Linked to Uncertainties on U.S. Positions

While Europe sees itself as a major stakeholder with regard to nonproliferation, its positions carry some weaknesses that are emphasized by the current geopolitical context. First, at the political level, its action has mostly been complementary to or in addition to US initiatives. Even if there have been occasional differences of approach on some situations, and Europeans have generally been more formal and more attached to global norms than their transatlantic partners, they have mostly shared the objective of restraining access to proliferating technologies, in particular regarding Iran or North Korea.

Occasionally, a division of roles was observed, based on the comparative advantages of the various stakeholders. At the diplomatic level, Washington sought to capitalize on the European investments made during years of negotiations, as well as a potentially more conciliatory image, in order to resume and coordinate negotiations with Iran.[xxix] But U.S. power projection has been essential to implement powerful economic sanctions, including secondary sanctions, create coalitions at the United Nations, and lead counter-proliferation initiatives such as the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) which aims to stop WMD trafficking, their delivery systems and their components.

In the current context, it is hard for Europe to rely on Washington as a norm-maker and norm-enforcer in the field of nonproliferation. First, the Trump administration has displayed, most recently in Iran, that it believed that force was more efficient than diplomacy and norms to curb proliferation.[xxx] Second, the Republican administration holds in contempt the multilateral system, and its investment in favor of the nonproliferation regime has largely decreased with the Donald Trump's return to the White House. Not only has the administration excluded the ratification of the CTBT, but it has also implied that it may return to nuclear weapon testing.[xxxi] Its obsession to deny climate change leads to a systematic denunciation of sustainable development, which creates tension in the implementation of the NPT and at the IAEA. Worse, Trump and some of his advisers have in the past implied that it might consider that if some allies acquired nuclear weapons, it could serve U.S. interests by decreasing the need for reassurance.[xxxii]

The unreliability of the United States is of course only one of many challenges for the nonproliferation regime supported by European countries. Russian policy towards North Korea, which ignores UN Security Council resolutions, export control mechanisms and the very principles of nonproliferation, is a major preoccupation as it not only weakens norms but also favors technological development for proliferating countries which may fuel proliferating dynamics in some countries.[xxxiii]

Deprived of U.S. support, Europeans may find it difficult to uphold their standards with regard to proliferation, especially as the deterioration of the strategic environment is weakening the norms themselves. In East Asia, in the Middle East and in Europe as well, some countries, allies or partners of Europe, have implied that the current situation could justify the launching of national nuclear programs.[xxxiv] Europeans have the tools to react to this kind of activity, from political condemnation to economic sanctioning. But it is hard to anticipate to what extent they might have the political strength to oppose a partner or ally, or even one of their own, if neither the United States nor the rest of the international community is committed to the nonproliferation regime and is acting sincerely to curb these programs.

The emerging multipolar security environment is creating numerous challenges for the global nuclear order. For European countries, this means that they will increasingly be in a situation where they have to push for and defend nuclear

policies independently. While some of them have always aimed at contributing to nuclear regulations autonomously and following their own interests, they have also leaned heavily on the United States as they shared a strategic vision regarding nuclear matters. This situation may evolve as the transatlantic link gets more fragile and as Washington limits its participation to multilateral institutions linked to nuclear arms control and nonproliferation. It is therefore a key moment for European countries to try to weigh in on the global efforts to regulate global nuclear competitions. Two conditions will be required for Europe to play a role in these discussions and defend its interests: adequate leverage, including through capability development; and strategic cohesion. It is essential for European countries to share their priorities in that field and try to build a common strategy to address rising nuclear risks on the continent.

CONCLUSION

During his speech in March 2026, French President Emmanuel Macron announced that the next fifty years would be a "nuclear weapon age."[xxxv] He emphasized a vision in which Europe would be more sovereign and able to defend itself against all types of threats. In his eyes, but also for key other European leaders, this need to aggregate various European conventional capabilities, but also to build on the autonomous nuclear forces of France and the United Kingdom. Following this understanding, and without severing the link with the U.S. and its extended deterrence, willing European countries could be able to claim a more independent standing on nuclear affairs and to defend their specific interests in this matter. This is especially true with regard to the nuclear order. In the current context, it becomes impossible to assume that the "Western bloc" may systematically have the same priorities and policies with regards to arms control and nonproliferation. Europe does suffer from disadvantage to play a major role on this front: a lack of military leverage on some aspects, a dependency on Washington, a limited weight in the global system, and internal divisions. But it also has strengths, including a historical commitment to the global nuclear order. By working together on a shared vision in which regulations can bring stability and limit the risks of escalation or arms race, European countries can define a coherent strategy of rearmament which is coupled to a long term arms control negotiation strategy. Likewise, they need to anticipate the upcoming challenges of the nonproliferation norms and use their political leverage and willingness to engage with like-minded countries all over the word to promote adaptations to the various regimes and innovative mechanisms to sustain the principles of nonproliferation, which remains in the interest of all.

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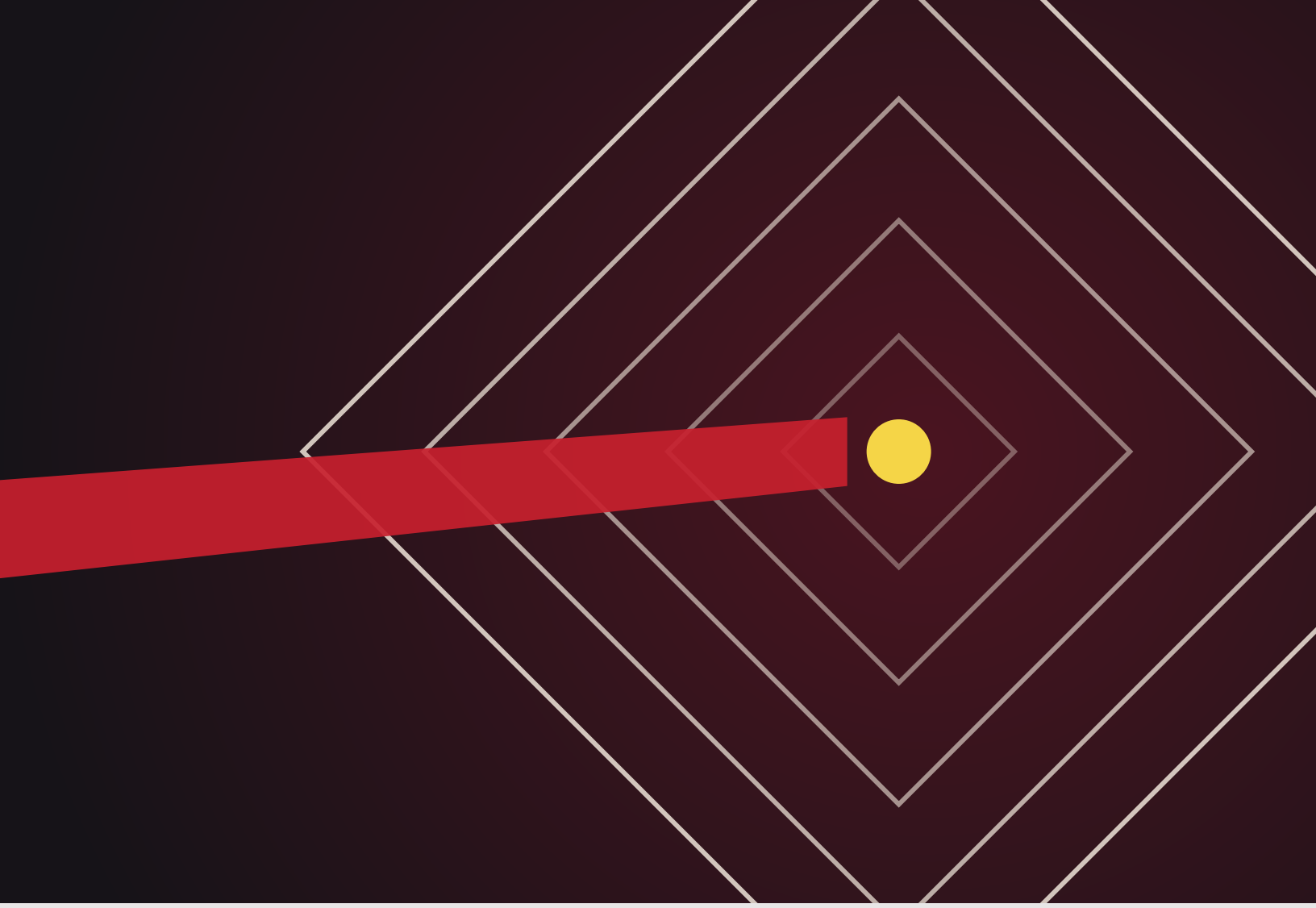
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Russia's Trojan Horses: Populism and the Security Challenge for Europe

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INTRODUCTION

In the nineteenth century, Carl von Clausewitz famously observed that "war is merely the continuation of politics by other means." Had he lived in the twenty-first century, he might well have reversed this dictum, suggesting that "politics is merely the continuation of war by other means."

No matter how extensively a state equips its armed forces or trains its soldiers, national security cannot be assured if hostile actors succeed in penetrating the core of state power and manipulating the political process from within. It is precisely this form of political subversion that has become a growing concern for major Western countries today. Russia, whose confrontation with European states has deepened in recent years, has sought to compensate for its relative military disadvantages by cultivating sympathetic political forces within European countries and undermining them from the inside. Alternatively, it has endeavored to encourage the establishment of governments more inclined to cooperate with Russia, thereby reshaping the international order in ways more favorable to its own interests.

Domestic political actors, for their part, often seek to expand their influence by cooperating with Russia. In doing so, they effectively function as "Trojan horses," facilitating Russian penetration into domestic political systems. In Europe, many of the political forces that play this role are commonly categorized as populist parties or populist politicians. While addressing this phenomenon has become an increasing concern among European policymakers, premature regulatory measures risk undermining freedom of expression and democratic institutions, leaving many countries deeply ambivalent about how to respond.

This article focuses primarily on France, where this phenomenon is particularly pronounced. By examining the characteristics of populist political forces in France, it seeks to clarify how they have forged close ties with the Putin administration in Russia and how, as a result, they have come to pose a threat to France's national security. Although formulating clear-cut countermeasures remains difficult, this study aims to draw several instructive lessons from the French case, while also touching on cases from other European countries that share common characteristics.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF POPULISM

This article proposes a two-phase model of contemporary populism, arguing that since the late 2000s populism has evolved from protest-oriented movements into power-

seeking governing projects.[i] Accordingly, it proposes a distinction between a "first phase" and a "second phase" of populism. Such a distinction is crucial because the concept of "populism" has long resisted precise conceptual definition. This difficulty stems from several factors: populism manifests itself in diverse forms through its association with other ideologies; populist politicians and parties frequently alter their claims and policy positions; their rhetoric does not always align with their actions; and the term "populism," much like "terrorism," has often been used pejoratively as a label of denunciation rather than as an analytical category.

In recent political science scholarship, a widely accepted definition has emerged, describing populism as a political discourse that divides society into two homogeneous groups - "the elite" and "the people" — and claims to represent the latter in opposition to the former.[ii] Under this definition, populism, as an explicitly anti-elite ideology, possesses a fundamentally anti-establishment character.

The debate concerning the normative evaluation of populism has been no less persistent. One influential perspective emphasizes its role in mobilizing previously marginalized voters and regards populism as a force that can reinforce democracy. Another highlights its tendency to deny pluralism and views it as a threat to democratic governance. While populism in practice appears to embody both characteristics, scholars have remained divided over which dimension is more fundamental or deserving of analytical focus.

Despite these complexities, this article adopts a framework that divides populism into two phases. Although some scholars trace the origins of populism to movements such as the U.S. People's Party or Russia's *Narodnik* movement, the rapid rise of populism in its current form became evident after the end of the Cold War in 1989. As socialism rapidly lost legitimacy and left-wing politics receded, populist politicians expanded their support by filling the resulting political vacuum. Notable examples include Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of France's far-right National Front (*Front National*), and Pim Fortuyn, the Dutch right-wing politician assassinated in 2002. Their primary objective was not the acquisition of governmental power but rather the mobilization of popular discontent and anxiety. In practice, they failed to secure sufficient support to seriously challenge for power. This period can be characterized as the first phase of populism.

In contrast, the 2010s witnessed the rise of populist leaders who explicitly sought — and in some cases succeeded in obtaining — political power. Viktor Orbán's assumption of the Hungarian premiership in 2010 marked an early turning point, followed by the electoral victory of Poland's Law and Justice Party in 2015 and Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.[iii] The social anxiety triggered by the 2008 global financial crisis and the European sovereign debt crisis, compounded by the 2015 refugee crisis and a series of Islamist terrorist attacks in France and Belgium, created fertile ground for populist appeals. This period constitutes the second phase of populism.



The hemicycle of the Louise Weiss building, seat of the European Parliament, Strasbourg, France. | Photo via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.0

The contrast between these two phases is vividly illustrated by the political trajectories of Jean-Marie Le Pen and his daughter, Marine Le Pen, in France. Jean-Marie Le Pen, who led the *National Front* from its founding in 1972, remained a marginal figure of the anti-communist far right throughout the 1970s. In the 1980s, he expanded his support by centering his platform on anti-immigration rhetoric, and after the collapse of the Cold War order he continued to gain ground, ultimately reaching the second round of the 2002 presidential election. Nevertheless, he largely confined himself to inflammatory rhetoric and personal attacks against political opponents.[iv]

Marine Le Pen, who ascended to the leadership of the National Front in 2011, by contrast, sought to transform the party into a viable governing party. Through a process she termed *dédiabolisation* (de-demonization), she banned overtly antisemitic discourse frequently observed within the party, expelled neo-Nazi elements, and sought to normalize the party's image. Economically and socially, she adopted a left-leaning, welfare-oriented discourse emphasizing social protection and civil rights. As a result, the party broadened its electoral base, incorporating not only older and wealthier voters but also working-class constituencies during the 2010s. She reached the second round of the 2017 presidential election, renamed the party the National Rally (*Rassemblement National*) in 2018, expanded support in rural areas during the 2020s, and again advanced to the runoff in the 2022 election. As of January 2026, her approval ratings

exceed 30 percent, leading many observers to regard her victory in the 2027 presidential election as a probable outcome.[v]

THE EUROPEAN FAR RIGHT'S RAPPROCHEMENT WITH RUSSIA: FRENCH AND OTHER COUNTRIES' EXAMPLES

One of the factors contributing to this rise has been the National Front's relationship with Russia. Jean-Marie Le Pen, whose political orientation was strongly pro-American, began to develop ties with Russia in the 1990s. However, these connections remained limited to marginal actors, such as cooperation among far-right figures including Vladimir Zhirinovsky. At the time, the National Front also maintained cordial relations with right-wing nationalist parties in Ukraine and thus did not articulate a coherent or consistent policy toward Russia. Meanwhile, in the early 2000s, Vladimir Putin cultivated friendly relations with then French President Jacques Chirac through their shared opposition to the Iraq War. Given Jean-Marie Le Pen's antagonistic relationship with Chirac, there was little room for the emergence of a close relationship between Le Pen and Putin. It was only under the leadership of Marine Le Pen that strong ties with the Putin administration were established.

From the outset of her tenure as party leader in 2011, Marine Le Pen expressed admiration for Vladimir Putin. From 2013 onward, she frequently visited Moscow, and although Le Pen herself has denied it, there are testimonies suggesting that she met with Putin in person on multiple occasions.[vi] In 2014, the National Front and companies owned by the Le Pen family received loans totaling approximately EUR 11 million from Russia-linked financial institutions. These loans have been widely interpreted as a form of compensation for Le Pen's support of Russia's occupation of Crimea.[vii]

One of the most influential figures shaping Le Pen's rapprochement with the Putin regime was Aymeric Chauprade, an international relations scholar and former Member of the European Parliament who advocated for closer Franco-Russian cooperation. A self-described realist and former head of a department at the French War College, Chauprade became Le Pen's de facto foreign policy adviser in 2010 and played a central role in formulating her foreign policy during the 2012 presidential election. He argued that the primary axis of global conflict was no longer liberalism versus socialism, but rather "materialism versus traditionalism," positioning himself firmly on the side of the latter.[viii] Openly expressing affinity toward Russia, Chauprade participated in the "international observer mission" organized by Russian authorities for the 2014 referendum on Crimea's status, repeatedly advancing narratives that sought to legitimize Russia's occupation of the peninsula.

Although Chauprade left the National Front in 2015 due to a loss of an internal power struggle, Le Pen's pro-Russian orientation remained persistent. In the 2017 presidential election, she made foreign policy a central pillar of her campaign, advocating withdrawal from NATO's integrated military command structure and the establishment of a strategic alliance

with Russia. She also proposed strengthening cooperation among Paris, Berlin, and Moscow, and advocated the creation of a pan-European confederation of sovereign states — including Russia and Switzerland — as an alternative to the European Union.

By the mid-2010s, this French phenomenon, embodying second-wave populism, had become a broader trend among far-right populist parties across Europe. From 2013 to 2014, party leaders and senior officials from the British National Party, Greece's far-right Golden Dawn, and Italy's Northern League visited Russia. Even in post-Cold War Eastern European countries, where suspicion toward Russia had traditionally been strong, closer engagement with Moscow became increasingly visible during this period. In 2014, Konstantin Malofeev, a Russian oligarch close to Putin, together with conservative ideologue Aleksandr Dugin, convened a meeting in Vienna with representatives of France's National Front and Austria's Freedom Party. Bulgaria's far-right party Ataka also participated in this gathering.[ix]

WHY POPULISM ALIGNS WITH RUSSIA

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, many right-wing populist parties fell conspicuously silent regarding their ties to Russia. In the French presidential election held in April of that year, references to Russia disappeared from Marine Le Pen's campaign platform, and — except for her continued opposition to France's participation in NATO's integrated military command — foreign policy was largely absent from her manifesto. In media interviews, she even expressed support for accepting the Ukrainian refugees, signaling an apparent attempt to distance herself from Moscow.[x]

Nevertheless, Le Pen has not fundamentally altered her pro-Russian stance. She has argued that Ukraine's NATO membership prospect served as a justification for Russian aggression and has criticized economic sanctions against Russia on the grounds that they undermine French purchasing power.[xixii] Jordan Bardella, a young politician who succeeded Le Pen as president of the National Rally in 2021, criticized Russia's invasion during a televised debate for the 2024 parliamentary elections, stating that "Russia must not be allowed to absorb Ukraine."[xiii] However, many observers interpret this comment as a strategic attempt to influence public opinion rather than a substantive shift in policy.[xiv] Similarly, Matteo Salvini, the leader of Italy's League, has shown no clear sign of abandoning his pro-Russian orientation.

"Populist parties function as 'Trojan horses' within democratic political systems, while influence agents operate as secondary Trojan horses embedded within the populist parties themselves."

Why, then, do right-wing populist parties align so closely with Vladimir Putin's Russia? Several factors help explain this alignment. First, the Putin regime functions as a model of governance for populist parties. According to a 2014 report by the Hungarian Political Capital Institute titled

The Russian Connection: The Spread of Pro-Russian Policies among Europe's Far Right, Putin's Russia appears to many European far-right parties as an ideal political system. Russia's authoritarian political system, its heavy-handed leader, its great power rhetoric, the suppression of basic freedoms, state control over strategic sectors, the constant reference to "national interests" overriding market mechanisms and a controlled economy keeping "big-capital" in check offer a state-organization model for some European far-right parties.[xv] These characteristics are often perceived by populist parties as a blueprint for their own future governance.

This perception is closely linked to the transformation of populism since the late 2000s. Whereas populism had previously existed as a niche, anti-establishment movement, Putin's Russia provided populist actors with tangible examples of how such movements could actually govern. Populist leaders believed that by emulating Putin's policies, they themselves could win elections and take control of their countries. Moreover, in 2014, Russia occupied Crimea quickly and decisively. This enhanced Putin's image as a decisive strongman among European right-wing populists.[xvi] Ironically, the success of this operation itself depended on Russia's extensive use of political subversion, including the cultivation of collaborators and sympathizers among Ukrainian and Crimean political elites as part of its broader hybrid warfare strategy.

Second, support from the Putin regime offers tangible benefits. Although many aspects remain opaque, it is widely believed that Russia provides various forms of assistance to European populist parties. Russian banks gave loans to the National Front and Marine Le Pen, which is one clear example, but support for the National Front is not limited to financial assistance. Russian-sponsored disinformation campaigns, efforts to inflame social unrest, and the orchestration or radicalization of protests and mass mobilizations across Europe often have the indirect effect of boosting populist parties. For these parties, the ability to influence public opinion while remaining formally within legal boundaries constitutes a significant strategic advantage.

Third, the relationship is reinforced by the fact that they share conspiracy narratives. One defining feature of populist parties is their frequent reliance on conspiracy theories to amplify perceptions of crisis and mobilize support. This approach closely resembles the methods employed by the Putin regime, which routinely attributes inconvenient developments to conspiracies orchestrated by such as the CIA. Populist actors and the Russian state promote similar messages that reinforce each other. This leads to a shared ideology and practical cooperation.

Fourth, long-standing pro-Russian networks persist within populist parties. Some of the most influential figures within Europe's far-right movements have had strong connections with Russia for a long time. In some cases, these connections are rooted in shared antisemitic or white supremacist ideologies. Within France's National Rally, for example, some veteran party officials who have close links to Russia have reportedly maintained ties with the Assad regime in Syria, a key ally of Moscow.[xvii]

In addition, Russian intelligence services are also known to cultivate so-called agents of influence within foreign academic systems.[xviii] These individuals, who may perceive intelligence operatives as friends or valuable sources of information, act based on narratives provided to them and help disseminate those narratives domestically — often without being fully aware that they are serving Russian interests. The same can be said for political systems. Many populist parties are believed to contain multiple such figures within their ranks or immediate surroundings. Given that populist parties often lack experienced personnel with specialized policy expertise or governing capacity, they are particularly susceptible to and vulnerable to the influence of such actors and the narratives they promote.

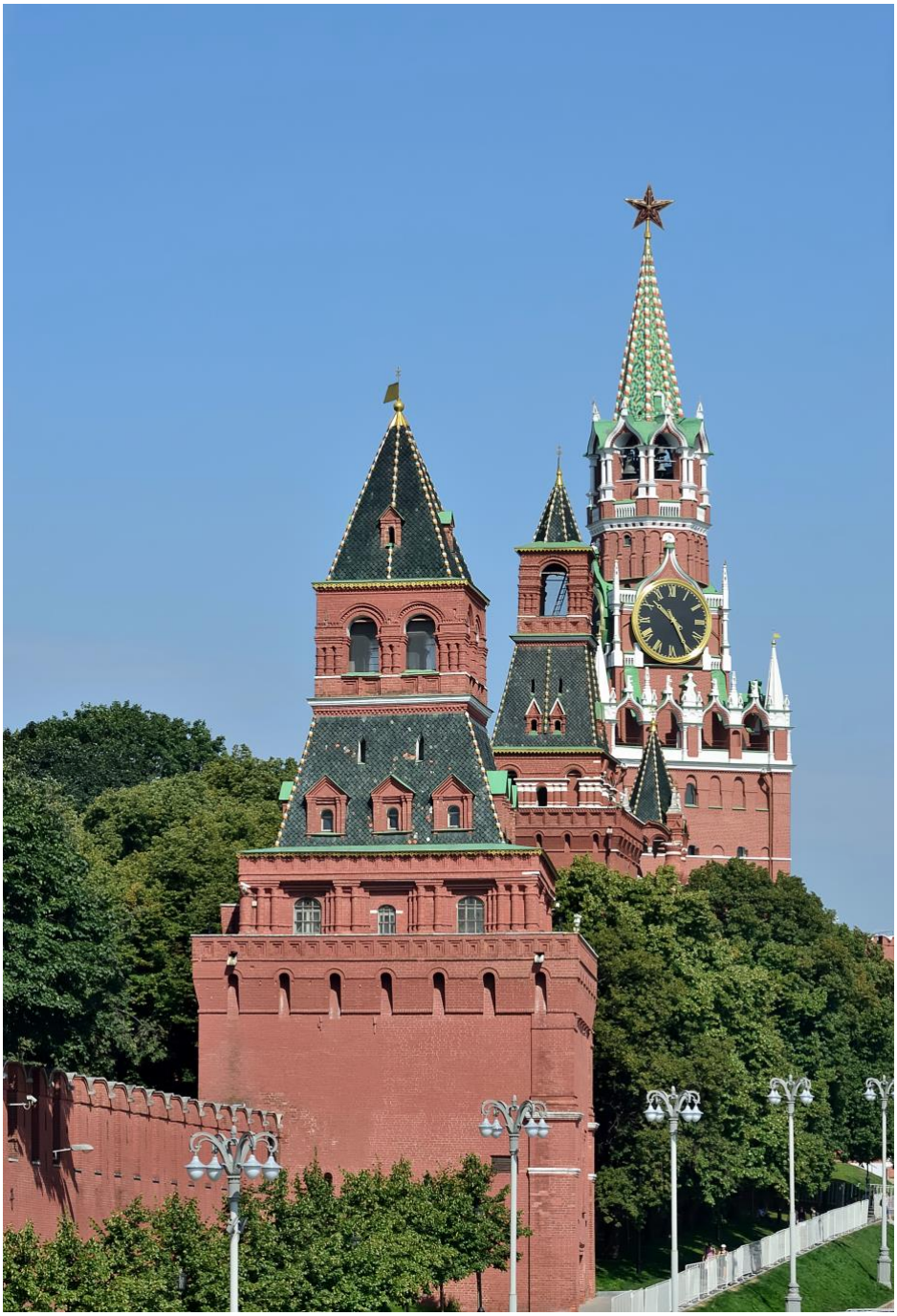
In this sense, populist parties function as "Trojan horses" within democratic political systems, while influence agents operate as secondary Trojan horses embedded within the populist parties themselves. Russia's efforts to shape the politics of major democratic states thus exhibit a multilayered, nested, *matryoshka*-like structure.

A CRISIS INSUFFICIENTLY RECOGNIZED BY THE PUBLIC

Experts in France have increasingly expressed concerns about the National Rally and its potential impact on national security. France held parliamentary elections between June and July of 2024, resulting in a victory for the National Rally, which emerged as the largest party in the National Assembly. On July 5, 2024 — the day following the election — prominent French foreign policy specialists, including Deputy Director of the Foundation for Strategic Research (FRS) Bruno Tertrais, former director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) François Heisbourg, and former Ambassador to the United States Gérard Araud, published a joint statement in *Le Figaro* titled "While the Kremlin Threatens our Security, the National Rally Proposes France's Subordination to Russia."[xix] The statement urged citizens to remain vigilant.

The authors pointed out that pro-Russian websites had supported National Rally leader Jordan Bardella during the election campaign and that many of the party's candidates had adopted pro-Putin positions while criticizing sanctions against Russia. They condemned the National Rally for seeking to "dramatically alter our alliances, turn away from our allies and historical friends, and align with Eurosceptic, authoritarian, and populist leaders such as Putin's Russia, Assad's Syria, Orbán's Hungary, Morawiecki's Poland, and Trump's United States." Regarding defense policy, they expressed deep mistrust, noting that the party had repeatedly reversed its position — initially advocating withdrawal from NATO, later calling for withdrawal from NATO's integrated military command, and most recently abandoning even that stance without public explanation. The statement warned that the party was effectively

seeking to subordinate France to Russia.



Towers of the eastern wall of the Moscow Kremlin. | Photo by Dmitry Ivanov, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Concerns regarding Russian interference through social media have also become increasingly concrete. In 2024, David Chavalarias, research director at the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), published the results of an analysis of approximately 700 million social media messages posted between 2016 and 2023.[xx] According to the study, Russia's principal disinformation strategies have been conducted primarily on social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and

Facebook. Before the European Parliament elections in June 2024, for example, false narratives circulated claiming that France was recruiting soldiers for deployment to Ukraine. This created the impression that President Emmanuel Macron was preparing for war with Russia. Disinformation networks also created fake websites that looked like they belonged to the presidential party. Numerous accounts suspected of being managed by actors linked to the Putin regime reportedly amassed a large following. Notably, some of these narratives supported not only the National Rally but also the left-wing party *La France Insoumise* (LFI), which is likewise known for its pro-Russian positions. The report concluded that such activities exacerbated divisions within the political landscape.

Despite these warnings, it remains unclear whether the broader public fully grasps the gravity of the situation. Marine Le Pen and Jordan Bardella both have approval ratings over 30 percent, which are much higher than those of other major political figures. Observers increasingly regard the possibility that one of them could win the 2027 presidential election as entirely plausible.

Russian influence operations appear to extend beyond France. In the United Kingdom, Nathan Gill, a former Wales representative of the populist party Reform UK, was convicted of accepting bribes and making pro-Russian statements during his tenure as a Member of the European Parliament.[xxi] He reportedly acted under the direction of Oleg Voloshyn, a pro-Russian Ukrainian politician who fled the country shortly before the full-scale invasion. Voloshyn's wife, Nadia Borodi, was also known to maintain close ties with Nigel Farage, the leader of Reform UK, as well as with Nicolas Bay, a former National Front executive.

In Germany, it was revealed in December 2025 that Ringo Mühlmann, a state parliamentarian from Thuringia who is affiliated with the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD), had repeatedly demanded that the state government disclose sensitive information regarding drone defense systems or arms transfers to Ukraine. The state interior minister commented that it was difficult to dispel the impression that these actions were undertaken at the behest of the Kremlin.[xxii]

CONCLUSION

There is little doubt that some form of response to these populist movements is necessary from the perspective of national security. The challenge lies in the fact that these parties operate within the formal rules of democratic systems, and excessive restrictions risk devolving into political repression. Moreover, while populist parties may constitute a security threat through their ties to Russia, they sometimes also fulfill certain functions for the state and society in areas unrelated to foreign and security policy. Russia seeks precisely to exploit the vulnerabilities inherent in democratic systems.

Accordingly, one possible response is to address these political forces through democratic political competition. In this regard, the example of Italy under Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni is instructive. Although Meloni was known in her youth as a right-wing activist and previously

expressed sympathy for Russia's position, she has adopted a markedly pragmatic and realistic approach since assuming office in 2022. She has unequivocally condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine, rejected conspiracy narratives, and emphasized the primacy of national security. At the same time, she has incorporated the pro-Russian right-wing populist League — potentially a security liability akin to France's National Rally — into her governing coalition, thereby effectively constraining its behavior. While far from perfect, this approach may nonetheless serve as a useful model.

Finally, given that both populism and Russian influence operations rely heavily on conspiracy-driven discourse, the maintenance of a transparent, fair, and robust public sphere — as well as the protection of independent journalism — is indispensable. In France, particular concern has been raised over the growing media influence of Vincent Bollóre, a business magnate who heads one of the country's largest logistics groups and has systematically acquired newspapers and television networks, thereby consolidating control over a vast media empire. Many of these outlets reportedly employ former staff members of Russian propaganda organizations as journalists.[xxiii]

The situation confronting France is one that other European countries — and Japan as well — are likely to face sooner rather than later. The United States appears to be even further along this trajectory and may already be experiencing a national security crisis of this nature. While military equipment and troop deployments serve as tangible symbols of national defense and help bolster public morale, efforts to counter domestic populist parties may appear comparatively abstract, diffuse, and lacking in urgency. Yet neglecting this challenge risks rendering even the most carefully constructed deterrent capabilities ineffective over time. Informing citizens of this danger and addressing it through international cooperation constitutes an urgent challenge for democratic states.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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NOTES

i The idea of dividing contemporary populism into two periods was inspired by the following essay. Thibault Muzergues, Postpopulisme: La nouvelle vague qui va secouer l'Occident (Paris: Editions de l'Observatoire, 2024). For Muzergues's argument, see; Interviewed by Norito Kunisue "Trump, Meloni, Le Pen...Différences à l'ère post-populisme : Interview de Thibault Muzergues", RCAST Open Laboratory for Emergence Strategies, February 15, 2025, https://roles.rcast.u-tokyo.ac.jp/publication/20250215 (accessed February 1, 2026).

ii Although their respective positions and perspectives may differ somewhat, the following major essays on populism all develop arguments consistent with this concept. Jan-Werner Müller, What Is Populism? (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Cas Mudde, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Populism: A Very Short Introduction (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Pascal Perrineau, Le populisme (Paris: Que sais-je?, 2021).

iii Orbán also served as prime minister from 1998 to 2002.

iv According to Henri Emmanuelli, former First Secretary (party leader) of the French Socialist Party, Francois Mitterrand, who served as President of France from 1981 to 1995, said that Jean-Marie Le Pen was "nothing to be afraid of." This was because Mitterrand was convinced that Le Pen only wanted to secure a place in the spotlight for himself and had no desire to hold power. Dominique Albertini, David Doucet, Histoire du Front National (Paris: Tallandier, 2013).

v In 2025, Le Pen was convicted of misappropriating party funds to pay for her parliamentary secretary while serving as a Member of the European Parliament, and her right to stand for election was suspended. Unless the conviction is overturned on appeal or there is a legal amendment granting her a de facto pardon, she will be unable to run for president. In that case, current party leader Jordan Bardella is expected to run as a kind of puppet candidate. As of 2025, Bardella has at times surpassed Le Pen in popularity.

vi Nicolas Hénin, La France russe: Enquête sur les réseaux de Poutine (Paris: Fayard, 2016).

vii Agathe Duparc, Karl Laske, and Marine Turchi, "Crimea, Russian loans and the Le Pens: the

Kremlin's intriguing SMS messages", Mediapart, April 4, 2015, https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/france/040415/crimea-russian-loans-and-le-pens-kremlins-intriguing-sms-messages (accessed February 1, 2026); Romain Geoffroy, Maxime Vaudano, "Quels sont les liens de Marine Le Pen avec la Russie de Vladimir Poutine ?", Le Monde, April 20, 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2022/04/20/quels-sont-les-liens-de-marine-le-pen-avec-la-russie-de-vladimir-poutine_6122903_4355770.html (accessed February 1, 2026).

viii Interview in Paris on May 13, 2015. For details on Chauprade's logic, See Aymeric Chauprade, Chronique du choc des civilisations: Novelle Édition (Paris: Éditions Chronique, 2013).

ix Bernhard Odehnal, "Gipfeltreffen mit Putins fünfter Kolonne", Tages-Anzeiger, June 3, 2014, https://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/gipfeltreffen-mit-putins-fuenfter-kolonne-335546606907 (accessed February 1, 2026).

x 'Le Pen, "Oui, il faut aider à accueillir les réfugiés ukrainiens", RMC, February 25, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2IuvuL6f1k (accessed February 1, 2026).

xi Tetyana Vysotska, "French far-right politician Le Pen: Promising Ukraine NATO and EU membership is a big lie and risk for peace", Ukrainska Pravda, March 3, 2025, https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2025/03/03/7501117/ (accessed February 1, 2026).

xii "Guerre en Ukraine, en direct : le convoi humanitaire vers Marioupol espéré dans l'après-midi de lundi", Le Monde, April 12, 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/live/2022/03/13/guerre-en-ukraine-en-direct-washington-avertit-pekin-de-consequences-en-cas-d-aide-a-la-russie-face-aux-sanctions-internationales_6117301_3210.html (accessed February 1, 2026).

xiii "French far right chief Bardella vows he won't let 'Russian imperialism' absorb Ukraine", Le Monde, June 27, 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/france/article/2024/06/27/french-far-right-chief-bardella-vows-won-t-let-russian-imperialism-absorb-ukraine_6675991_7.html (accessed February 1, 2026).

xiv Bardella advised Le Pen to distance himself from Putin, following the example of Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, who has taken a hard line against Russia, but Le Pen reportedly dismissed the suggestion. See Pierre-Stéphane Fort, Le Grand remplaçant: La face cachée de Jordan Bardella, (Paris: StudioFact, 2024).

xv Political Capital, "The Russian connection: The spread of pro-Russian policies on the European far right", Political Capital Policy Research and Consulting Institute, March 14, 2014, https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC_FlashReport_RussianConnection_140314.pdf (accessed February 1, 2026).

xvi Muzergues, op.cit.

xvii Nicolas Lebourg, Olivier Schmitt, Paris-Moscou : Un siècle d'extrême droite (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2024).

xviii Sanshiro Hosaka, "Epistemic Communities and 'Agents of Influence': Insights from Soviet Intelligence Documents", Europe-Asia Studies Volume 77, 2025 - Issue 2, March 3, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2025.2463399 (accessed February 1, 2026)

xix Bruno Tertrais, Christian Lequesne, Gérard Araud, Nicolas Tenzer, Pierre Buhler, François Heisbourg, «Alors que le Kremlin menace notre sécurité, le RN propose la vassalisation de la

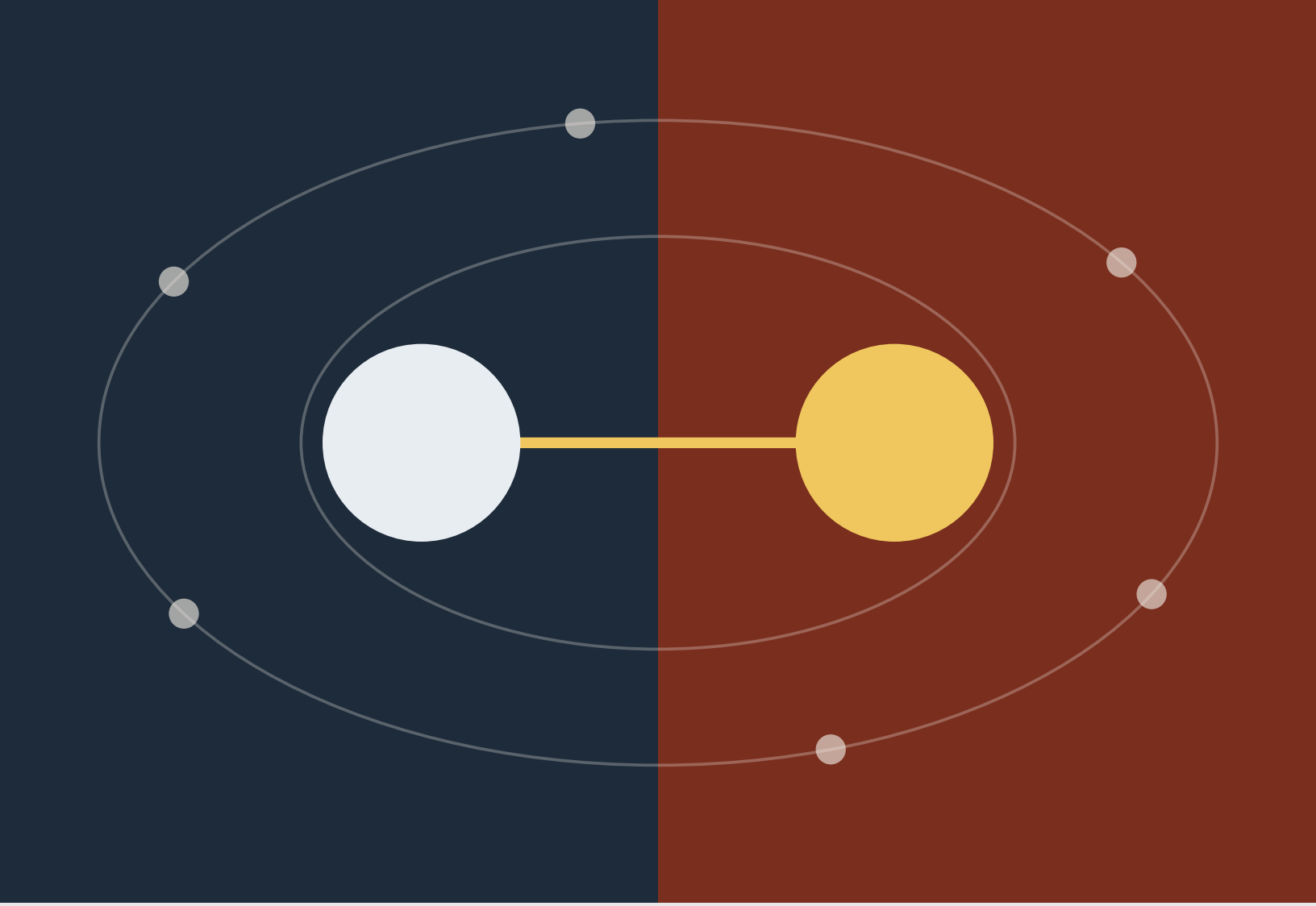
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xx Clara Hidalgo "Législatives 2024 : comment le Kremlin aurait tenté d'influencer le scrutin pour déstabiliser la France", Le Figaro, July 3, 2024, https://www.lefigaro.fr/elections/legislatives/legislatives-2024-comment-le-kremlin-aurait-tente-d-influencer-le-scrutin-pour-destabiliser-la-france-20240703 (accessed February 1, 2026); The survey results are as follows: David Chavalarias, "Minuit moins dix à l'horloge de Poutine", HAL open science, August 29, 2024, https://hal.science/hal-04629585v1 (accessed February 1, 2026).

xxi Lizzie Dearden, "U.K. Politician Admits Making Pro-Russia Statements in Return for Bribes", The New York Times, September 26, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/26/world/europe/gill-russia-britain-bribery.html?smid=tw-share (accessed February 1, 2026).

xxii Nette Nöstlinger, "Germany's far-right AfD accused of gathering information for the Kremlin", Politico, December 23, 2025, https://www.politico.eu/article/germanys-far-right-afd-accused-of-gathering-information-for-the-kremlin/ (accessed February 1, 2026).

xxiii Lebourg, Schmitt, op.cit.



An Emergent Multipolar Security Regime?

Michael O'Hanlon

The concept of an emerging multipolar security order has been exaggerated. To be sure, power distributions and security challenges are changing. However, a shift toward multipolarity would require multiple regional hegemons each leading its own network of organizations, with each network operating on unique principles and interests. There would likely be significant friction and competition between the various networks. Alternatively, it would imply a genuinely collaborative and powerful global security order, but that exists only for certain issues like nuclear nonproliferation at a time when the United Nations Security Council has been largely defanged due to great-power competition. Thus, today's institutional landscape is more bipolar or tripolar than multipolar — though with the United States clearly the single greatest security power, supported by allies even in the Trump era. Today's world is more similar to that of the Cold War than to a genuinely multidimensional power distribution.

China and Russia are again aligned, albeit in different ways than in the Cold War (and with different goals back then). Iran and North Korea remain complex problems for the United States and its allies. China-led security institutions such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) are still not major players on the big issues of the day.

The Western world as a system of alliances is still largely the same as it ever was, only a bit bigger (though weakening under Trump with an uncertain prognosis). Maybe I don't want to see or acknowledge change, but I see more continuity than change, at least in terms of power structure and global order, despite Trump's occasional efforts to weaken it.



U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III shakes hands with North Atlantic Treaty Organization Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in Washington, D.C., July 11, 2024. | U.S. Army photo by Spc. Phyleicia-Nicole Dais (public domain)

Consider some historical perspective for a moment. Since World War II, we had many phases of thinking about American decline — the implication that the United States and its allies are losing ground to a new rival or, as this *FSR* issue postulates, a group of potential rivals and competitors. The first time, as observed by the late great Samuel Huntington of Harvard University, was within a few years of the formation of the post-1945 alliance network. By the late 1950s and the "Sputnik moment," the Soviet Union seemed to catch up to a lagging United States in various areas of technology (and in the overall strength of its military, especially in Central Europe). China was somewhat independent of the Soviet Union and therefore a third pole, with the Global South being a fourth; but for the most part, the world was bipolar, and the United States with allies was seen as slipping behind.

Similar observations were made throughout the next decades: in the late 1960s, as the protracted Vietnam War sapped our military strength and divided the American people; in the late 1970s, after the defeat of South Vietnam by North Vietnam, the fall of the Shah of Iran, as well as stagflation in the economy; in the late 1980s, when Paul Kennedy wrote his seminal work, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, documenting a half millennium of history and using it in part to predict the next period of American decline; and in the late 2000s, when a combination of "forever" wars in the Middle East as well as the 2008 global financial crisis seemed to herald American decline in both relative and absolute terms.

Sometimes these predictions of decline presupposed a single relative beneficiary of America's reduced strength; sometimes they presupposed several. There were also times when new power centers seemed to

emerge separately from any noticeable decline in American power. The coining of the phrase "BRICS" in the early 2000s recognized the growing success and strength (not just in economic terms) of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa among other countries. Never mind that, in the words of my Brookings colleague, Bruce Jones, "the BRICS had no mortar" — there was little holding them together as a bloc or new pole in the global security order, even if some of them are individually powerful, notably Russia and China.

My point in reviewing this history is not to disprove the possibility of a relative American or allied decline that might facilitate the arrival of new powers and a multipolar world. It is only to note that the same prediction has been advanced many times in the last seventy years but generally incorrect to date.

WHY THE WORLD REMAINS BIPOLAR - FOR NOW

So, what about today? My contention is that while a world of 200 countries and 8 billion people will indeed have many different types of security challenges and many important actors, the world remains roughly bipolar, or tripolar on some issues — with little reason to think that will change anytime soon. Here are my main reasons:

* The United States, with a national defense budget nearing USD 1 trillion a year, still accounts for more than 35 percent of global military spending.

* U.S. allies in Europe, stepping up their efforts after considerable hectoring from the Trump Administration, plus U.S. allies and security partners in East Asia and the Pacific and the Middle East, represent about another 35 percent.

* Russia is a formidable military power in Eastern Europe and globally as well, because of its nuclear weapons in particular - at least in its ability to threaten devastation, if not to control events or territory.

* But China, Russia's security partner "without limits," is the real rising superpower. China's military budget is estimated at well over USD 300 billion, once appropriate adjustments are made to account for costs not included in its official defense budget, but the U.S. would, and its already rough parity with U.S. military power in the western Pacific (I would contend). No other country with the very partial exception of India (and Iran, in a different way) is making any real effort to be an important security player far from its own shores.

* Finally, multilateral security efforts centered on the United Nations system have weakened in relative importance in recent decades. Nobody is meaningfully regulating AI or gene splicing or climate change or pollution of the oceans or destruction of rain forest.

"Today's world is more similar to that of the Cold War than to a genuinely multidimensional power distribution."

It is also worth noting that, as of early 2026, the world still has nine nuclear weapons states (official and unofficial) - the same number throughout the twenty-first

century to date. This is less than half of the number that JFK feared would exist by the end of the twentieth century, when he made his predictions in the early 1960s.



The Security Council Chamber at UN Headquarters, New York. | UN Photo/Albert Fox (used for editorial/news purposes; credit required per UN Photo terms)

Of course, it is not all about spending levels nor global ambitions. There are new security issues where traditional measures of military power do not equally apply. Other security issues, broadly speaking, include the regulation and control of AI and modern microbiology, the management of global climate change, and the management of pandemics. Given the weakening of multilateral security institutions (not just UN Peacekeeping Operations, but also the WHO and other health-related organizations), I would describe the existing state of play for addressing such transnational challenges as one of international anarchy (or weak policy intervention) rather than multipolarity. I wish things were more genuinely multipolar because we could use more governance and more good ideas on several key issues of the day. Alas, I fear we are collectively floundering as a human civilization on a number of them.

My argument here is not to be dismissive of the notion that aspects of the world's security order are becoming more multipolar - or at least, that they should

become more multipolar. It is only to say that, for the moment, I see more of a mélange of bipolarity or tripolarity with quasi-anarchy rather than genuine multipolarity, by most metrics of power and on most matters of top-tier security importance for the planet.

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