

Translateralism in the Changing Global Order

Rethinking Global Partnerships
in the Era of Deepening Uncertainty

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Abstract

In the contemporary international relations scholarship, there is a prevalent presumption that effective partnerships require shared values and ideological unity. The primary purpose of this article is to challenge such orthodox views on the merits of unity in global affairs. By proposing the concept of “translateralism,” the author argues that the power of partnerships among unlike-minded actors should not be discounted. Translateral partnerships of the unlike-minded expose participating actors to the messy realities of global politics, compel them to get out of their diplomatic comfort-zones, and help them overcome the limitations of crude binary thinking. In a world of deepening global uncertainty, open-minded actors able to harness the widest possible networks of diverse partners

may be more likely to succeed in adapting to changing circumstances. To probe the argument's plausibility, this article provides illustrative examples of translateral partnerships advanced by China, Russia, and Japan, and discusses how these practices have reshaped the overall landscape of global interactions. Based on the insights offered by these examples, this article concludes that uncritical celebration of the strength of unity needs to be reconsidered.

Keywords: multilateralism, translateralism, global order, international institutions, China, Russia, Japan.

In a recent article published by *Russia in Global Affairs*, Marlene Laruelle points out that contemporary political commentaries too often employ outdated binaries with little heuristic value (Laruelle, 2020, p.103; see also Laruelle, 2021). Binarism forcefully reduces diverse actors to crude caricatures while simultaneously promulgating inward amity and outward hostility. Over time, actors entrapped in binary thinking often come to uncritically celebrate internal purity, uniformity, and homogeneity as the ultimate source of strength. Indeed, there are prevalent presumptions that effective partnerships require shared values and ideological unity. This is probably why many international relations (IR) scholars and pundits are quick to dismiss the role of rising powers in reshaping the world order. For instance, the common criticism goes that the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) group is unlikely to play a meaningful role in global politics because they lack a unified vision. In the words of Joseph Nye, “BRICS countries remain too politically and economically diverse to act in a unified manner” (Nye, 2013).

The primary purpose of this article is to offer an alternative hypothesis that challenges this conventional view. By proposing the concept of “translateralism,” I argue that the power and resilience of partnerships among unlike-minded actors should not be dismissed. Historically, coalitions of unlike-minded actors prevailed over unions of like-minded actors on numerous occasions. For example, consider the remaking of the European world order in the Medieval Age.

Since the late 14th century, the continent suffered from the global plague pandemic (the Black Death), which was believed to have originated in China/Mongolia before spreading across the Ottoman Empire to finally devastate much of Europe. The mid-15th century then witnessed the rise of new technologies (such as Gutenberg's printing press) that radically reshaped the landscape of information dissemination. Following these multiple and intertwined socio-political disruptions, protestant Reformation movements emerged in 16th century Europe to challenge the singular moral authority of the Vatican (see Phillips, 2010, Chapters 3-5). Initially, medieval Catholic leaders dismissed the viability of the Protestant challenge. Unlike the Vatican (which represented a "value-based community" of Catholic normative unity with well-developed institutional structures; see Bellomo, 1995), the Protestant movements included numerous intra-confessional divisions and lacked a coherent grand vision for an alternative post-Reformation world order. In light of this, many medieval Catholic leaders questioned whether a mere marriage of convenience among disparate movements with no common vision could ever challenge the single community united under Catholicism's common values, rules, and institutions.

At the end of the day, it turned out that the absence of normative unity among Protestant movements in fact *enabled* them to effectively challenge the established Catholic order. Rather than clinging to a bloc mentality, assorted Protestant challengers skillfully harnessed workable compromises, cross-cutting alliances, and flexible partnerships with unlike-minded actors (see Owen, 2010, Chapter 4). In the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), for instance, Protestant challengers ultimately prevailed over their Catholic opponents by soliciting support from France (a major Catholic power at the time) and even from the Ottoman Empire.

Although detailed historical investigations go beyond the scope of this article, a key macro-historical pattern appears to be that transcendence of a bloc mentality is essential to success in a world of radical uncertainty. In this article, I call such practices "translateralism" and argue that, in a similar vein, actors with translateral mindsets

are likely to play an increasingly important role in reshaping global politics. This article advances such an argument in five parts. Following this short introduction, the second section articulates the principles of translateral diplomacy, which consciously seeks to transcend debilitating bloc politics, build inclusive global partnerships with unlike-minded actors, and maximize opportunities for innovative mutual learning. The third section provides illustrative examples of translateral diplomacy with a focus on China, Russia, and Japan. The fourth section addresses the potential limitations of translateralism. The final section offers concluding remarks and suggests avenues for future research. The primary purpose of this article is to engage in a conceptual exercise intended to challenge orthodox views on the merits of ideological unity in global affairs. The examples provided in this article are selective rather than representational, but they are nonetheless useful in articulating alternative perspectives and stimulating further debate.

THE PRINCIPLES OF TRANSLATERALISM

In contemporary world politics, the term ‘multilateralism’ is commonly understood as international cooperation involving more than three states (Ruggie, 1992). This definition, however, deviates from the term’s original Latin meaning. The suffix -lateral has no association with states or nations; it is the plural of *latus*, translated as “side” or “front.” This original Latin meaning is still prevalent in medical science. For example, ophthalmologists distinguish unilateral myopia (one-sided myopia, either in the right or left eye) from bilateral myopia (two-sided myopia). In this light, multilateralism may be more accurately conceived as “multi-side-ism,” where actors representing different blocs (“sides”) come together to seek cooperation based on workable compromises.

Although multilateralism forms the basis of global cooperation, it still raises the divisive impression of each actor being rigidly situated on a fixed side. In contrast, translateralism is a foreign policy approach explicitly aimed at *transcending* a perilous bloc mentality by instituting inclusive, flexible, and open-ended partnerships that cut across existing

international cleavages. The essence of translateralism therefore lies in the *transcendence* of binary thinking. Binaries are cognitive schemes that allow policymakers to reduce complex political realities into simplistic dichotomies. Binaries serve as a powerful manipulative tool to arouse a sense of hostile unity (“us vs them”) and mobilize political support for particular foreign policy actions. In the above-mentioned case of the Thirty Years’ War, the binary of Catholicism/Protestantism was mobilized by both sides to construct an imaginary theatre of “Religious War,” where Catholics and Protestants were supposedly “destined” to clash with each other in the epic struggle for a universal world order (see Cavanaugh, 2009).

In our time, the prevalent discourse of democracy/autocracy similarly constructs a haunting specter of a Regime War where autocracies are “destined” to clash with democracies across the world.¹ Yet, like the myth of Religious War, the binary narrative of Regime War is largely a political fiction that constrains our ability to examine facts with an open mindset. Though dominant narratives tend to portray the United States as the leader of the “democratic” world bravely standing up against “autocratic” challengers such as China and Russia, such crude simplification does not withstand scholarly analysis. For example, a 2021 opinion poll commissioned by the Alliance of Democracies Foundation found that “nearly half (44%) of respondents in the 53 countries surveyed are concerned that the U.S. threatens democracy in their country; fear of Chinese influence is by contrast 38%, and fear of Russian influence is lowest at 28%” (Guardian, 2021). The prevalent binary narrative of America’s inevitable “democratic” confrontation with “autocratic” China and Russia not only neglects the opinions of citizens across the world, but also deflects attention from complex global political realities.²

The purpose of translateralism is to transcend the limits of such binary thinking by recognizing that all international actors have

¹ For example, Frederick Kempe (2020) asserts that “the global competition of democratic and authoritarian systems” is acutely destabilizing for the world order.

² In recent years, a growing number of IR scholars have shown the limits of the democracy/autocracy binary. For a critical review, see Hyde and Saunders, 2020.

multiple values and complex identities that are irreducible to divisive simplifications. Even though we may acknowledge the existence of certain binary identities (Catholic/Protestant, democratic/autocratic, and so on), translateralists consciously refuse to exploit this difference as a means to further manipulative aims.³ Karl Deutsch and David Singer (1964, p. 395) once emphasized that a stable world order requires flexible relationships, cross-cutting communication networks, and an openness to work with different groups of actors, arguing that “one of the greatest threats to the stability of any impersonal social system is the shortage of alternative partners.”⁴ In line with this insight, translateralism aims at fostering inclusive partnerships that bring together actors of different values and worldviews. Such partnerships of the unlike-minded can expose participating actors to the messy realities of global politics, compel them to get out of their diplomatic comfort-zones, and help them overcome the limitations of reductive binary thinking.

As discussed above, global history is filled with examples where flexible partnerships among unlike-minded actors decisively prevailed over value-based unions of like-minded actors. In the Second World War, the Grand Alliance of the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom (UK), France, and the U.S. lacked shared ideological values, common security policy, or a rigid institutional union, but ultimately prevailed over the totalitarian Axis. The Western liberal international order then survived and thrived throughout the Cold War while being anchored in multiple and cross-cutting partnerships.⁵ In the 1950s,

³ On the international practice of “othering,” see the seminal work of Neumann, 1999.

⁴ Notwithstanding his advocacy for a multipolar world order, Karl Deutsch is also known for the concept of security community. Deutsch’s research team argued that a key factor in explaining the absence of war in security communities may be common ideological values (along with many other factors such as high administrative capability, cross-cutting communication networks, high density of interactions, and so on). In this sense, unity is conducive to intra-community peace. However, in his joint article with David Singer, Deutsch also warned that, even though a united alliance may enhance intra-community security for its member states, “the establishment of such a clear-cut in-group-outgroup division can only lead to an increase in the range and intensity of any conflicts with non-alliance actors” (Deutsch and Singer, 1964, p. 397).

⁵ In this article, I use the word “West” as a colloquial shorthand to refer to dominant Anglophone global elites, though the idea of the West itself suffers from the limits of binarism. On scholarly inquiries into the concept of the West, see Henrich, 2020; Stuenkel, 2011.

the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) emerged as a hybrid alliance embracing a diverse array of unlike-minded states; it included liberal democracies (e.g., Canada), Christian democracies (e.g., West Germany), imperial powers subjugating overseas colonies and subjects (e.g., the UK, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands), and military dictatorships (e.g., Portugal and Greece), while being heavily reliant on the military supremacy of segregationist America (see Hellmann et al., 2017). From the beginning, the hybrid Atlantic alliance was marred with perpetual internal clashes. In the wake of the 1956 Suez crisis, the U.S. stood with Egypt against the UK and France and even threatened to sanction the imperial European powers. In 1966, de Gaulle's France abruptly withdrew from NATO's military organization and NATO headquarters had to be forcibly relocated from Paris to Brussels. In the meantime, France advanced an explicit anti-hegemonic foreign policy, going so far as providing military assistance to Nicaragua's Sandinistas (Boniface, 2021). In 1974, NATO allies Greece and Turkey militarily clashed with each other, causing the estimated death of nearly 10,000 citizens and soldiers.

In light of NATO's perpetual internal conflicts, Soviet officials frequently ridiculed the Atlantic alliance as a mere marriage of convenience among disparate actors lacking a common vision; in contrast, the Warsaw Pact was portrayed as a "value-based" alliance united by common communist principles, institutions, and political regimes. From the viewpoint of Atlantic leaders, however, lack of unity was not seen as a liability but rather as a core strength of the liberal order, in which diverse partners could freely and openly disagree with each other in search of workable compromises to immediate policy challenges. In the midst of the Cuban Missile Crisis, for instance, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson remarked in the emergency UN Security Council (UNSC) meeting that:

"Against the idea of diversity, Communism asserts the idea of uniformity; against freedom, inevitability; against choice, compulsion; against democracy, dogma; against independence, ideology; against tolerance, conformity. Its faith is that the iron laws of history will require every nation to traverse the same predestined path to the same

predestined conclusion. Given this faith in a monolithic world, the very existence of diversity is a threat to the Communist future. I do not assert that Communism must always remain a messianic faith. Like other fanaticisms of the past, it may in time lose its sense of infallibility and accept the diversity of human destiny” (quoted in Jones, 1972, p. 85).

At the end of the day, NATO’s hybrid alliance prevailed over the “value-based” Warsaw Pact, in part because the Soviet obsession with compulsive ideological unity constrained its ability to broaden its global partnerships. For instance, Mark Haas shows that the Soviet Union’s inability and unwillingness to tolerate different forms of communism played a critical role in the degeneration of the Sino-Soviet alliance into a relationship of mutual enmity in the 1960s (see Haas, 2005, Chapter 5). In contrast, ideological flexibility enabled Western powers—above all the U.S.—to engage with Mao’s China in the 1970s, allowing the capitalist camp to gain a decisive geopolitical advantage over the Soviet Union. My argument here is not that the unlike-mindedness of NATO members “caused” its overall effectiveness; however, it is worth noting that the ability and willingness to openly engage with actors of diverse normative orientations played an important role in extending Western influence across the world during the Cold War.

One may argue that the ideological flexibility of the Western camp was largely a by-product of the bipolar structural pressure of the Cold War era. Confronted by the formidable Soviet threat, Western nations could not afford to prioritize in the defense of their core normative values. Though bipolarity certainly played a role in promoting ideological flexibility in the Western camp, structural pressures alone cannot explain the variation of translateral practices during the Cold War. Indeed, the Soviet Union also faced the same structural pressure, but it generally refrained from openly aligning itself with unlike-minded partners abroad, even when such moves could be strategically advantageous. Instead, the Soviet Union tended to push for a stricter adherence to shared communist values among its partners, assuming the role of chief disciplinarian. The Soviet obsession with unity, homogeneity, and uniformity often resulted in the alienation of foreign communist co-ideologues (e.g., Mao’s China and Tito’s Yugoslavia). At

a glance, the Soviet case seemingly suggests that it was the ideology of communism that constrained the Soviet Union's ability to engage with unlike-minded partners abroad. However, the fact that communist China was able and willing to engage with capitalist America in the 1970s strongly indicates that translateralism is neither a by-product of external structure pressure nor an inherent property of particular ideologies; rather, it appears to be a conscious policy choice.

Although this article cannot further explore this claim due to space limitations, the insights from the historical examples discussed above suggest that open-minded actors able to harness the widest possible networks of diverse partners may be more likely to succeed in navigating a turbulent world and adapting to changing circumstances. Of course, this is not to state that all translateral coalitions are performatively and normatively "superior" to unilateral unions. Cooperative arrangements in global politics are made for a variety of purposes under divergent conditions, and hence sweeping generalizations need to be carefully avoided. At the very least, however, the insights offered by this article point to the need to go beyond orthodox views on the merits of ideological unity and to rethink the complex dynamics of global partnerships from an alternative viewpoint. The remainder of this article provides illustrative examples of translateral foreign policy advanced by China, Russia, and Japan, and discusses how the practice of translateralism has enabled these nations to extend the horizon of their global influence in an increasingly polarizing world.

PRACTICES OF TRANSLATERAL DIPLOMACY

China's Translateralism

In popular discourse, China is colloquially framed as the leader of the "autocratic" world that allegedly menaces its neighboring democracies (Myers, 2021). Like many parochial binary narratives, this discourse is neither historically accurate nor factually compelling (see also Suzuki, 2009). In many ways, what has enabled China to rise to the position of a potential global superpower today is not the pursuit of ideological

unity, but instead the principled advancement of translateral diplomacy with a spirit of mutual learning and open experimentation.

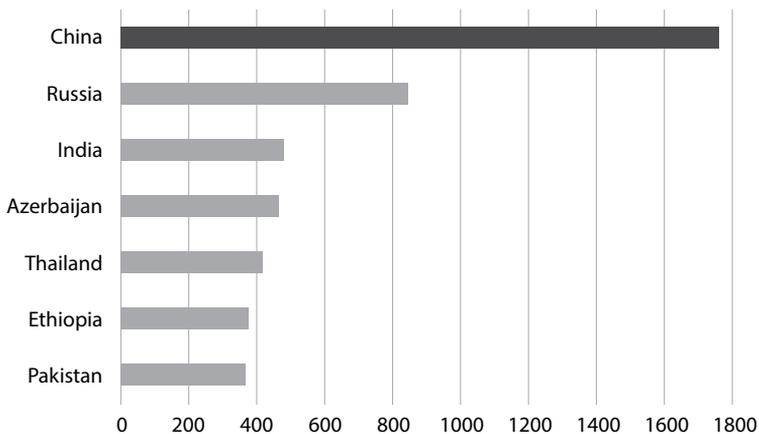
In many ways, China's successful rise is (at least partially) rooted in the transcendence of unilateral (one-sided) solidarity. During the Cold War, China refused to advance value-based unity with the communist Soviet Union, instead opting for translateral diplomacy by seeking a wider network of international engagements. In transcending the communist/capitalist binary, China struck a historic diplomatic deal with the United States in 1971 and successfully took the permanent UNSC seat from Taiwan in the same year. Since the late 1970s, China also initiated hybrid market reforms and proactively learned the best practices of the Western business world. Rather than staying trapped in the parochial binary of democracy/autocracy, Beijing has expanded its partnerships with all states, *regardless of* race, religion, civilization, and regime type. Contrary to the popular narrative of China's solidarity with autocratic regimes, research shows that Beijing developed constructive partnerships with almost all Latin American democracies (Dreher and Fuchs, 2015). In Africa, South Africa emerged as China's major diplomatic partner within and beyond the BRICS community.

Over the last decade, China has also strengthened its footprint in Europe. In so doing, China's strategy is not to form a coalition of like-minded nations, but instead to build a cross-cutting platform that brings together partners of diverse values and interests. For example, in 2012, China launched a forum entitled "Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries" and subsequently deepened its partnerships with European democracies and democratizing states. Perhaps Ukraine is the most interesting case in this regard.⁶ Contrary to the conventional binary narrative of China allegedly seeking to undermine democracies across the world, Ukraine's (partial) democratization since 2014 has provided Beijing with growing opportunities for engagement. In 2019, China surpassed Russia and Poland to become Ukraine's single largest bilateral trading partner, with forthcoming plans to invest in Ukraine's basic infrastructure, seaports,

⁶ As of December 20, 2021, Ukraine was not an official participant of the Forum, but Kiev had nonetheless dramatically deepened its bilateral relationship with China since the early 2010s.

agriculture, IT sector, and transport (Weir, 2019). Ukraine inaugurated the Belt and Road Trade and Investment Promotion Center in Kiev and even officially designated the year 2019 as The Year of China. Ukraine also emerged as a major arms exporter to China: between 2000 and 2018, China was Ukraine’s single most important destination for arms exports (see Fig. 1 below).

Fig. 1. Major buyers of Ukrainian arms, 2000-2018 (in millions USD)



Source: Figure adapted from Nikkei Asian Review (2019), Original Data from SIPRI

In 2021, China’s engagement with Eastern Europe faced significant setbacks, as Lithuania and the Czech Republic turned away from Beijing and began to seek closer ties with Taiwan. Though we should avoid exaggerating the effectiveness of China’s global engagement (which remains uncertain at the moment), the fact that communist China managed to establish a functional policy forum with Eastern European nations is an unusual achievement, given the region’s persistent anti-communist inclinations.

In a similar vein, translateralism forms the basis of China’s evolving relationship with India. Although China and India are engaged in a protracted border conflict (and other bilateral disputes), the two nations have also pursued closer interactions through translateral platforms such as the BRICS group, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,

and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).⁷ When it comes to the rise of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) among India, Japan, Australia, and the United States, certain Western leaders have attempted to portray the new security arrangement as a “democratic” coalition against “autocratic” powers in the Indo-Pacific. Yet, both Beijing and New Delhi have consistently criticized this binary thinking as an obstacle to the pursuit of an inclusive global order (see Jiji Tsushin, 2021). For example, although Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar acknowledged the strategic challenge posed by China’s rise, he also stressed that: “...when it comes to China, first of all, it’s unrealistic in the world to only sort of do business with people who think similar to you. That doesn’t work in the marketplace, it doesn’t work on the street, it doesn’t work in global affairs” (CFR, 2019). Despite the outstanding bilateral disputes, such a translateralist worldview has served as a crucial stabilizing force in the deepening interactions between China and India in global politics.⁸

In the Asia-Pacific, China’s translateral diplomacy has also led to a more institutionalized form of global cooperation, exemplified by the establishment of the AIIB in 2016. Rather than advancing an exclusive institution of like-minded regimes, the AIIB welcomed a diverse array of global members, including major Western powers such as the UK, France, and Germany. Even though Beijing retains prominent influence over the new bank, the AIIB actively recruits European and Japanese officials and seeks to learn from the best practices of international public policy. Such efforts are documented in the current composition of its governing structure (see AIIB, 2021), where many European nationals serve in the bank’s leadership positions. Since its inception (and even before that), the AIIB has also signed multiple memoranda of understanding with the U.S.-led World Bank, resulting in joint projects and various knowledge exchange partnerships (see World

⁷ Among possible translateral values, I did not include the value of non-interference because translateral partnerships do not necessarily preclude the practice of mutual criticism, as the case of Sino-Indian relations demonstrates.

⁸ It should be also noted that, rather than demanding Russia pick a side in the Indian-Chinese conflict, both Beijing and New Delhi have skillfully leveraged their close relationships with Moscow as a channel of communication (see Roy, 2020).

Bank, 2017). IR scholars continue to debate the actual impact of the AIIB on global development finance and beyond (see, for example, Ikenberry and Lim, 2017). Although a systematic comparative analysis of China's translateral diplomatic practices goes beyond the scope of this article, the case of the AIIB and other illustrative examples presented above strongly suggest that China's rise has been driven in part by its ability to think beyond binaries and to grow as a proactive global transformer committed to learning (or copying) best practices from anybody, anywhere. As discussed in the previous section, such a transcendent mindset can be crucial in uncertain times when our ability to experiment, adapt, and evolve is being constantly tested.

Russia's Translateralism

Some Western narratives frame Russia as an "autocratic" world power relentlessly seeking to attack its neighboring democracies. In the words of Larry Diamond, "Vladimir Putin is making the world safe for autocracy" and hence "democracy is his enemy" (Diamond, 2019). Yet others contend that such claims lack a sound scientific basis (see Way, 2015). As Marlene Laruelle enlightens: "One has to point out the irony that the portrayal of Russia as a totalitarian enemy of the West is being driven in part by the governments of Poland and the Baltic states, which are far more ethno-nationalist than Putin's regime. Moreover, the U.S. has been supporting far more authoritarian regimes than Russia—Saudi Arabia or Sisi's Egypt, for instance—without casting them in essentialist terms as foes of the West" (Laruelle, 2020, p. 115).

More importantly, what is neglected here is the fact that Russia's growing global influence in Eurasia and beyond is deeply amplified by its translateral partnerships with major "democratic" powers across the world, including those sharing borders with Russia.

Take, for example, the case of Russian-Indian relations. Over the last decades, Russia has developed resilient military and economic partnerships with India, often dubbed the "world's largest democracy." In the words of Anuradha Chenoy, "Indo-Russian bilateral relations are embedded in a history of trust, mutual compatibility and interest that have few parallels" (Chenoy, 2008). Gulshan Sachdeva, Jean Monnet

Chair and Director of the Europe Area Studies Programs at Jawaharlal Nehru University, also emphasizes that “at the broadest level, the Indian elite believes that a strong Russia is important for maintaining a desired international equilibrium, both supporting the idea of multi-polarity and a rule-based international system, within which India can continue its rise” (Sachdeva, 2011, p. 221). As Alexei Kupriyanov and Alexander Korolev emphasize, “Russia and India are unique in that no other pair of countries of comparable weight can boast such strong historical and political ties and a total lack of conflicts in the past and foreseeable future” (Kupriyanov and Korolev, 2019, p. 11). In recent years, India has further strengthened its ties with Russia and it has become the largest buyer of Russian military hardware (Moscow Times, 2019).

The case of Russian-Indian relations is consistent with a broader pattern of Russia’s translateral engagement. Since 2014, India, Japan, and South Korea—the most populous and economically powerful democracies in Russia’s neighborhood—have continuously deepened their ties with Moscow and helped Russian citizens withstand the pressure of Western sanctions. As discussed above, India strengthened its military and economic partnership with Russia in recent years, while Japan launched an eight-point cooperation plan to make Russia “a great power of high-quality life” (see below for more details). In the meantime, South Korea established a visa-free regime with Russia in 2014, refused to join the anti-Russian sanctions, and launched the New Northern Policy in 2017 to further upgrade its bilateral relationship with Russia. These developments cast serious doubt on the binary narrative that Russia seeks to threaten “democracies” in its neighborhood. On the contrary, Russia’s ability to survive and thrive under dire conditions of Western sanctions appears to be bolstered by its growing networks of translateral partners in its neighborhood and beyond.

In the global arena, an important vehicle for Russia’s translateral diplomacy is the BRICS group, which embodies the spirit of translateral pluralism by encompassing diverse races, religions, civilizations, and political systems in states across Latin America, Central Eurasia, South Asia, East Asia, and Africa. To be sure, the BRICS group has

been criticized for its symbolic gestures and sluggish development (see Miller, 2021). Yet the translateral coalition has remained resilient against the internal political changes in its member states. In Brazil, India, and South Africa, political transitions (the change of ruling parties after elections) have not disrupted their engagement with the BRICS group. Surprisingly, the coalition has remained largely immune to relational disturbances among its members, including the deterioration of Sino-Brazilian relations in 2020 and the border clashes between China and India. This endurance is no small achievement, given the exceptional diversity embraced by the coalition. When it comes to the question of maintaining global order, Brazil, India, and South Africa—major “democratic” powers within the BRICS group—consistently stood with Russia to oppose Western interventionism (see Abdenur, 2016).

In many ways, Russia’s lack of a rigidly uniform ideology appears to have enabled it to develop cross-cutting partnerships with diverse actors across the world. Moscow has deepened its relationship with communist one-party states such as China and Vietnam, but it has also successfully solicited support from more liberal-minded states such as South Africa, Brazil, and other Latin American democracies. From a binary viewpoint, this may appear to be a lack of “consistency” or pure strategic opportunism. But Russia’s (apparently) growing global influence (see Stoner, 2021) is seemingly driven by a flexible engagement strategy that does not seek to impose its own ideological values on others, unlike its Soviet precursor. To be sure, this does not mean that translateralism always guarantees diplomatic success for Russia, but it has certainly enhanced the overall resilience of Russian foreign policy by widening the horizon of its diplomatic engagement across the world. Indeed, Russia has steadily expanded cooperation with U.S. allies in recent years, including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Hungary, and the Philippines.⁹ At the very least, the prevalence of translateral practices in Russian foreign policy challenges the above-mentioned Western narrative that Moscow is expanding its global influence by supporting its “autocratic” partners across the world.

⁹ The author thanks an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this point.

Japan's Translateralism

The illustrative cases of China and Russia may give the impression that translateralism is an anti-hegemonic strategy intended to challenge unipolar dominance. Though this could well be the case, contemporary Japanese foreign policy demonstrates that translateral diplomacy can also work for allies of hegemonic powers. While Japan's foreign relations remain deeply anchored in Japan-U.S. bilateral security cooperation, Tokyo has also developed constructive relationships with a diverse array of partners, including those with "anti-Western" inclinations such as Myanmar, Iran, and Sudan. In many ways, Japan's miraculous rise after 1945 was driven by its ability to synthesize multiple (and often contradictory) values and identities with an open mindset (see also Hagström, 2015). Japan is simultaneously modern and traditional, democratic and authoritarian, Western and non-Western, Asian and non-Asian, and much more. Such a repertoire of non-binary state identities has enabled Japanese policymakers to advance cross-cutting partnerships and to position Japan as a bridge between contending arrangements of international cooperation in global politics.

Over the last decade, Japan's translateralism has significantly reshaped the overall landscape of global connectivity. When Western Europe was rocked by the Brexit division after 2016, Japan seized this timely opportunity to swiftly negotiate new trade deals with both the European Union (the Japan-EU Economic Partnership Agreement signed in 2018) and the UK (the Japan-UK Free Trade Agreement signed in 2020). In November 2019, former NATO Secretary-General Anders Rasmussen proclaimed that the Japan-EU Economic Partnership Agreement constituted a cornerstone of "a Euro-Japanese Alliance of Hope" and that "democracies should stand together in the fight against autocracy" (Rasmussen, 2019). In November 2020, merely a year after Rasmussen's proclamation, Japan joined the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) led by China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), demonstrating that the divisive binary logic of "democracy vs autocracy" finds little resonance in Japanese foreign

policy.¹⁰ Here, Japan's recent turn to the RECEP should not be seen as a willingness to "side" with the China-led economic order in the Asia-Pacific. In fact, Japan has also played a key role in negotiating the Comprehensive Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (CPTPP signed in 2018), which is often seen as a competing trade arrangement for the RECEP (see Wilson, 2015). Whether these new trade partnerships will bring tangible benefits to Japan and to the global economic order at large remains to be seen. Yet, it is remarkable that Japan has managed to strike four mega trade deals with such diverse partners. Taken together, these developments show that skilled translateral diplomacy has enabled Japan to emerge as a hub for global connectivity, even in the context of the looming uncertainty prompted by Brexit and the intensifying geopolitical competition between China and Western powers.

While the maintenance of the U.S. security alliance is a top priority for Japanese policymakers, this commitment to the hegemonic world order has not prevented Tokyo from developing translateral partnerships with other major powers, including Russia. In 2014, Japan reluctantly joined the anti-Russian sanctions to demonstrate its conformity with Western powers, but Tokyo also took a number of concrete steps to further its relationship with Russia. In 2016, the Abe administration launched an exceptional cooperation package to bolster Russia's status as a *seikatsukankyou taikoku* (a great power of high-quality life) through mutually beneficial cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2019a). Under this plan, nearly four hundred agreements have been signed and more than two hundred concrete projects have been implemented (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2019b). As Anton Bepalov notes, "amid the growing confrontation between Russia and the West, Japan was one of the few Western-world countries maintaining a benevolent, or at least neutral, disposition towards Moscow" (Bepalov, 2021). In 2020, Japan and Russia conducted their first ever joint naval (anti-piracy) exercise in the Gulf

¹⁰ Allan, Vucetic, and Hopf (2018, p. 22) show that, among all major powers, Japan is the only country in which the identity discourse of "democracy" does not entail a generally positive resonance both at the elite and mass levels.

of Aden, demonstrating Tokyo's willingness to work with alternative partners in the domain of global security (Kommersant, 2020).

When it comes to the question of China, what usually goes unnoticed is the resilience of the translateral relationship between Tokyo and Beijing (Harris, 2021), notwithstanding their mutual distrust and diverging views on historical issues. As the largest official development assistance (ODA) provider to the Chinese government since the late 1970s, Japan, in fact, played a key role in China's rise, while China also learned much from Japan's best practices of mercantilism, state capitalism, and developmentalism (Li, 2003). Beyond the case of China, Japan's translateral engagement with diverse partners in its neighborhood has contributed to the rise of Asia as a region of exceptional economic vibrance, with a rapidly growing middle-class and emerging hubs of technological advancement (see Stubbs, 2009). Since the mid-2010s, Japan has also sought to catalyze deeper mutual learning through new translateral platforms such as the North-East Asia Development Cooperation Forum, which brings together China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea. While Japan continues to maintain its privileged relationship with Western powers, the illustrative examples provided above show that translateralism has enabled Japan to diversify its global interactions and to position itself as a bridging actor in an increasingly polarizing world. Such relational diversity can serve to further enhance Japan's national resilience in an era of deepening uncertainty, where the Western primacy can no longer be taken for granted.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Although the concept of translateralism may help us better understand the evolution of complex and cross-cutting interactions in global politics, there are (at least) three critical questions that deserve closer scrutiny. This section briefly addresses these questions to provide further clarification on the utility of the translateral concept.

First, can we meaningfully distinguish translateral engagement from a realist foreign policy?¹¹ Although I acknowledge that certain practices of translateral diplomacy (such as the transcendence of religious

¹¹ The author thanks an anonymous reviewer for raising this important question.

and/or ideological dividing lines) may bear similarities to realist prescriptions for prudent pragmatism, the concept of translateralism is distinguishable from realism in several aspects. Above all, translateral practices are primarily concerned with global partnership-building efforts that transcend conventional dividing lines, with the assumption that such cooperative arrangements play an important role in global politics. This stands in contrast to (various strands of) realist theories in the IR scholarship, which often contend that institutions, partnerships, and other cooperative schemes are of marginal importance in an anarchical world.¹² It is in this sense that translateralism as a long-term partnership-building policy should be differentiated from ad-hoc, transactional, and tactical maneuvers often advocated by proponents of *Realpolitik*. More importantly, a false dichotomy between “value-based” politics and “valueless” translateral pragmatism needs to be avoided. As emphasized above, translateralism is fundamentally about advancing *translateral values* based on the principles of openness, tolerance, non-discrimination, mutual respect, and common progress through competition.¹³ With the looming uncertainty imposed by the ongoing pandemic, translateral partnerships may become even more important in devising and implementing innovative solutions to common global challenges such as climate change and endemic poverty.¹⁴

The second question is the analytical scope of translateralism. Although the cases of China, Russia, and Japan illustrate that translateral practices can empower nations to extend their global outreach, can the translateral concept also apply to the cases of weaker actors in international politics? For example, smaller nations allied with hegemonic power centers such as the U.S. might be unwilling or

¹² For a realist critique of international institutions, see Mearsheimer, 1994.

¹³ It is worth noting here that religionists initially framed the rise of secularism in Enlightenment Europe in a similar false dichotomy, where secularism was condemned as a valueless, faithless, and purely “pragmatic” form of political order devoid of any normative principles, as opposed to the “value-based” Christian order governed by Christian values, rules, and institutions. Though seemingly valueless from the viewpoint of (certain) devout believers, secularism, in fact, entails *secular values*, such as the separation of the state and the Church and the tolerance of religious pluralism.

¹⁴ The author thanks the journal’s two anonymous reviewers for highlighting the importance of common threats posed by climate change and other global issues.

unable to develop inclusive translateral partnerships with alternative international partners. While hegemonic control can limit the possibility of translateral practices, it must be emphasized here that, in our increasingly multipolar world, no superpower is potent enough to totally control the behaviors of its client states. Even in the era of American unipolarity (in the 1990s and 2000s), states such as the Philippines and Uzbekistan defied the hegemon's will and successfully ejected American military bases from their territories. Despite its heavy dependence on American security and economic assistance, Iraq's parliament recently voted to expel U.S. troops from its soil (CNN, 2020). As discussed above, South Korea boldly refused to join Western sanctions against Russia in 2014, while Ukraine emerged as a key military and economic partner for China's penetration into Europe. Over the last few years, even Georgia defied America's will to foster closer ties with Russia, prompting former U.S. Ambassador to Georgia, Ian Kelly, to lament that "Georgia turns its back on the West" (Kelly and Kramer, 2021). These examples vividly demonstrate that, even in a world of hegemony, skilled leaders from smaller nations can find leeway to conduct translateral foreign policy. Most recently, the Afghan government's rapid fall in August 2021 exposed the extremely high risk of maintaining exclusive dependence on a single patron. Translateral partnerships can enable smaller nations to mitigate such risks and enhance their sovereign freedom through engagement with multiple and diverse international partners.

Third, one might wonder how we can build a synergetic interface between formal institutions and informal partnerships. Although conventional IR institutionalist research tends to privilege formal institutions, this article argues that informal translateral arrangements can also foster policy innovations through flexibility and experimentation (see also Haas and Kupchan, 2021). In Africa, for instance, forum-based cross-cutting policy platforms involving diverse global partners are increasingly becoming a regional norm. Since 1993, Japan has led the forum-based Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) process, emphasizing the principles of self-help, self-reliance, and a commercially-driven development model based on the trinity of

aid-trade-investment. Though the TICAD lacks formal institutions, its flexibility has spurred innovative policy practices and open dialogue involving thousands of diverse partners within and beyond Africa (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2021). This model of open translateral partnership has been actively emulated by the India–Africa Forum Summit (IAFS) and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FCAC). Learning from these best practices, Russia has also launched its own Russia-Africa Summit in partnership with the African Union, demonstrating that forum-based cooperative arrangements can also serve to enhance existing formal institutions. Despite this, it remains to be seen whether informality is an essential characteristic of translateral diplomacy, or if translateralism can work both through formal and informal institutional arrangements. Rather than assuming the superiority of formalism over informality (or vice versa), future research may also need to look deeper into the potentiality of hybrid partnerships that creatively combine *both* formal and informal mechanisms.

* * *

This article developed the concept of translateralism and argued that the power of the partnerships of the unlike-minded should not be underestimated. To reiterate my previous points, my argument is not that translateral partnerships are performatively or normatively “superior” to unilateral unions. Instead, the translateral concept enables us to look at global affairs from a new angle, unconstrained by the conventional binaries that arbitrarily limit our imaginations. As emphasized above, the illustrative cases provided in this article are selective and not intended to definitively prove the viability of translateralism. Yet, the translateral concept offers tentative clues towards rethinking the merits of ideological unity in global affairs. In this vein, further research is needed to more systematically investigate how and to what extent translateral practices promote (or not) policy innovations through flexible partnerships. For the purpose of clarity, the concept of translateralism developed in this article is highly state-centric.¹⁵ Another potential avenue for future research is to explore how

¹⁵ The author thanks an anonymous reviewer for raising this legitimate concern.

and to what extent the concept of translateralism can be useful for the analysis of global interactions among different types of international actors, including multinational corporations and transnational movements, among others.

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