

# Sailing into Unchartered Waters in Times of a Great Transition

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The events of recent years show that we have entered a time of a great transition towards a new world of multilateralism. Unlike the shift of power that happened in the West-centric world in the past few hundred years, the global disorder we are experiencing nowadays is caused mainly by the U.S.'s refusal to accept the rising Asian powers, above all China, a country with a long history and a culture that the U.S. is not familiar with. Striving for peaceful coexistence with other powers, China has tried at all times to resolve disputes with other countries in an amicable manner without using arms because it believes that "the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting." From the Chinese perspective, it is unrealistic, if not self-cheating, for the U.S.-led West to expect that it can maintain world dominance simply by imposing sanctions, exercising economic decoupling, and launching proxy wars to contain the development of other nations that it considers to be its competitors or rivals.

In the ever-changing world, particularly when our economies have become interwoven and interdependent, recognizing the general trend of world development and moving in its direction means “riding on the wave of a winning momentum.” For those who believe in Chinese philosophy as such, it is undeniable that every country should adjust its policies to the changing environment in order to survive and thrive. The ways and approaches countries take vary, depending on their economic realities, perception of security challenges, cultural and historical background, and the changing external environment may significantly influence a country’s behavior.

Our world has once again arrived at a major crossroads, whereby the big and powerful will have to shoulder the responsibility and decide where we are heading to, and how to create a new order to ensure peace and development for all nations as befits world leaders. Looking back at world history, we can see empires wax and wane, chaos and wars ensue when competing powers fight for supremacy but fail to reconcile with each other. Many have argued that it is difficult for changes to take place peacefully across the Grand Chessboard, often referred to as a shift of power center(s) in a global context, because new actors are bound to be vigorously rejected by those who are still dominant but losing their grip. But should we allow history to repeat itself?

The inexorable war in Gaza, the intensifying conflict in Ukraine, and the escalating tensions across the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea have made it evident that the U.S.-led West refuses to accept the changing realities while the Global South countries resist its attempts to save its dominance and the order that came into existence after the Second World War. Free trade is dead. The U.S. has revived trade protectionism by manipulating global supply chains to its advantage. Strategists and policy advisors around the world are busy devising analytical scenarios and measures to protect the interests of their respective countries. Yet the fundamental question remains: When and how will we learn to respect our diversity and solve disputes in a civilized way through peaceful negotiations?

The year-long war in Gaza between Israel and Hamas is now being further escalated. Israel's animosity towards Iran and its supporters, including Hezbollah, is becoming ever more visible. Endless bombings and missile attacks on Gaza and southern Lebanon, as well as targeted killing of the Hamas leaders and those of Hezbollah and Qassam Brigades has done nothing but invited a war of a much bigger scale with Iran, turning the entire Middle East into a battlefield again. For various reasons, the U.S. has found itself compelled to stand behind Israel by supplying more weapons, sending its aircraft carriers closer to the region, and preparing for combat engagement. Surprisingly, most European countries have stayed aloof so far.

Contrary to those whose immediate reaction is to take sides whenever a conflict breaks out anywhere around the world, China is always the first to come out to condemn the killing of civilians and call for a ceasefire. When the war between Israel and Hamas started about a year ago, China was as usual one of the first countries to call for a ceasefire and encourage peace talks to solve the long-pending issues of mistreatment of the Palestinians in Gaza. China also brought together all fractions of the Palestinians to help them recognize the importance of reaching a consensus and signing of the Beijing Declaration. In 2023, China even came out with the initiative to bring together Iran and Saudi Arabia to reach a reconciliation and end the century-long animosity between these countries.

Whether the war in Ukraine was provoked by the U.S. or if Russia has fallen into a trap set by the West may remain debatable for many years to come. What is unquestionable is that NATO has resurrected as a result of the war and that the U.S. has once again tightened its control over Europe under the North Atlantic Partnership, although the rifts within the European Union are becoming more visible. Two years after the start of its Special Military Operation (SMO) in Ukraine and the West's severe sanctions, Russia remains economically strong. The largest country in the Eurasian continent, Russia has embarked on a path of national revival and is committed to building a new world order.

In global politics, nothing occurs at random. For almost two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the West repeatedly rejected Russia's willingness to be part of "the European or Western family," which eventually made it re-identify itself as a Eurasian country and turn to the East to partner with Asian economies. Russia's subsequent decision to forge a tighter partnership with China is now widely recognized as most beneficially suiting its interest, especially after the start of the SMO on 24 February 2022.

Amidst the West's growing hostility towards Russia, some governments in Europe are pledging to send more financial aid and advanced weapons to Ukraine, while others are openly against such a decision for fear of entering a direct military conflict with Russia. More and more people now understand that the root causes of the conflict lie beyond Ukraine and that all countries across Europe have suffered collateral damage and only the U.S. has won financially. The EU's future and Europe's independence have been called into question. However, the end of the war in Ukraine still seems remotely possible as the EU countries have tied themselves up to the U.S.-driven war machine. The recent election results in Europe and the presidential election in the U.S. may change their policies to some extent, but Russophobia and enmity towards Russians will endure for a long time.

Determined to win the war in Ukraine and withstand the West's pressure, Russia has successfully mobilized society and transformed its economy. Moscow has officially declared its determination to break the West's will to ever dare to challenge or harm Russia again. This resolve is shared by the country's elites and ordinary people. Russian leadership's vow to pre-emptively use nuclear weapons if the country faces an existential threat is, in fact, an ultimatum to the West to stop pushing the envelope further. Now that many politicians in the West have been carried away by their arrogance and ignorance, the reminder of nuclear deterrence is extremely timely, at least from the Russian perspective.

In parallel and almost within the same time period, the rise of China as an economic powerhouse and a principal trading partner of over 140

countries has made the U.S. feel constantly threatened. By officially recognizing China as its main competitor and adversary, the U.S. has admitted that China is now the only country that has the ability and readiness to challenge the U.S.'s leadership on a global scale. Moreover, China's tightening of its relations with Russia in recent years has made Western leaders convinced that they must side with the U.S. to retain their collective dominance in world affairs. However, neither China nor Russia is willing to replace the U.S. on the world stage. China has never declared the U.S. a competitor, let alone enemy.

China is accused by the West of having undermined the so-called "rules-based order" and of posing a direct threat to the values of "liberal democracy." Yet China's rebuttal and confidence in winning this competition, if taken by its true meaning, lie in the fact that the U.S. has long betrayed itself by its hypocrisy in trying to maintain its primacy using means that have nothing to do with what it purports to stand for. Regardless of how desperate and reckless the U.S. and some of its allies have been to demonize China and its strategic partnership with Russia, China has stood firm in advocating for free and fair trade, respecting the provisions of the UN Charter and international law, and supporting the efforts to create a new multipolar world of peaceful coexistence among all nations, for which Russia has also pledged its support.

The Joint Statement by China and Russia, released during President Vladimir Putin's most recent visit to China, shows the two countries' unshakable resolve to take each other as "priority partners." The impact of this partnership on geopolitics and on the world economy should not be underestimated. Unlike the previous declarations and statements by the Russian and Chinese leaders, this ten-thousand-word-long document has for the first time spelt out in detail the two countries' determination to tighten partnership, shared vision of the ways to settle the pressing economic issues on a bilateral level, as well as common stance on global governance over the long run.

The Western media expectedly tried to downplay the Russian President's latest visit to China, which showed not only the West's

resentment but perhaps also its unpreparedness, if not shock, at the open declaration by Russia and China of their position on various matters. Just a few weeks and even days before President Putin's arrival in Beijing, senior White House officials including U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken came to China one after the other, pressuring Beijing to stop supporting Moscow and even threatening to impose more sanctions on China if Beijing does not heed Washington's expectations.

As the demand and warning were blatantly ignored by China, the U.S. has increased its arms sales to Taiwan in an attempt to further discourage Beijing's efforts for unification with the self-governing island, which is universally recognized as part of China. Meanwhile, more U.S. and its allies' warships pass through the South China Sea to flex their muscles under the pretext of "freedom of navigation," and the Philippines is being emboldened by the U.S. to intensify its disputes with China over the sovereignty of a few islands and reefs.

Most recently, the White House has introduced a 100-percent tariff on electric vehicles imported from China, thus escalating the ongoing trade war between the two countries. Not by coincidence in its timing, the 2024 G7 summit in Italy was staged to purposely show the West's unity against Russia and China, while the foreign ministers of the BRICS countries met in Russia to promote global engagement for building a multilateral world and called for adoption of a new trade settlement mechanism in order to speed up the de-dollarization process. Beijing's top diplomat Wang Yi reiterated China's uncompromising commitment to strengthen its relations with Russia but stressed that the Sino-Russo partnership "is not a *modus vivendi* or a momentary political expedient" and should be valued for its non-exclusiveness based on non-alliance, non-confrontation, and the non-targeting at any third party.

Some have warned that the tightening of the China-Russia partnership will escalate the tensions between the U.S.-led West, on the one side, and Russia and China, on the other, bringing back the Cold War. A few American strategists have argued that the U.S. should

have engaged Russia to jointly contain China, which they believe poses the biggest threat to the U.S., while others, including some pundits in China, insist that it is not in China's best interests to "side with Russia" for various reasons. Smaller countries, particularly those in Southeast Asia that find themselves caught in the middle of the growing conflict between the U.S. and China, have voiced their reluctance to take sides.

While people's opinions may differ at all times, the predicted widening of differences between the U.S.-led West and the Global South, which China and Russia are leading, has become a reality. However, the U.S.-led West has no grounds to claim that either China or Russia is aiming to destroy or replace the U.S. or the West in general. Rather, the two countries' open detest of the U.S. hegemony reveals the Global South's shared aspirations—a fact that the West fails to understand. BRICS and the SCO's close enlargement and Turkey's expressed interest to join these organizations notwithstanding its NATO membership, are plain evidence of the growing weight of these organizations, which the West can no longer ignore.

The naked truth is that, although the U.S.-led West refuses to accept the ongoing rebalancing of the world order and acknowledge the inevitable rise of other powers, it will have to learn to coexist with them. The frustration over the uncertainty of the future world is not only caused by the rise of China and other powers. The U.S. has lost moral ground to lead the world; hence the long-felt need for a new and more balanced global governance system. If smaller countries might remain free riders in the transition towards it because they have no incentives or nerve to challenge any of the powers, it is up to the big and powerful to lead and ensure the change.

In his address to the Valdai Club forum on 7 November 2024, President Putin pointed out the challenges the world is facing and outlined six principles on which the future world order should be built. By and large, they coincide with the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative advocated by China. Despite the many difficulties a major transition

period holds, China and Russia should not give up their efforts to engage in dialogue with the U.S. and its allies. We must convince them that instead of containing the development of other countries they should moderate the greed of the privileged few, refrain from arrogance and respect the right of others in order to be on the right side of history.

The U.S. and its allies were blinded by the belief in the “end of history”—a conception that made them claim that any country that does not embrace the liberal democracy practice is either backward or embodies evil. This explains why the rise of countries like China came as a shock to the West and why all of its containment measures against China cannot be successful. So, the world must wake up to understand the advantages and true meaning of multilateralism, which is meant not to replace one superpower with another. China and Russia’s joint efforts to fight the U.S.’s hegemony have been echoed by the Global South countries because they understand that it is a just cause and the right direction in which to advance human civilization.

Nothing happens overnight. The Great Transition might take years and even decades. The year 2024 surely marked the beginning of a new period of change in modern history. The escalation of the war in Gaza suggests that instability of a much bigger scale in the Middle East is looming, the growing number of European countries are turning nationalistic and protectionist, Russia will not give up its resolve to fight the West’s provocative attempts to challenge its existence as a Eurasian power, and China is emerging as an increasingly important actor in global affairs. Considering the spectacular outcome of the U.S. presidential election, particularly in view of the attempted assassination of the Republican Party’s nominee Donald Trump and the last-minute change of the Democratic Party’s nominee, no one dares to predict what tomorrow will bring us. The only thing that is certain is that we are all sailing into unchartered waters in times of a Great Transition, whereby extra caution must be taken by all nations, big and small, to guide our way forward.