

p-ISSN : 2788-502X | e-ISSN : 2788-4678

DOI(Journal): 10.31703/gfpr

DOI(Volume): 10.31703/gfpr/.2024(VII)

DOI(Issue): 10.31703/gfpr.2024(VII-IV)

www.gfprjournal.com



GFPR

GLOBAL FOREIGN POLICIES REVIEW

HEC-RECOGNIZED CATEGORY-Y



VOL. VII, ISSUE, IV, FALL (DECEMBER-2024)



Double-blind Peer-review Research Journal

www.gfprjournal.com

© Global Foreign Policies Review

Article Title

Geopolitics of Connectivity in the 21st Century and the Changing World Order

Global Foreign Policies Review

p-ISSN: 2788-502x e-ISSN: 2788-5038

DOI(journal):10.31703/gfpr

Volume: VII (2024)

DOI (volume):10.31703/gfpr.2024(VII)

Issue: IV Fall (December-2024)

DOI(Issue): 10.31703/gfpr.2024(VII-IV)

Home Page

www.gfprjournal.com

Volume: IX (2024)

<https://www.gfprjournal.com/Current-issues>

Issue: IV-Fall (December-2024)

<https://www.gfprjournal.com/issues/7/4/2024>

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the importance and utilization of global connectivity in terms of economic, infrastructural, digital, and strategic levels for geopolitical goals by major powers and its possible implications. This is done so in the context of the rising multi-polarity and the supposed decline of the US status as the preeminent power in the existing world order. The paper explores the Chinese strategy to overcome its natural geographic disadvantages through the colossal undertaking of OBOR as well as how this project has inspired the emergence of various other supporting as well as competing trade routes. The United States seems to be reverting its successful Cold War era strategy of containment against China albeit through the use of forming strategic alliances and using proxy wars in strategic regions for this purpose while analyzing the risks associated with this strategy as well as possible alternatives available to the United States.

Keywords: Global Connectivity, Geopolitical Goals, Cold War, Proxy Wars

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Pages: 37-47

DOI: 10.31703/gfpr.2024(IX-IV).05

DOI link: [https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2024\(VII-IV\).05](https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2024(VII-IV).05)

Article link: <http://www.gfprjournal.com/article/A-b-c>

Full-text Link: <https://gfprjournal.com/fulltext/>

Pdf link: <https://www.gfprjournal.com/jadmin/Author/31rvIolA2.pdf>



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Citing this Article

05								Geopolitics of Connectivity in the 21st Century and the Changing World Order								
Author		Muhammad Rehan Zafar Noman Omar Sattar				DOI		10.31703/gfpr.2024(VII-IV).05								
Pages		37-47		Year		2024		Volume		VII		Issue		IV		
Referencing & Citing Styles	APA		Zafar, M. R., & Sattar, N. O. (2024). Geopolitics of Connectivity in the 21st Century and the Changing World Order. <i>Global Foreign Policies Review</i> , VII(IV), 37-47. https://doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2024(VII-IV).05													
	CHICAGO		Zafar, Muhammad Rehan, and Noman Omar Sattar. 2024. "Geopolitics of Connectivity in the 21st Century and the Changing World Order." <i>Global Foreign Policies Review</i> VII (IV):37-47. doi: 10.31703/gfpr.2024(VII-IV).05.													
	HARVARD		ZAFAR, M. R. & SATTAR, N. O. 2024. Geopolitics of Connectivity in the 21st Century and the Changing World Order. <i>Global Foreign Policies Review</i> , VII, 37-47.													
	MHRA		Zafar, Muhammad Rehan, and Noman Omar Sattar. 2024. 'Geopolitics of Connectivity in the 21st Century and the Changing World Order', <i>Global Foreign Policies Review</i> , VII: 37-47.													
	MLA		Zafar, Muhammad Rehan, and Noman Omar Sattar. "Geopolitics of Connectivity in the 21st Century and the Changing World Order." <i>Global Foreign Policies Review</i> VII.IV (2024): 37-47. Print.													
	OXFORD		Zafar, Muhammad Rehan and Sattar, Noman Omar (2024), 'Geopolitics of Connectivity in the 21st Century and the Changing World Order', <i>Global Foreign Policies Review</i> , VII (IV), 37-47.													
TURABIAN		Zafar, Muhammad Rehan and Noman Omar Sattar. "Geopolitics of Connectivity in the 21st Century and the Changing World Order." <i>Global Foreign Policies Review</i> VII, no. IV (2024): 37-47. https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2024(VII-IV).05 .														



Global Foreign Policies Review

www.gfprjournal.com

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gfpr>



Pages: 37-47

URL: [https://doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2024\(VII-IV\).05](https://doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2024(VII-IV).05)

Doi: 10.31703/gfpr.2024(VII-IV).05



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Geopolitics of Connectivity in the 21st Century and the Changing World Order

Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the importance and utilization of global connectivity in terms of economic, infrastructural, digital, and strategic levels for geopolitical goals by major powers and its possible implications. This is done so in the context of the rising multi-polarity and the supposed decline of the US status as the preeminent power in the existing world order. The paper explores the Chinese strategy to overcome its natural geographic disadvantages through the colossal undertaking of OBOR as well as how this project has inspired the emergence of various other supporting as well as competing trade routes. The United States seems to be reverting its successful Cold War era strategy of containment against China albeit through the use of forming strategic alliances and using proxy wars in strategic regions for this purpose while analyzing the risks associated with this strategy as well as possible alternatives available to the United States.

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Keywords: [Global Connectivity](#), [Geopolitical Goals](#), [Cold War](#), [Proxy Wars](#)

Introduction

The modern world is characterized by an extraordinary level of connectivity at economic, infrastructural, digital, and strategic levels. Globalization has also played a vital role in unifying the world in its current economic, social, and strategic form. However, in the 21st century, this connectivity has now gained strategic importance with Chinese initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the attempts of the Western powers to maintain the status quo in the global system of states. As Mark Leonard has pointed out, major power influence now depends more on networks and access to resources and

markets rather than merely on traditional military might (Leonard, 2016).

Connectivity and trade have always played a pivotal role in deciding the balance of power in global politics. Examples of these global powers can be taken from the Prosperous Empires of antiquity that were joined by the ancient Silk Road and the maritime empires of Southeast Asia. It was the trade and resources of the early Chinese dynasties that allowed ancient China and ancient India to become the centers of global wealth and power during the first two millennia. Similarly, it was global reach and connectivity combined with administrative and strategic



advantages that allowed the European countries to establish their global colonial empires.

Another critical aspect in this regard is understanding that this global trade and connectivity was made possible during eras of relative stability. It was during the stable era of the early Song dynasty and Achaemenid Persia that the Silk Road flourished in its early years. However, as this stability diminished with the rise of nomadic tribes in Central Asia and Northern Mongolia, both trade and internal stability were negatively affected. Similarly, we see that eras of relative stability in terms of international geopolitics often coincide with eras of massive economic growth (Beckwith, 2009). Therefore, we can understand that global stability and reduction of conflicts are in favor of rising powers.

An important question to answer here is whether or not global stability and peace are indeed in favor of the powers that are now in decline. In his book *The Changing World Order*, Ray Dalio subscribes to the idea of big cycles, where a major power generally does not give up without a fight. Therefore, the likelihood of a major conflict increases as one major power declines while another power rises to take its place as the preeminent economic and military global power (Dalio, 2021).

There are of course many domains of connectivity ranging from trade to finance and the Internet; however, this paper will look at the aspects of these various domains that particularly affect geopolitics between major international powers. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to explore how connectivity is reshaping global geopolitics and enabling the rise of new powers and new centers of power spread throughout the globe. This paper will also explore the dynamics of connectivity that influence global power in connection with the above-stated purpose. It will also try to establish the emerging global powers and how these emerging powers are using connectivity in order to enhance their influence. Thereby, this paper will establish the relationship between connectivity, economic growth, and geopolitical influence.

Role of Connectivity in the Modern World

The idea of connectivity playing a pivotal role in connectivity is not a new idea. Empires and civilizations in the past have relied heavily on different trade routes for their prosperity and risen and fallen with the rise and fall of these trade routes. The historical Silk Route during the Han and Tang dynasties of China and the Spice Route during the middle of the first millennium are examples of such routes playing a vital role in the projection of power, prestige, and prosperity.

A similar example exists in the case of the rise of European Maritime Empires that culminated in the age of colonialism owing to the technological gap between the European and Eastern Powers of the time. In this case, we also see an example of how connectivity can be used as a geopolitical tool. This was exemplified by the British Empire and its control of key strategic choke points across the world's oceans.

The British Empire pursued a policy of maintaining a strategic Balance of Power between the major European powers of the time and ensuring that it retained control or at least a significant military presence at vital choke points such as the Strait of Malacca where it controlled the strait settlements such as Penang, Singapore, Malacca, Sarawak, and Labuan while in South China Sea it had strategic holding of Hong Kong and Macao. Similarly, it controlled the Trucial States (now called UAE) in the Persian Gulf while in Africa it controlled vital states such as Egypt, and South Africa and maintained its presence along the Strait of Gibraltar as well (Hobson, 2021).

However, connectivity and interdependence as never been as pivotal to the world throughout history as it is today in a globalized interconnected world. Author Prag Khanna said quite succinctly regarding the modern world, "Connectivity is destiny – and the most connected powers, and people, will win" (Khanna, 2021). Countries are scrambling to find their place in this new hyper-connected world where goods, people, and ideas are rapidly shifting the tide of global power and the world order itself. Nowadays, the major powers are competing with each other, not in terms of mere military might and diplomatic clout but primarily in terms of trade and geoeconomics.

At present, the global economy is reliant on a consistent exchange of goods and services thus creating a complex ecology of industries and markets which require stable supply chains. The vulnerability of this interconnected economy was amply displayed during the COVID-19 crisis that caused many industries and economies irrecoverable damages due to disruptions and lockdowns.

This connectivity has created a truly globalized world and has had several direct implications that have shaped the modern dynamics of international relations and shall continue to have implications for the future. One of the major impacts in this regard is the spread of knowledge and information across the globe. This spread of information and knowledge has played a pivotal role in reducing the technological gap between the western countries and the developing economies. Currently, countries like China, Japan, and India are competing directly with the Western economies in many fields like information technology, and electronics and developing their indigenous projects.

Geopolitical and Geo-strategic Dimensions of Connectivity in a Changing World Order

In a world that is shaped by networks of trade and commerce, geographic realities and constraints are playing a vital role in shaping the policies of existing and rising powers. The field of geopolitics is now a well-developed field that concerns itself with the study and analysis of the influence of geographic, economic, and political factors and how they affect political processes and relations between states (Cohen, 1963). Thus, this field integrates the study of the effects of human and physical geography on international politics and international relations. Another sub-discipline that relates to this domain is the field of geo-strategy which concerns itself with the practical application of geopolitics. Kaplan (2012) defines the field of geopolitics as the implementation of geopolitics thus "linking global politics to physical realities of geography.

The field of geopolitics came to the forefront of global policymaking during the Cold War with the United States and USSR competing for global dominance. It was ultimately the geopolitical savvy of US policymakers and the application of geostrategic thought in the shape of the policy of containment that led to the United States emerging as the sole superpower at the end of the Cold War. Zbigniew Brzezinski defined geo-strategy in terms of using geographical space to project power and influence in order to shape the global political order (Hao, Loan, & Duc, 2023).

The Unipolar Moment of the United States that lasted during the last decade of the 20th and the first quarter of the 21st century is now at its end and regional powers as well as competing power blocks are now emerging to counteract US influence and carve out their own spheres of influence. Major Powers like the United States and its European allies have dominated the world for the last half-century through their technological superiority but in the modern world, this technological dominance is being challenged by new competitors like China. In part, this closing of the technological gap itself has been enabled by connectivity, especially in the digital domains.

The Chinese began their industrialization in the 1970s and have ever since pursued a policy of rapid industrialization by leveraging its massive population and centralized economic model. However, the true opportunity for the Chinese to rise as a direct competitor was provided by US engagement in the War on Terror which allowed the Chinese to utilize their economic growth to build up their massive military potential that can for the moment challenge the US hegemony in its immediate regional neighborhood.

China and its Geo-strategic Dilemma

One of the major dilemmas that the Chinese face today is related to its geography. Its position is unlike the uniquely advantageous position that the United States enjoys with its open coastline on the East and West along two great oceans that offer protection from major invasions and access to unrestricted trade. The Chinese eastern coastline along the Pacific Ocean is restricted by two Island chains with a significant presence of the United States and its Allies. While its Northern, Eastern, and Southern borders are constrained by inhospitable terrains including deserts and Mountain ranges.

For the Chinese specifically, the supply chains of trade, energy, and commerce are essential to support its export-based economy that is heavily reliant on its Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) which are very vulnerable due to heavy dependence on the narrow Strait of Malacca as well as the contested waters of South China Sea and the Strait of Taiwan. This Import-oriented export dependency of the Chinese economy can prove to be its Achilles heel.

The Chinese have answered this dilemma through its highly ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is a multi-trillion dollar vision spanning five continents and 152 countries. This project aims to build multiple routes of trade and commerce across the globe connecting the world to China. The Chinese will attain several geostrategic advantages through this project. One on hand these multiple routes will help overcome Chinese geographic constraints and vulnerabilities through the creation of multiple avenues of trade in case of a regional conflict or blockade. On the other hand, these projects have massively increased Chinese diplomatic influence across the globe by offering the partner countries loans for projects related to BRI that ultimately align their economic and political policies with Beijing.

The Emerging World Order

The United States enjoyed its moment of uni-polarity in the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. This event marked a unique chapter in world history where a singular power had emerged with an unprecedented global power projection capability, enormous economic resources and potential, a globally accepted reserve currency as well as a relatively favorable support for its global diplomatic standing. It was this moment that led some authors like Francis Fukuyama to declare that this was the final chapter in the evolution of the political and social development of mankind and that the democratic capitalist system had emerged victorious in the great ideological struggles of the twentieth century.

This euphoria, however, was ephemeral as the challenges of dealing with the aftermath of the USSR and Balkan republics, the start of the first Gulf War, and rising anti-United States sentiment in the Muslim world posed a range of challenges. The United States became entangled in European and Middle Eastern politics during the 1990s and after the events of 9/11 its military engagements became global along with massive troop deployment in Afghanistan and Iraq. These massive military engagements along with the maintenance of an equally impressive network of global bases and supply chains as well as 11 aircraft carrier fleets that ensure its global power projection ultimately became similar to classic cases of imperial overreach.

During this time period, the potential competitors of the United States in terms of global influence including China, India, and Russia had time to silently build up their economic and military potential to a level where these countries could challenge US hegemony at the regional level. The realization of these challenges was apparent to US policymakers even at the start of the second decade of the 21st century. However, it was now equally difficult to disengage from the disastrous conflicts of Afghanistan and Iraq which have become quagmires for the global behemoth. Another major challenge for the United States was to realign the structure of its forces from a structure suited for global operations against non-traditional foes to combat possibilities against near-peer enemies such as China or Russia.

During the first quarter of the 21st century, China continued its phenomenal growth trajectory thus becoming the second-largest economy in the world and is projected to surpass the United States in size of the economy by the end of the current decade. The Chinese have effectively become the economic powerhouse of the world and have diversified their investments all across the globe through their BRI projects. In addition to that they have massively upgraded and modernized their military potential especially the Peoples Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and Peoples Liberation Army Air Force (PLAA). The Chinese have been especially keen on building favorable networks of trade and commerce with resource-rich but underdeveloped countries across Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

This time when the US was bogged down by its global engagements was crucial for China, Russia, and other regional players as it allowed them to build their economies as well as military capacity which enabled them to challenge US preponderance within their immediate regions. Hence, a new Multi-Polar World Order is taking shape as a result of these rising powers. This new multipolar world order will also have some distinguishing characteristics just as the multipolar world before the First World War was defined by the concert of

nations and secret alliances and the multi-polar world order before the Second World War was defined by the conflict between competing systems of capitalism, communism, and fascism.

What is apparent about this new world order is a competition between global powers to create and control avenues of trade and commerce. In the modern world material resources, technology, and economy will be determining factors for deciding the ultimate winner of this "New" World Order.

Russian Resurgence and Sino-Russian Nexus

The idea of creating a multipolar world order against American dominance emerged in April 1997, when the then-Chinese President Jiang Zemin and the Russian President Boris Yeltsin issued a joint statement saying, "No country should seek hegemony, practice power politics or monopolize international affairs". This was a statement that predicted the joint Sino-Russian goal of limiting unchallenged US preponderance in global affairs.

Russian strategic thinking differs greatly from the Chinese. From the Russian perspective, maintaining a substantial buffer zone in the shape of neutral countries or vast territories is essential for Russia given its history of devastating invasions by Mongols from the east and Napoleon and Nazi Germany from the west. Russia with its vast natural resources and strategic location dominating the north of Eurasian landmass also began to rebuild and reassert itself. It also utilized its geostrategic location to become one of the central and most advantageous land routes connecting China to mainland Europe. (Ericson, 2009) Also, utilizing its vast oil and gas reserves, the Russians created a stable market for themselves in Europe. To this end, a network of pipelines such as the the Druzhba and Bratstvo pipelines already existed that connected Eastern Europe through Belarus and Ukraine and had been constructed during the Soviet era (Lee & Connolly, 2016).

By 2009, a total of 12 pipelines supplied Russian gas to Europe with 3 connecting the Baltic countries, four connecting Slavic countries through Belarus, and five pipelines supplied Russian gas to Eastern Europe through Ukraine (Planète Energies, n.d.). By 2011, the Nord Stream 1 pipeline became operational and connected Russian gas from Russia via Saint Petersburg directly to the German city of Hamburg through the Baltic Sea. By 2017, Russia had become the largest supplier of liquefied natural gas to Europe and used this fact as leverage for the pursuit of its foreign policy objectives (Bruegel, 2021).

This is where Russian geostrategic culture and its insecurities come into play. The expansion of NATO eastward only added to the Russian insecurities and it invaded Ukraine under the pretext of protecting the

ethnic Russian population in the country. This invasion started with the annexation of the strategic peninsula of Crimea which also contained the strategic port of Sevastopol during the political unrest within Ukraine. The invasion was justified by the Russians from their perspective by holding a referendum that supported the Russian intervention but this referendum was rejected by the Ukrainian government as well as most of the Western countries. (Council on Foreign Relations [CFR], [2022](#))

However, the greatest impact of this invasion came in the form of economic sanctions targeting Russian economic interests as well as prominent individuals who were part of Russian President Vladimir Putin's inner circle. Although Russia reciprocated the sanctions with its own set of sanctions against countries that had issued these, the economic impact of these sanctions revealed glaring vulnerabilities in the Russian economy as well as the drawback of reliance on the dollar for international trade (Council on Foreign Relations [CFR], [2024](#)).

The Race for Trade Routes and Connectivity

In this emerging world order, connectivity, control over routes of connectivity, as well as access to markets, had become the central theme of competition. The Chinese understood their strategic vulnerabilities and how effective a Cold War-styled US containment policy against it could be. Therefore, in order to overcome their strategic weaknesses and avoid the fate of the former USSR, which collapsed economically due to successful US containment policy; the Chinese embarked on a multi-billion dollar global connectivity project of BRI.

The Chinese had started investing in various port projects in the early 1990s. These ports were referred to as "The String of Pearls" by the US authors and viewed by skepticism even at that time as a Chinese attempt to increase its influence across the Indian Ocean region (Defense Technical Information Center [DTIC], [2006](#)). The same string of pearls became part of the Chinese BRI in 2013 when Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the Multibillion dollar global connectivity paradigm to the world. This project if successful would effectively make China the locus of global trade and commerce by improving regional integration, trade, economic growth, and integrating global commerce (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development [EBRD], [n.d.](#)).

The BRI is the largest multifaceted infrastructure project to have been initiated by a single county. Pursuing the policy slogans of Peaceful Chinese rise and development given by former President Hu Jintao, this project primarily aims at stimulating economic growth and regional integration between the greater Afro-Eurasian landmass. There are officially six major corridors being built under the umbrella of the BRI projects. These include the China-Pakistan Economic

Corridor (CPEC), the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM), China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor (CCWAEC), The China-Indochina Peninsula Corridor (aka the Southern Transport Corridor), China-Mongolia-Russia economic corridor and the New Eurasia Land Bridge. These corridors include railway lines, roads, bridges, industrial zones, energy projects as well as telecommunication networks aimed at integrating the entire region to create an unimpeded network of trade, commerce, and communication (He, [2020](#)).

The policy that the Chinese government declares is that of planning, building, and benefitting together with participating countries. Yet, these projects while creating goodwill also achieve other aims. On one hand, these projects link the participating countries to the Chinese economy and give China a centrality in global trade by making it the central point of these projects, on the other hand, these projects are not merely altruistic developments. The projects are carried out through Chinese loans which have already made China the biggest bilateral lender in the world. The loans are secured by pledging collateral in the shape of mining rights, resources, or in many cases the very ports and industrial centers built through the loans themselves (Central Asia-Caucasus Institute [CACI], [2024](#)).

In many cases, these loans have proven to be a significant burden on the economies of the recipients of these loans especially in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis. Critics of the Chinese BRI project have sometimes called Chinese policy debt-trap diplomacy where loans are given to countries for various BRI projects and these projects are then constructed by Chinese contractors thereby recovering a significant amount of investment through these contracts. In many cases, these projects have generated marginal income with these low-income countries being unable to pay back these loans.

Chinese firms then take over these projects directly on long lease periods as a form of debt repayment. A significant example in this case is the strategically important port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka which the Chinese have leased for 99 years after Sri Lanka failed to repay its debts. (Wibisono, [2019](#)) A similar strategy has been followed by the Chinese in Central Asia as well where the Central Asian countries now owe a debt of nearly 16 billion to the China Export-Import Bank and the Chinese Central Development Bank (Islamov, [2001](#)).

The Chinese are consistently adding further projects to their existing global infrastructure projects in order to diversify available routes in case of increased geopolitical instability in one region or another. To this end, the Chinese have already started investing heavily in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal in 2021 with the goal

of creating another corridor linking China to the Persian Gulf through Afghanistan and Iran.

Following the lead of the Chinese, other players are also stepping up to construct their own trade routes. Some of these are emerging out of necessity while others are emerging out of hopes for a brighter future. One observation that stands out among the above projects is that the effects of climate change while generally being harmful to the environment and the planet are also creating new opportunities for several countries (World

Bank, 2020). This is apparent from the renewed interest in the Arctic routes by major players in the global geostrategic sphere and trade. A second observation that stands out here is that the United States is ostensibly absent from most of the routes dominating the Eurasian landmass which despite the obvious regional dynamic also displays greater interdependence among the Eurasian countries as well as a diminishing role of the US power within the region (International Road Transport Union [IRU], 2023).

Table 1

Some of the most prominent projects among these have been listed below in the table.

S.No.	Corridor Name	Regions Connected	Participating Nations
1	International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)	South Asia, Central Asia, Europe	India, Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Oman, Syria, Turkey, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Greece
2	Northern Sea Route (NSR)	Arctic Ocean, connecting Europe and Asia	Russia, Norway, China, Japan, South Korea, and other Arctic Council members
3	Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR) - Middle Corridor	China, Central Asia, Caspian Sea, South Caucasus, Turkey, Europe	China, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, Ukraine, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria
4	Arctic Blue Economic Corridor	Arctic Ocean, connecting Asia and Europe	China, Russia, Arctic Council members
5	G7's Global Gateway Initiative	Global (focus on Africa, Asia, Latin America)	G7 nations (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, United Kingdom, United States), European Union
6	Blue Dot Network (BDN)	Global (focus on Indo-Pacific, Africa, Latin America)	United States, Japan, Australia, with potential participation from other like-minded partners
7	Africa's Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Trade Corridors	Intra-African regions	African Union member states
8	India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)	South Asia, Middle East, Europe	India, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel, European Union, United States
9	The Three Seas Initiative (3SI)	Central and Eastern Europe	Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia
10	Pacific Islands and Oceania Connectivity Projects	Pacific Island nations, Australia, New Zealand, Asia-Pacific	Pacific Island nations, Australia, New Zealand, United States, Japan
11	Türkiye's Middle Corridor Expansion	Central Asia, South Caucasus, Türkiye, Europe	Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan
12	Latin America's Pacific Trade Corridors	Latin America, Asia-Pacific	Chile, Peru, Mexico, Colombia, other Pacific Alliance members

S.No.	Corridor Name	Regions Connected	Participating Nations
13	Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T)	European Union regions	European Union member states
14	Iraq Development Road Corridor (Dry Canal)	Middle East, connecting Arabian Gulf to Europe via Türkiye	Iraq, Türkiye, with potential involvement from Gulf Cooperation Council states and European partners

The United States and its policy in the New Cold War

The rise of China was unchecked in the first two decades of the 21st century primarily due to US preoccupation with the War on Terror. However, by the second term of US President Obama, the realization started to set in that the rise of China and its growing collaboration with Russia could pose a credible threat to US global dominance. Over the past several years, this potential rivalry is now taking geostrategic dimensions with various powers taking measures ranging from forming alliances to military build-up.

The United States of America has maintained a globally recognized position of great power since the end of the First World War. However, its true test of strength came in the form of a prolonged Cold War against the USSR from which it emerged as the sole Superpower in the world. No country before the United States has enjoyed such a unique and unchallengeable position of global preponderance as the United States in the 1990s in the aftermath of the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

The strength of US hegemony rests upon three pillars. These are the acceptability of the Dollar as a global reserve currency and hence the currency of global trade, the US military preponderance and global power projection capability, and the transatlantic alliance system that the US has maintained since the end of the Second World War and expanded to include Eastern European countries since the end of the cold war. At the center of these three pillars lies its massive military-industrial complex that still maintains and produces the most technologically advanced military hardware in the world (House, 2024).

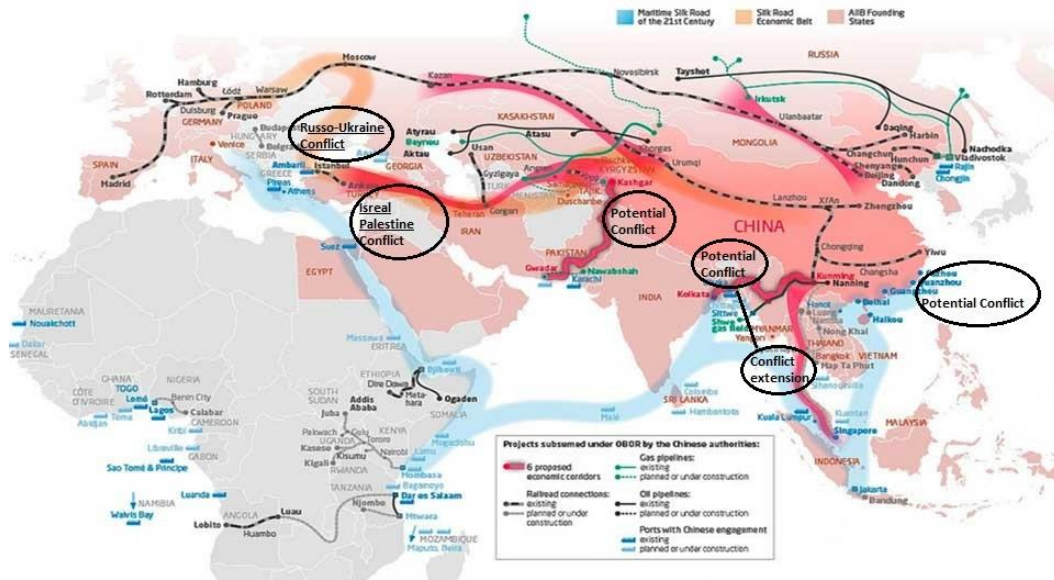
It is here that the Sino-Russian coalition and the impact of these economic powerhouses come into play. As leading BRIC countries as well as the dominant

players in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) these two players have now utilized these platforms to challenge the very basis of US global dominance i.e. the primacy of the Dollar as the global reserve and trade currency (Hussein & Farahat, 2024). It is precisely the rise of these many regional players like Russia, China and India that are capable of now resisting absolute US primacy in global affairs that is leading the world to what some experts have referred to as Skewed multi-polarity.

The United States has responded to the shift in the global balance of power by reinforcing its alliance network through strategic alliances in the Indo-Pacific region including QUAD which includes India, Japan, and Australia. Australia is also a member of the AUKUS group that leverages the Anglo-sphere connection between Australia, the US, and the UK. (Peters, 2021) In addition to these measures, it has continued to expand the already existing transatlantic military alliance of NATO. The scope and participants of these alliance networks hint at attempts to reapplication the previously successful strategy of containment by the US against China (Perth US Asia Centre, 2024).

Another aspect of US strategy is also similar to the strategy utilized by the US in the first Cold War i.e. regime changes and selective utilization of proxy wars in other to strain and weaken the opponents' military and economic resources. To this end, Russia was entangled in the Ukraine conflict due to the threat of NATO reaching its national borders. However, due to US and NATO military and financial aid, Ukraine has not only managed to survive so far but also inflicted colossal losses on the Russian military. A sign of Russian desperation in Ukraine is the arrival and utilization of North Korean troops to reinforce fledging Russian lines in the Kursk region (Tertitskiy, 2024).

Figure 1



Template reference: China Global South Project. Mapping BRI. September 2022.

<https://chinaglobalsouth.com/dev/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Mapping-BRI.jpg>

The biggest result of this war was the marginalization of the key trade routes that China had established through Belarus and Ukraine in an attempt to forge a direct land route to Europe that could not be blockaded by the superior US Navy. Another key route that granted direct access between China and the Arabian Sea i.e. CPEC has not yielded the desired results due to political instability and militancy in Pakistan's Baluchistan province. However, the project still remains active with very high potential (Bibi, Khan, & Baloch, 2024).

Now, China has shifted its focus to an alternative route through Afghanistan and Iran that would link directly with Turkey's middle corridor and thus to Europe (Bayramli, 2024). However, this route is also threatened by the ongoing wars between Israel and Palestine and Lebanon. The loss of the Assad regime in Syria is also a major blow to Russian and Chinese interests in the Middle East and also threatens to expand the ongoing conflict in Syria's neighboring countries (The New York Times, 2024).

Challenges and Opportunities in Skewed Multi-polarity

Every iteration of multi-polarity has certain unique characteristics that correspond to the features of the existing world order, just as the unique elements of multi-polarity in the First World War and the Second World War. While the first multi-polarity was characterized by unstable but rigid alliances primarily fueled by nationalistic and imperialist motivations, the second multi-polarity was characterized by more pragmatic

alliances but motivated by overarching ideological objectives.

The emerging skewed multi-polarity is characterized by complex relationships and geo-economic constraints as well as the domineering position of the United States in economic, military, and technological spheres. However, other regional powers have greatly restricted the capacity of the United States to act unilaterally without any major opposition. Hence, managing this emerging world order through cooperation and working on global goals through regional and international originations would be a key challenge for the United States.

The US superiority extends beyond elements of hard power and into soft-power domains as well due to its global cultural and political outreach. In this sphere, the United States still carries an ace up its sleeve. Despite the general decline in favorable opinion for the United States, the country still carries massive appeal for the brightest minds from across the world and has a cultural appeal that attracts the younger population hopeful of a brighter future. However, the United States itself has given space to other powers through underutilization of this domain while China as well as other countries are now investing heavily in creating a favorable global image.

Another major challenge would be to prevent the decoupling and fragmentation of global technological and financial systems by opposing blocks of major powers. Despite the current interconnected nature of the global economy, this decoupling and emergence of separated global systems of finance, trade, and industry is a very real threat. Overutilization of sanctions, technological

sanctions, and tariff/trade wars can intensify competition to an extent that major economies may seek to decouple themselves from the US-led global financial system in order to protect their perceived national interests (Wei, 2019).

Lastly, the greatest challenge for all countries is the reemergence of Interstate conflicts and proxy wars in an increasingly fragmented world where states, as well as non-state actors, threaten the salience of permanent state borders. Hence, containment of this war and preventing spillover effects of proxy wars into neighboring countries or regions can become the greatest challenge as well as a threat to human civilization in the 21st century.

Conclusion

The emerging world order so far, is that of a skewed multi-polarity in a US-dominated world order with the primary driver of competition and alliances being geo-economics and control of critical resources. The United States is likely to retain its position as a major global power but with a much reduced capacity for unilateral actions. In this emerging system of multi-polarity, maintaining global connectivity and peace would become increasingly difficult but of equal importance.

The United States and China are engaging in geopolitical competition in multiple ways. China is trying

to diversify its access routes to global trade and resources in a manner that it would be difficult to isolate it through containment or encirclement, while also massively enhancing its military capacity and broadening its alliance structure. The United States, however, is utilizing its import orientation and export dependency against it and can effectively block off Chinese access to global markets through either alliance formation or through initiating limited conflicts in strategic regions through which massive Chinese investments in OBOR can be rendered useless.

Such a strategy, however, would come at a very high risk and cost to both the United States and the world in general. Coming decades, therefore, may see greater competition between rising powers, and the threat of a conflict becoming global through design or miscalculation remains very high. The United States therefore stands to gain greater benefits by avoiding direct confrontation with their current global adversaries and instead maintaining open trade relations until countries like China and Russia begin to be affected by the full extent of their demographic crises. The United States can on the other hand offset a similar crisis within its own country by maintaining a well-managed immigration and assimilation policies.

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