

FROM UNIPOLARITY TO FRAGMENTATION: AN OVERVIEW OF GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS IN THE POST-COLD WAR PERIOD

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In July 2023, UN Secretary-General António Guterres (United Nations, 2023) painted a worrying picture of the current state of international relations when he said that “[t]his new era is already marked by the highest level of geopolitical tensions and major Power competition in decades. (...) Violations of international law are becoming more common. Deep and, in some cases, justified grievances about double standards and unmet commitments are undermining cooperation.” These observations stand in sharp contrast to the mostly optimistic evaluations made by Western political commentators at the dawn of the 1990s, when the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union led to the emergence of a new world order. The unipolar era, defined by the unchallenged dominance of the United States in international politics (Layne, 1993), was marked by the extension of liberal hegemony. While the Political West incorporated most of Europe, with the notable exception of Russia (Sakwa, 2024), liberal internationalism, i.e., the system based on mutually accepted rules, multilateral institutions, and economic openness, was globalized (Ikenberry, 2018). By the mid-2010s, however, even the leading proponents of liberal institutionalism acknowledged that the hegemonic system of multilateral governance is in crisis (Ikenberry, 2015).

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Several interrelated factors can explain the failure of the post-bipolar order. The Bush administration's Global War on Terror, along with the US invasion of Iraq without UN Security Council authorisation, weakened the normative pillars of the rules-based international order already in the early 2000s. These actions exposed Washington's unwillingness to consider itself bound by the rules it expected others to follow (Vezirgiannidou, 2013), thereby revealing the growing divergence between declared norms and employed practices (Sakwa, 2024). In addition, the United States' efforts to promote democracy worldwide have provoked hostile reactions from authoritarian states, making intergovernmental cooperation on global issues more challenging (Haass, 2022). This coincided with the acceleration of the shift in the global distribution of economic growth following the 2008-2009 financial crisis. The "rise of the rest", i.e., the dynamic progress of non-Western countries such as China, India, and Brazil (Zakaria, 2008), has undermined the unipolarity of the US-centred international system and paved the way for an increasingly multipolar world economy (The World Bank, 2011).

The redistribution of economic power among an increasing number of actors has not resulted in the consolidation of multilateralism (Laïdi, 2014; Ikenberry, 2015). Instead, it led to the emergence of a complex post-hegemonic order, in which the United States can no longer dominate the institutions of global governance on its own, as it must accommodate the rise of emerging powers that do not bend to its command (Acharya, 2017). As the United States became increasingly unable to impose its preferences worldwide, its willingness to maintain the global order diminished (Tálas, 2021). Revisionist powers, however, are not yet able to provide a viable alternative. Hence, global governance has moved into a transitional phase of hegemonic change, characterised by instability and fragmentation (Laïdi, 2014). In this context, geopolitical rivalries stormed back into the centre of international politics, as emerging powers became more willing to directly challenge the declining hegemony of the United States (Mead, 2014).

China's rise represents the most significant challenge to US dominance, as the country's dynamically growing economic power has been complemented since 2009 by a global vision integrating the objectives of military build-up, expansion of economic influence, and construction of regional architectures (Doshi, 2021; Roland, 2021). While Beijing continued to utilise traditional Western-dominated international institutions to benefit from the existing order, from the mid-2010s onwards, it also showed a growing tendency to invest significant resources in building parallel institutional structures, security forums, and infrastructure projects (Huang, 2020). China has also made increasingly assertive efforts to extend its dominance over the South China Sea and oust the United States from the maritime area that it considers its own territorial waters, raising the prospect of direct great power confrontation (Allison, 2017). At the same time, by waging war against Georgia in 2008, then annexing Crimea and partially occupying Southeast Ukraine in 2014, Russia

demonstrated its determination to use military force to reassert its control over the contested geopolitical field of the post-Soviet space (Toal, 2017). A further noteworthy aspect of the changing geopolitical landscape is the new opportunity it has provided for middle powers with traditionally close ties to the West to pursue strategic autonomy. Turkey, for instance, despite being a NATO member, has deepened its economic cooperation with Russia and China, while assertive diplomacy and the projection of military force beyond Turkish borders have become prominent elements of Ankara's foreign policy (Haugom, 2019).

Yet, contemporary geopolitics extends far beyond traditional great-power rivalry and military competition and is rather shaped by the interactions of multiple factors, such as economy, technology, environment, society and ideology. Widespread frustration over the growth of social differences, dissatisfaction with mainstream political parties, migration-related anxieties, social fragmentation caused by identity politics, and disillusionment with economic globalisation and free trade have led to the intensification of nationalist and anti-establishment sentiments both in the United States and the European Union (Acharya, 2017; Szalai, 2020). The subsequent populist upsurge manifested among others in the election of Donald Trump as US president, the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the EU, and the increasing influence of right-wing EU-sceptic parties in Central and Eastern Europe (Zakaria, 2016), making the Political West more divided and fragmented.

The 2020 coronavirus epidemic has amplified these negative trends. Although it could have been seized as an opportunity to rebuild global collaboration, the pandemic has served as a catalyst for increased geopolitical tensions and intensified competition between the United States and China. The Trump administration's withdrawal from institutions of multilateral governance accelerated the disintegration of the leading international role of the United States (Sheng, 2022). Meanwhile, China's ability to take advantage of the vacuum caused by Washington's retreat from multilateralism during the epidemic, and the strong performance of East Asian economies in the post-pandemic recovery, have further shifted the world beyond a US-centric world order towards a more pluralistic multiplex order (Acharya, 2021). In a broader sense, the temporary disruption of the economic, political, and social fabric of the world has given opportunities for authoritarian states to tighten control over their citizens and provided a fertile ground for nationalism and populism to flourish in both democratic and authoritarian countries (Huang, 2020).

The next major crisis that sent geopolitical shockwaves across the world was Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In addition to causing immense suffering and destruction within Ukraine, the invasion has been a direct assault on the very foundations of the rules-based international order, as it disregarded its most crucial principle – the idea that international boundaries may not be changed with force (Brunk & Hakimi, 2022). The conflict vindicated the narrative of a definitive end to the “unipolar moment” and marked the return of contestation over spheres

of influence in world politics (Ashford, 2023). Although it was unable to achieve a quick victory, Russia extended its military control to new territories in Ukraine, establishing a land corridor between the previously occupied areas of the Donbass and Crimea. Meanwhile, its economy proved resilient to Western sanctions, largely because several major countries – not only China, but also India, Turkey, and Brazil, among others – refused to sever their commercial ties with Moscow despite Washington’s demands (Haass, 2022).

One of the most significant implications of the war in Ukraine has been the accelerating pace of the world’s fragmentation into geopolitical blocs. Due to Russia’s aggression, the Biden administration was revitalised, and the idea of a unitary West has been strengthened (Lo, 2023). The most visible consequence in this regard has been NATO’s renaissance, manifested in stronger consensus, increased defence spending, and the integration of Finland and Sweden into the Alliance (Leoni & Tzinieris, 2024). At the same time, the alignment between Russia and China has become tighter, as indicated by the massive increase in their bilateral trade and the deepening of the interoperability of their armies. As a result, Moscow and Beijing’s temporary marriage of convenience transformed into a durable strategic alliance based on a shared aversion to the US-centric world order and the mutual benefits of enhanced economic cooperation (Gabuev, 2024). The third, less unified geopolitical bloc consists of ambitious middle powers such as Brazil, India, Turkey, South Africa, and Indonesia. Instead of aligning themselves with the Euro-Atlantic alliance or the Moscow-Beijing axis, these “global swing states” are seeking to expand their strategic autonomy by taking advantage of the opportunities offered by an increasingly multipolar world (Hamilton & Stent, 2023).

The geopolitical shocks caused by the US-China rivalry and the war in Ukraine have also highlighted the risks of economic dependence on strategic competitors. This explains why a growing number of states and companies have adopted the practice of “friend-shoring”, reorganising their supply chains to take into account not only commercial but also strategic considerations (Bosone & Stamato, 2024). Consequently, as geopolitical tension rises, the globalised world economy is gradually fragmenting into trading blocs, with partial decoupling in the areas of energy, technology, and finance, and increasingly fierce rivalry for economic dominance (Maihold, 2023). The revolutionary advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) is further intensifying competition among great powers – particularly between the US and China – while fuelling techno-nationalism, export restrictions, and the emergence of competing technological blocs, as states seek to bring AI-related supply chains, data flows, and critical digital infrastructure under their control (Weymouth, 2025). The successful application of AI tools can revolutionise warfare, enhance economic competitiveness, and accelerate political decision-making processes (Bremmer & Suleyman, 2023; Wang, 2025). Which states are best able to harness this potential will have a major impact on the global balance of power (Schmidt,

2023). At the same time, AI is expected to exacerbate existing inequalities, undermine public trust in state institutions, and increase the geopolitical influence of a few tech companies to an unprecedented degree (Zai & Chen, 2025; Park, 2025).

Donald Trump's return to power in 2025 has further heightened global geopolitical uncertainty, eroded the internal cohesion of the Euro-Atlantic Alliance, and accelerated the shift toward a post-American world order. Trump's remarks that the United States could annex Canada, Greenland, and the Panama Canal, as well as his demand that Ukraine must give up territories and remain outside the Western military alliance in exchange for a ceasefire, indicate that the United States, which previously tried, albeit imperfectly, to defend the rules-based order, is now openly seeking to undermine the long-standing principle of international law that prohibits the threat or the use of force to conquer land or resolve disputes (Hathaway & Shapiro, 2025). Although informal agreements among great powers to recognise each other's spheres of influence may be a mechanism for avoiding escalating tensions between them, it also foreshadows the emergence of an order, reminiscent of 19th-century geopolitics, in which great powers can oppress weaker states in their geographical vicinity without restraint (Taft, 2025).

The objective of this special issue is to explore the multifaceted and complex dimensions of geopolitical dynamics by providing an interdisciplinary perspective of the contributing authors from different regional, theoretical, and disciplinary backgrounds. The volume aims to address contemporary geopolitical questions across a range of themes, including power competition, geoeconomics, technological rivalry, environmental challenges, security constraints, migration, urban studies, ideological narratives, and identity issues in popular culture. Hence, the articles published in this special issue demonstrate the diversity of geopolitical interpretations.

The first set of contributions demonstrates how global and regional fragmentation, rising tensions, and technological advancements can undermine traditional concepts of foreign and security policy and compel states to adapt to changing geopolitical circumstances. Pacini (2026) examines the relevance of neutrality, concluding that the proliferation of hybrid warfare challenges the feasibility of the concept in the classical sense and necessitates its reinterpretation. Urbanovics (2026) highlights the growing importance of digitalisation and cyber capacity-building in international relations, illustrating various strategic approaches to cybersecurity through the examples of key actors in cyber diplomacy. Siposné Kecskeméthy and Sipos (2026) analyse Japan's evolving geopolitical position in the Asia-Pacific region, demonstrating how growing geopolitical tensions have prompted Tokyo to redefine its security identity, pursue a more proactive foreign policy, and deepen its strategic ties with NATO. Csekity Szemesi and Györgyi (2026) examine how Japan and

Australia's political stances on the pursuit of nuclear energy solutions and military technologies have evolved within the context of the Indo-Pacific's turbulent geopolitics, comparing the divergent paths these two nations have taken on the issue.

A second group of articles highlights the diffusion of geopolitical agency beyond traditional state actors. Borja et al. (2026) examine the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy through the case of the Philippines under Rodrigo Duterte, arguing that citizens' low prioritisation of foreign policy and weak demand for political accountability enabled the government to pursue strategic hedging between China and the United States. Németh (2026) enriches the field of minority studies by incorporating an ethnic minority's perspective into foreign policy analysis. According to his conclusion, although North Macedonian Albanians remain committed to a Euro-Atlantic orientation, the prolongation of the European Union accession process may negatively influence their attitude. Tzoumaka (2026) presents an overview of global cities and their urban dynamics, explained through the case of Athens, tracing developments from the urban transformations associated with the 2004 Olympic Games to more recent trends such as urban attractiveness and touristification. Thomázy and Guevara Parra (2026) discuss recent trends in Venezuelan migration to Chile and Spain, focusing on migration policies, integration, and access to citizenship within the changing dynamics between the Global North and the Global South.

Finally, some of the articles in this special issue employ a critical geopolitical approach to interpret our rapidly changing world. Kara-Szabó (2026) explores the connections between climate policy and the Brazilian state's Amazon strategy, analysing Jair Bolsonaro's sovereigntist and climate change-denying policies within their historical context. Stempler (2026) reflects on decolonisation from a critical perspective by examining the Indonesian question at the UN Security Council in 1947, the first major armed confrontation between the Netherlands and the Republic of Indonesia following the latter's 1945 declaration of independence. Murányi et al. (2026) present the results of an analysis of the series *Rise of the Raven* from the perspective of popular geopolitics, examining how a large-scale historical television production contributes to the contemporary reproduction of the geopolitical imaginaries and national identity in the Hungarian context.

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