



# Between Comity and Conflict

## REVISITING EURASIAN SECURITY IN THE MULTIPOLAR ERA

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### Abstract

This article revisits Eurasian security by examining the unresolved tension between comity and conflict under conditions of contemporary multipolarity. How, and through what institutional–normative mechanisms, can Eurasian security be organized in a multipolar era without reverting either to hegemonic tutelage or to bloc-based confrontation? The analysis adopts genealogy as a historically grounded interpretive method that reconstructs the contingent processes through which security practices and political orders become possible, stabilized, and treated as self-evident. A limited set of historically significant episodes—ranging from the failed Volga Charter and the 1945 Yalta–Potsdam moment to the consolidation of the UN Charter International System and the rise and unmasking of the Political West—are examined through close reading of diplomatic exchanges, institutional documents, policy statements, and authoritative interpretations. The findings identify a durable “security gap” produced by the absence of a shared Eurasian normative framework in 1941–45, later compounded by contradictions between Charter-based sovereign internationalism and liberal-globalist ordering. The article concludes that heterar-

chical comity, anchored in Charter pluralism, provides the most plausible basis for a sustainable Eurasian security architecture under multipolarity.

### **Keywords**

*comity; Eurasian security; multipolarity; sovereign internationalism; world order*

## **Introduction**

During his visit to Moscow in December 1941, the British foreign minister, Anthony Eden, came prepared to discuss the contours of a postwar order. The focus of the talks was on strengthening the Anglo-Soviet wartime alliance, yet Eden had wider ambitions. Winston Churchill, the prime minister, was extremely reluctant to talk about postwar order, insisting that the priority was winning the war, and everything else was a distraction. However, to entice the United States into the war against Nazi Germany, Churchill agreed to the Atlantic Charter with the US president, Franklin D. Roosevelt. The Atlantic Charter, signed off the coast of Newfoundland in August 1941, outlined the fundamental principles of the war and the outlines of a postwar order. Since the US at the time was not a direct combatant, the document necessarily avoided specific operational matters and instead concentrated on abstract principles. Churchill was forced to make important concessions, including opening the British Empire to American commerce. In return, the UK received increasing quantities of war materiel delivered through the Lend-Lease programme. The Atlantic Charter would later become the foundation of the Washington Treaty of April 1949, establishing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

In his visit to Moscow, Eden was thinking of an equivalent for Eurasia, which he dubbed the “Volga Charter” (Hall, 2014). This venture proved stillborn, with discussions in the Kremlin focusing on Joseph Stalin’s immediate demands, above all recognition of Soviet borders as they existed before the German invasion of 22 June that year, including the parts of Finland ceded after the Winter War (1939-40), the Baltic States, Eastern Poland and Northern

Romania. Neither the British nor American governments were prepared to recognize these territorial changes. Nevertheless, the visit prepared the way for the Anglo-Soviet Treaty of Mutual Assistance of May 1942, which in turn laid the foundation for the wartime Grand Alliance. As for the broader vision of a postwar order, no common framework was established. The alliance would not last much beyond the end of the war. The path was set, and the lack of a normative foundation, equivalent to the Atlantic Charter, meant that the anti-Axis alliance did not endure. The problem of North Eurasian security has still not been resolved.

This article takes Eden's stillborn "Volga Charter" as a point of departure to revisit the enduring tension between comity and conflict in Eurasian security. It is guided by a central question: how, and through what institutional–normative mechanisms, can Eurasian security be organized in a multipolar era without reverting either to hegemonic tutelage or to bloc-based confrontation? From a methodological perspective, this question is addressed through genealogy, understood here as a historically grounded interpretive research method that investigates how political orders and security practices become possible, stabilized, and taken for granted over time, rather than as an inquiry into origins or linear causation (Vucetic, 2011). Genealogy proceeds by problematizing what appears natural in the present and reconstructing the contingent historical processes through which it emerged. In practical terms, this involves identifying a limited number of historically significant episodes, assembling a focused archive for each episode (including diplomatic exchanges, institutional documents, policy statements, and authoritative interpretations), and subjecting these materials to close interpretive reading. The analysis traces how specific discourses and institutional arrangements structured what could be said, negotiated, and institutionalized at each juncture, while simultaneously marginalizing alternative possibilities. By moving iteratively across episodes and examples, genealogy shows how earlier settlements constrained later choices and how power operated productively through norms, institutions, and expectations rather than through direct coercion.

In this study, genealogy is applied by tracing how Eurasian security arrangements came to be constituted through a series of contingent historical settlements—from the failed Volga Charter and the 1945 Yalta–Potsdam moment to the Charter system and the rise of the Political West—rather than treating them as the product of fixed strategic logics. By reconstructing these episodes through close reading of diplomatic practices, institutional designs, and normative claims, the analysis shows how comity and conflict were historically produced, stabilized, and reconfigured under changing conditions of power and multipolarity. In this context, the argument is that the failure to articulate a shared Eurasian normative framework in 1941–45 produced an enduring “security gap” that later interacted with the post-1945 settlement’s own contradictions—above all the uneasy overlap between the Charter International System and competing models of world order, from Yalta–Potsdam sovereign internationalism to the liberal-globalist project of the Political West. The argument is constructed in four stages: it reconstructs the contradictions of the 1945 settlement; traces the rise, endurance and recent unmasking of the Political West; develops a four-dimensional framework for understanding multipolarity; and concludes by assessing whether heterarchical comity can provide a viable basis for Eurasian security in the present era.

## **1945: Year of Contradictions**

The Yalta and Potsdam conferences in 1945 established the principle of the comity of the great powers, which was entrenched in the newly established United Nations in the form of the five permanent members of the Security Council. Russia repeatedly calls for the restoration of the ‘Yalta-Potsdam’ system, reflecting the high point of its power and international recognition. However, Yalta-Potsdam was not a system but a model of world order, something very different. The international system today is the one established in 1945: the Charter International System, based on the UN and the vast body of agencies, international law and norms established on its foundations. By contrast, Yalta-Potsdam is a model of world

order at the level of international politics. There is, nevertheless, congruity between the Charter system and the Yalta-Potsdam order: a common commitment to sovereign internationalism. Hence Russia's contemporary desire to return to that order, which also entails support for the UN system.

The leaders at the Yalta conference in February 1945 sought to establish a peacetime grand alliance to guarantee peace and security for all countries after the war. This was taken a step further at the Potsdam meeting in July 1945. A Council of Ministers was created to negotiate Europe's postwar territorial and political order. Superpower summits, which until 1955 included the UK, continued this tradition. Yalta is often misrepresented as carving up Europe into spheres of influence, and this myth has resonance to this day when the specter of a second Yalta great power deal over the head of Europe hung over the talks to end the Ukraine war. However, as Geoffrey Roberts stresses, there was no such discussion of spheres of influence at Yalta. Indeed, the conference was devoted not to dividing Europe but to unifying it under the combined tutelage of the three victorious great powers of the Second World War – Britain, the Soviet Union and the United States. The key political resolution agreed by the Big Three – the Declaration on Liberated Europe projected a politically united continent based on democracy and anti-fascism (Roberts, 2025b).

Nevertheless, the myth of Yalta as the “great betrayal” lives on, symbolizing the division of Europe into spheres of influence without regard for the interests of small and medium states. In fact, the leaders at Yalta envisaged a united Europe managed on comity principles. Dividing lines emerged because of ‘the complex dynamics between great powers and their leaders, solidified by the post-war realities on the ground’. The pro-Soviet regimes in eastern Europe “unfolded amid escalating confrontation with the West – and, crucially, was never predetermined at Yalta or Potsdam” (Bespalov, 2025).

At the level of international politics after 1945 two models of world order emerged, whose contestation between 1947 and 1989 took the form of a Cold War. The Political West, covering the

western part of the continent and North America, opposed the Soviet bloc, encompassing the rest of North Eurasia and Central Asia. The Soviet bloc, like the Soviet Union itself, proved a brittle formation. The combination of ideological rigidity and inflexible geopolitical imperatives inhibited a more stable transition towards the creation of an organically rooted hegemonic system, and instead stability remained mechanical, policed by a rampant state apparatus and the force of arms. The Soviet bloc, in these terms, was truly a creation of the Cold War and disintegrated with the end of the Cold War, followed in short order by the collapse of the Soviet Union itself in December 1991.

On the other side, the US-led transatlantic alliance system is usually described by Russian commentators as the “collective West”, although it is more accurately described as the “Political West”, to denote its contingent character. It was also created during the Cold War and remains stamped with the legacy of cold war institutional and ideological characteristics. However, unlike its Soviet counterpart, instead of dissolving at the end of the Cold War, as most wartime alliances do after achieving their goals, the Political West radicalized. It now claimed certain universal rights, thus usurping the prerogatives that properly belong to the Charter system. In stark contrast to the sovereign internationalism at the heart of the Charter system, and professed by the Yalta-Potsdam order, the world order represented by the Political West advances liberal globalism, the view that the only viable and universal model of modernity is the one represented by the Political West. Liberal globalism combines a political project based on reified notions of ‘freedom’; an economic agenda demanding free markets, open trade and minimum state management of the economy; and a geopolitical ambition to maintain the primacy of the US. These three elements were not always compatible but nevertheless created a powerful model of world order in the first eight postwar decades. Liberal globalism, variously described as the liberal international order, liberal hegemony or the rules-based international order, entailed an entitlement, if not obligation, to interfere in the internal affairs of states if they are believed to have

contravened elements of the normative order represented by the Political West.

The Political West endured, whereas the endless contingencies of the Soviet bloc proved less durable. This is paradoxical, since classical Marxist-Leninist theory would suggest that a community founded on socialist principles would have greater internal coherence than one established by competing capitalist democracies. In the event, it was the democratic capitalist model of world order that was fated to survive. It turned out that Karl Kautsky's model of 'ultra-imperialism', whereby the leading capitalist states created a de facto global cartel and learned to cooperate, was vindicated, whereas Lenin's theory about the inevitability of conflict between the imperialist powers was refuted – at least for a time. With the rise of Donald J. Trump's mercantile globalism and militarized forms of globalism more generally, Lenin may in the end be proved right. In the immediate term, the Atlantic Charter laid the foundations for an enduring transatlantic alliance, whereas the absence of an equivalent for Northern Eurasia set in motion the events that provoked the Russo-Ukrainian War from 2022. The Helsinki Final Act of August 1975 sought to fill the gap, with recognition of the Soviet Union's postwar borders (with the partial exception of the Baltic republics), but its focus on stabilizing Cold War relationships and normative issues failed to create firm foundations for great power comity after the end of the Cold War. The conceptual roots of contemporary debates over multipolarity lie in the liminal period of debates over the shape of postwar order.

The fundamental tension is between the contrasting dynamics of comity and conflict. After the First World War, two great German thinkers analyzed the conditions for enduring peace and stability in an anarchic international environment. The jurist Carl Schmitt (2006) opted for hierarchy and authoritarianism, whereas the historian Otto Hintze opted for confederalism and voluntary commitments. Both sought to avoid a repetition of the disastrous experience of war and the conditions that provoked the conflict in the first place. Schmitt favored empire in which a single authority would govern in discrete regional spaces, *Grossraum* in his terminol-

ogy. Schmitt identified the Holy Alliance, established after the Napoleonic wars, as a European civilizational ideal at odds with what he claimed to be the empty universalism of the League of Nations (Odysseos & Petito, 2007).<sup>1</sup> By contrast, Hintze from the outset warned against underestimating the scope for cooperative and associative models of social order, the “horizontal and unforced solidarity among equals” (Streeck, 2024, p. 182). Hintze argued that free and equal individuals can associate in cooperative solidarity, thus rendering unnecessary subordination to hierarchical or authoritarian power systems. In his view, this federative approach applied as much to international affairs as to individuals in society. Peaceful cooperation can be achieved by voluntary coordination, without infringing on the freedom and sovereignty of the individual or the state. Rather than empire, Hintze favored *comity*, an association of nations for their mutual benefit, although he did not use the term. He called for a regional state system based on voluntary union, but deeply confederal in its composition rather than striving for the federal agenda of “ever closer union”.<sup>2</sup>

The character of spatiality was again taken up against the backdrop of the Second World War. Soon after the war and not long after the publication of his landmark book in 1944, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, Karl Polanyi (1945) published an article with the unassuming title *Universal Capitalism or Regional Planning?* He explored the relationship between what he called ‘the organization of international life’ and the politics and institutions of the most important states of his time. Focusing on the three great powers of the era, the US, the Soviet Union and the UK, he argued that what was “at issue between the powers is not so much their place in a given pattern of power, as the pattern itself” (Polanyi, 1945, p. 86). This was a liminal moment, with liberal capitalism in crisis, world-revolutionary socialism on the

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1. Carl Schmitt later summarised his thinking in *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, Translated and annotated by G. L. Ulmen (New York, Telos Press Publishing, 2006). For analysis, see Odysseos & Petito, 2007.

2. For details of his thinking, see da Cunha, 2020.

march, and anti-imperial decolonization on the agenda. This made possible “a new era in international politics”, described by Wolfgang Streeck as one based on the “peaceful coexistence of diverse regimes in the regions of the world, based on differing ways of settling class conflict” (Streeck, 2024, p. 2). However, he was concerned that the US aspired to become a global power and thus sought world domination, which would “thwart the prospect of establishing a pluralistic world order and, thus, of a non-aligned third way towards regional planning” (Streeck, 2024, p. 269).

This brings us back to 1945. The Yalta and Potsdam conferences that year established the principle of the comity of the great powers, which was entrenched in the newly established UN in the form of the five permanent members of the Security Council. Russia repeatedly calls for the restoration of the “Yalta-Potsdam” system, reflecting the high point of its power and international recognition. However, as noted, Yalta-Potsdam was not a system but a model of world order, something very different. The fundamental Russian goal, now joined by China and some other states, is to generate precisely the pluralism promised in 1945, before it was overtaken by the bloc politics and bipolarity of the Cold War era. The desired spatiality is sovereign internationalism, advancing pluralism of social orders and geopolitical multipolarity, against the homogenizing impulse at the heart of liberal globalism. Spatiality at this point intersects with temporality. The contemporary striving for multipolarity is set against the longer historical context, and above all the manifold possible representations of “the West” itself. These include the civilizational West, expanding across the globe since 1492; or as a cultural formation with its roots in Judeo-Christian and Greco-Romano traditions. As the Political West begins to fragment, deeper political patterns and representations emerge to shape debates over territoriality.

The unresolved contradictions of the 1945 peace settlement shape international affairs today, just as the legacy of Versailles in the end determined interwar international politics. The current manifestation of the Yalta-Potsdam order is the alignment of Russia, China and the other states in the BRICS Plus association,

which can be considered as a nascent Political East, although with a very different political valence and normative foundations. The Charter system has now matured, and the great majority of states in the Global South variously pursue balancing, hedging or non-alignment strategies. Barely a generation separated the two world wars, whereas three generations have now passed since 1945. That does not mean that the issues are any less urgent. We remain trapped in another interwar era, although a much longer one than the mere twenty years between the great wars of the twentieth century.

## Comity and Heterarchy

The Charter system was established in the wake of the most devastating conflict in human history. The UN Charter aspires to abolish war as an instrument of policy, and various subsequent declarations and conventions, above all the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Genocide Convention of 1948, established the principles for a more humane and cooperative world order. There was no Henry Carey-like vision of *The Harmony of Interests*, but an attempt to manage competing interests. The normative foundation of the new order is sovereign internationalism, enshrining respect for the sovereignty of member states (including limits on interference in their domestic affairs), accompanied by the robust multilateralism enshrined in the Security Council and its five permanent members. This sovereign internationalism stands in stark contrast to globalist projects, of which liberal globalism was the dominant form in the post-war era until superseded by Trump-style *Machtpolitik*. Even at its height, the commonwealth dimension of the delivery of global public goods was entwined with American-style imperial globalism, intent on establishing and maintaining US global primacy. Shorn off its commonwealth trimmings, from the mid-2020s imperial globalism represented an incoherent combination of mercantile competitiveness with “America First” ambition to “normalize” US foreign policy to foster domestic development and reindustrialization. The distinction between internationalism and varieties of globalism, however, remained.

Instead of a progressive spiral of history, in which the lessons of past failures bring about future achievements, the radicalization of the Political West in the post-communist era undermined even the achievements of the early postwar years. This is the tension between sovereign internationalism and liberal (and other types of) globalism. The academic Gerry Simpson (2001, pp. 539, 560) draws the same conclusion, describing the struggle between “charter liberalism” and “liberal anti-pluralism”. For him, the core of the post-1945 international system is the idea of “charter liberalism”, based on a pluralist representation of the international community. This is a “procedure for organizing relations among diverse communities”. This stands in contrast to “liberal anti-pluralism”, described by Simpson as “a liberalism that can be exclusive and illiberal in its effects”, above all in its ‘lack of tolerance for non-liberal regimes”. The latter is “an evangelical version that views liberalism as a comprehensive doctrine or a social good worth promoting and the other more secular tradition emphasizing proceduralism and diversity” (Simpson, 2001, pp. 539, 560). The evangelical version took the form of liberal globalism in the postwar years.

Instead of the comity and cooperation envisaged by the Charter, events developed in a very different direction. Conflict and hierarchy returned with a vengeance. Concurrent with the establishment of the Charter system, the major power of the day, the United States established its own model of world order, the Political West (the Atlantic power system, latterly dubbed, as we have seen, the rules-based international order, largely synonymous with the so-called liberal international order) based on liberal globalism. This precept is antithetical to multipolarity, since it believes in a single universal model of modernity. In pursuit of its goals, it sought to reshape the entire globe in its image. The return of Trump to the White House in January 2025 removed the veil masking the raw power that lay behind the hegemony of the Political West, and the real distribution of power within that order. Liberal globalism gave way to mercantile globalism, exposing the imperial aspirations underlying both. The curtain was drawn back, ending the era of double standards but revealing some rather harsh realities.

This was particularly uncomfortable for the European legacy powers. France, Germany and the other powers are faced with determinate choices. In the face of the potential defection of the US from the political order of its own creation, they can either try to maintain the Political West in its accustomed form, although with a lower US commitment, and thus perpetuate the organizational and ideological instruments of the Cold war, or to substantially revise the North Eurasian security order. That would mean reconciliation with Russia, and more broadly the renunciation of liberal globalism and the embrace of the realism at the heart of Yalta-Potsdam style sovereign internationalism. In this way, some of the contradictions of 1945 would be resolved. It is unlikely that this will be the choice. The Political West was largely the creation of the US, with Europe a willing accomplice but a largely subaltern actor.

This, at least, is the standard interpretation. But what if this model is not correct? What if the driving power behind the Political West is Europe, with the US taking advantage of Europe's willingness to subordinate itself to US strategic interests. US concerns were always larger and more global than those of Europe. If this is indeed the case, then the conclusion is clear: Europe will try to continue the Political West by other means. This is evident in the increased militarization of the EU. It is also manifest in the idea of creating a 'European NATO' or even a European Treaty Organization (ETO). The Starmer-Macron 'coalition of the willing', the term used to describe the alliance that launched the illegal and ultimately catastrophic invasion of Iraq, has been revived to continue support for Ukraine as the US began to pull away. The Political West is a constellation of power, but if its locus shifts from Washington to Brussels, then a very different ontology emerges. Washington is a global power, but the Political West is a regional endeavor. As the US goes elsewhere in the search for new monsters to destroy, Europe is left with its old nightmares. The tragedy is that it has reproduced monsters that had long been thought to have been put to rest.

During the Cold War, the Political West was constrained by the existence of another substantive model of world order, the Soviet bloc. With the collapse of the latter in 1989-91, the endemic

problem of substitution, whereby the Political West claims the universalism properly belonging to the Charter system, was exacerbated. Instead of being resolved, this contradiction has sharpened. The Charter system today is under unprecedented threat. The UN Security Council has become yet another platform for great power conflict rather than a forum for conflict resolution. Reform of the UN is very much on the agenda, but for this to be meaningful a reconfiguration within international politics is required. This is the aspiration of the nascent post-Western anti-hegemonic world order, the Political East. Its challenge is neo-revisionist: to counter the logic of Western hegemony at the level of international politics; but to support and reinforce Charter norms at the systemic level.

This forces us to examine the potential of comity itself. Can a community based on comity deliver the requisite public goods? Is some sort of hegemon required to police the normative order for the delivery of public goods – including free trade, open markets, safe navigation, maintenance of the human rights norms embedded in the Charter and much else. Are there non-hegemonic means of overcoming collective action problems? Comity means a plural international order, in which sovereignty is defended but states come together based on *sovereign internationalism* to coordinate outcomes through multilateralism. In Europe, this does not necessarily mean some sort of European Union but could equally well work as a continent comprised of nation states, as proposed by Charles de Gaulle in the early years of the Common Market. This would be a Europe based on David Mitrany's (1943) functionalism. Mitrany's model is remarkably similar to the model of spatiality proposed by Hintze. A Europe of fatherlands is now the desirable outcome for various sovereigntist movement, typically miscategorized as 'populist'. In other words, rather than the integration of Europe as a Schmittian *Grossraum*, there is scope for a more pluralistic Hintzean comity model. Rather than hierarchy, heterarchy is becoming the organizing principle in international affairs (Cerny, 2023).

If we apply the distinction between system and order, then we may find a conceptual framework to substantiate the comity model. The Charter International System is based on the comity of

nations. The Charter system is far from a world government, yet it establishes the norms and rules of how international politics should be conducted. On its basis there is now a ramified network of institutions, agencies, protocols and a substantive body of international law. The Charter system's combination of sovereignty and internationalism built on and learned from the successes and failures of earlier international systems (Westphalia 1648, Utrecht 1714, Vienna 1815 and Versailles 1919). It is on that basis that multipolarity can develop and thrive. In fact, the entire postwar system of international relations is based on this idea.

At the same time, there are different types of comity. On the one side, there is *federative comity*, of the sort that was tried in the League of Nations and then more successfully implemented through the UN. In a multilateral format, formally equal states come together to resolve global problems in a robust normative framework and assign designated tasks to specialized agencies. On the other side, there is *great power comity*, of the sort that was practiced by the Allied leaders in the Second World War. This is the type of comity that Soviet and Russian leaders favor, with the Yalta-Potsdam meetings in 1945 considered a model for how great powers should manage international politics. The Yalta conference agreed the basic principles of the UN, including the voting rights of the permanent members of the UN Security Council. They were granted a veto on important decisions, a device to ensure great power unity and commitment to the new multilateral format to manage international politics. The wisdom of the UN is that it combines both types of comity, with the five permanent members of the Security Council enjoying veto rights, and thus incorporating great power comity into the workings of an organization dedicated to federative cooperation. The veto system sought to generate great power consensus on global security issues. Great power comity is based on a profoundly pluralist approach to international politics, with a variety of types of economic organization and social systems. There is, nevertheless, a profound imbalance, with great power comity greatly overshadowing federative comity, as represented by the UN General Assembly. That is why discussion about UN reform focuses on ways to

enhance the status of the UNGA. The two types of comity are dedicated to a common goal – the avoidance of war – but a more influential UNGA would reflect the maturation of the system and the rising power of the Global South.

The tension between the two principles is an enduring feature of the Charter system. The fragile balance is always in danger of rupturing, usually to the detriment of the UN General Assembly and the federative principle. There is also the persistent threat that the great powers will establish comity relations entirely outside of the UN system. Thus, as Geoffrey Roberts (2025a) argues, Russo-US rapprochement offers a pathway to peace in Ukraine. But his argument goes further: “ending the war could catalyse a radical reconstruction of Russo-American relations – towards a global compact between Washington and Moscow that, together with China and other Great Power partners, would underpin a stable, multipolar system of sovereign states”. The character of this ‘global compact’ is unclear, although it is clearly based on a sovereign internationalism unmoored from the normative foundations of the Charter system.

By contrast, in his application of the New Political Thinking in the final years of the Soviet Union, the last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev sought to meld the two forms of comity into a new and more integrated form, a higher-level comity that would preserve the pluralism of international politics but with a greater emphasis on international cooperation to establish a global federative peace order. This would not be world government, but comity taken to a higher level. The refusal of the Western powers to accord equal recognition and status to the Soviet Union/Russia and its legitimate security interests was one of the proximate causes of the first Cold War and which ultimately provoked the second. This generated a chronic problem of ontological insecurity in Russia, accompanied by a recessive obsession with Yalta-Potsdam. For a short period, Moscow had precisely been accorded its desired status.<sup>3</sup> Today it

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3. For analysis along similar lines, from which this account draws, see Pechatnov, 2025.

makes Russia a dedicated supporter of the Charter system, where it enjoys the status of a permanent member of the UNSC. At the level of international politics, however, Washington's struggle for primacy precludes such recognition, generating tensions that are now extended to US relations with China.

## The Four Dimensions of Multipolarity

Multipolarity has long been on the agenda in international politics. In Russia, the foreign minister (1996-98) and then prime minister (1998-99), Evgeny Primakov, was an early exponent of the idea that no state could hope to maintain its dominance. His advocacy of multipolarity was immediately recognized for what it was – a challenge to US hegemony. Primakov was the architect of the RICs alignment of Russia, India and China, although the move was premature and the current of history only caught up a few years later. In 2009, Putin convened the first meeting of the BRIC (with Brazil added to the original RIC) leaders in Ekaterinburg, joined the following year by South Africa.

Any view of multipolarity that retains a US- or Atlantic-basin centered view is anachronistic, and even perverse. The US remains the world's dominant military and economic power, but Europe has become increasingly marginalized. Above all, multipolarity presumes the absence of a single hegemon, and thus entails bargaining between great powers. Implicitly, this means some sort of concert arrangement if not fully-fledged great power comity. It does not necessarily entail a fully-fledged universalistic counterweight to the Political West or the US, but it does suggest a more heavily entrenched character to international politics. When Soviet and now Russian scholars talk of the Yalta-Potsdam system, this is what they mean. These hopes were soon dashed, and within two years the first Cold War chilled relations between the victors of 1945. An era of bipolar bloc politics set in. When that thawed in 1989, it was replaced by the "unipolar moment", that in the end was assumed to last indefinitely (Krauthammer, 1990; 2002). The US-led bloc, and the US itself, claiming certain universal preroga-

tives that properly belong to the Charter system. From the beginning Russian commentators, notably Primakov, called for multipolarity, but at this stage this was more an aspiration than a reality. Multipolarity is now becoming a reality, but what does it mean? What is a “pole” in international politics? There are several definitions.

First, the normative. The Charter principle of sovereign internationalism balances between sovereignty and multilateral internationalism. This means that the 193 states represented in the UN formally enjoy equal sovereignty. The former colonial states have mostly consolidated their statehood, and none (except the Europeans) is ready to temper its sovereignty for a renewed subaltern status. The nation-state is the ready-made instrument of polarity – each represents a pole in and of itself. Of course, some are small and some are great, some have been able to mobilize their economic and political resources, others have slipped back into neo-colonial dependency, while others have pooled elements of their sovereignty into supranational bodies, as in the EU. The big story, however, is the maturity of the Charter International System and the consolidation of the statehood of the postcolonial and post-communist states, as well as those in thrall to the great powers during the Cold War, notably in Latin America. A plethora of middle powers temper the dominance of the great and legacy powers and endows international politics with unprecedented fluidity and dynamism. This represents an epochal change and provides the foundations for a more thoroughgoing federative comity of nations based on functionalist internationalism. The Global South now demands a greater say in international affairs, above all through activating the reserve powers of the UN General Assembly vested in the Charter.

The second definition of multipolarity focuses on structural factors, the material distribution of power and resources. The relative power and military resources of states, above all the relative rise of Asia (and potentially Africa), and the relative decline of the West, is at the center of analysis. In this context, the meta-event of the current period is the ineluctable shift in the global economic center of gravity from the Atlantic basin to the Asia-Pacific region, from

the Political West to the Global South, accompanied by a potent demographic surge in Africa. In purchasing parity terms (PPP), China caught up with the US in 2014, although in nominal and per capita income terms still falls far short (nominal GDP in 2025 was \$19.6 trillion, compared to the US at \$30.75 trillion). India is one of the most rapidly developing countries in the world, along with what had earlier been called the Asian ‘tigers’ – including Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. They became manufacturing and commercial hubs, while Singapore retains its pre-eminence in financial services. In 2000, the G7 countries controlled 65 per cent of global GDP, but by 2022 this had fallen to around 40 per cent. The BRICS+ countries represent a slightly larger share when measured in PPP terms. The G7 countries make up 30.3 per cent of global GDP in PPP terms, while the ten BRICS+ states represent 37 per cent, although the G7 remains ahead in nominal terms. In terms of population, the disparity is even more striking, with the BRICS nations home to over 46 per cent of the world’s population, while the G7 accounts for less than ten per cent.

The Ukraine war brought into sharper focus the emergence of competing alignments, which we earlier conceptualized as the US-led Political West against a nascent Political East. The Sino-Russian alignment is at the core of the latter, along with a host of non- and weakly-aligned powers in the Global South. A new era of multipolarity is evident, with a constellation of diverse actors in international politics. The Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, considered the Ukraine war a consequence of the West’s failure to adjust to the changed realities. He argues that “today the world is living through the ‘multipolar moment’. Shifting towards the multipolar world order is a natural part of power rebalancing, which reflects objective changes in the world economy, finance and geopolitics. The West waited longer than the others, yet it has also started to realize that this process is irreversible”. He noted the increasing role of regional associations, such as the Eurasian Economic Union, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, ASEAN, the African Union, CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean states), and others. In his view, “BRICS has become a model of

diplomacy. The UN should remain a forum for aligning the interests of all the countries” (O’Connor, 2024).

Third, the realist approach is the classic one, seen through the prism of American-style realist International Relations, where the focus is on power, capacity and intent. The dominant paradigm here is Kenneth Waltz’s neo-realism. The focus is on great powers and their ability to forge constellations of states aligned with them. In the Cold War bipolar era the Soviet bloc was ranged against the US-led Political West. After the Cold War, the US emerged supreme, feeding illusions that the unipolar era would endure indefinitely. In the event, anti-hegemonic constellations emerged, above all the Political East alignment of Russia and China. In an anarchic international environment, this bloc-style multipolarity focuses on the balance of power, spheres of influence and demarcated regional alignments. In conditions where American dominance, in hard and soft power terms, remains overwhelming, this perspective tends to be critical of the notion of multipolarity, dismissing the concept as no more than a futile weapon of the weak (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2023). At most, American neo-realists concede that China is emerging as a peer competitor, and therefore elements of Cold-War style bipolarity are emerging. The rest are consigned to a residual category, where they play in the loser’s pool of balancing, hedging or some other subaltern strategy.

Fourth, the systemic model is one that underlies the idea of comity, and the pluralism outlined by Simpson and advanced by Gorbachev. In his vision of a common European home, Gorbachev envisaged that it would be a house with many rooms, hosting a variety of models of world order, ideologies and geopolitical centers. This is precisely the agenda facing the world today. Its most developed institutional representation is the BRICS+ as an international organization, designed not to balance US hegemony, but to challenge the very idea of hegemonism in international politics. In these terms, it is anti-hegemonic (challenging the principle of hegemonism) rather than counter-hegemonic, trying to beat the hegemon at its own game, thus assuming hegemonic characteristics itself. To the degree that it acts as a counterweight, it appeals to the

Charter system principle of sovereign internationalism as opposed to liberal and imperial globalism, but its challenge at the level of international politics is asymmetrical. It does not present itself as a universalistic model of world order, unlike the Political West. BRICS is anti-hegemonic rather than counter-hegemonic. If it was simply the latter, it would ultimately reproduce the pattern of behavior that it ostensibly challenges. Hence the group is neither an alliance nor a bloc. It is certainly not an alignment of autocracies, as suggested by some critics, but a genuinely global organization. Its original five members (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) includes democracies, so-called autocracies and the world's largest communist power. In 2024 they were joined by Egypt, Ethiopia, UAE and Iran (Saudi Arabia demurred, for a time at least), and in 2025 Indonesia. To these ten there are another ten partner countries hailing from several regions with a diversity of social systems: Belarus, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Nigeria, Uganda, Cuba, Bolivia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam, with the application of dozens more pending. The group lacks a common social or political ideology, but they share a commitment to the Charter norm of sovereign internationalism and anti-hegemonism (the latter couched in various ways, including continued anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism). Their common goal is the reform of global governance "by promoting a more just, equitable ... representative ... multilateral system", as the Rio de Janeiro Declaration puts it, adopted at the 17<sup>th</sup> annual summit in July 2025 (quoted in Snider, 2025).

## **Conclusion: Hegemony or Comity**

Sovereign internationalism gives expression to the diversity of the human experience, while remaining committed to the multilateral resolution of common challenges. The shift to systemic multipolarity entails a transformation of international politics away from endemic conflict towards the comity and cooperation envisaged by and reflected in the Charter system. This is the genuine new world order anticipated in 1945. A new generation now faces the chal-

lenge of overcoming the contradictions of 1945. All of this has a profound bearing on Eurasian security. It means a return to the agenda outlined by Eden in 1941, and amid attempts to devise a Eurasian Charter for our times.

In 1945 the US agreed to compromise its unfettered freedom of action in international affairs in the belief that engagement with allies and adversaries through multilateral agencies would avoid the pitfalls of the interwar period while rendering US power more legitimate, and thereby more effective (Wertheim, 2020). This bargain between power and legitimacy proved remarkably effective and allowed the Political West to survive and triumph in the Cold War. However, the tension between the autonomy of the Charter International System and the institutions of liberal globalism were evident, although disguised during the Cold War. As Soviet power waned, from the 1970s a more assertive liberal hegemony emerged, initially eroding the Keynesian domestic bargain and then from the late 1970s challenging the legitimacy of the Soviet Union itself, a process aided by catastrophic Soviet mistakes, notably the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Afghanistan in December 1979. The demise of the Soviet Union removed checks on liberal globalism and allowed its radicalization in the form of the expansive ambitions of a now unconstrained Political West (see Mearsheimer 2018; 2019). This in turn provoked not balancing as the main form of anti-hegemonic resistance but various anti-hegemonic alignments. The normative foundation of this is sovereign internationalism, the foundational principle of normative and systemic multipolarity, powered by structural changes in the global economy.

The retreat of liberal hegemony is a necessary condition for the international system to work as was implicitly part of the 1945 consensus, but it is not sufficient. The end of US tutelary politics may take forms that not only erodes the model of world order represented by the Political West but also the international system in which it is embedded. An American retreat opens space for China, Russia and other rising powers, and it is precisely this that Trumpian mercantile globalism seeks to counter. The contradictions of 1945 remain, but with the development of multi-faceted multipolarity the

conditions are potentially created for the fulfilment of the comity embedded in the Charter system.

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