POLYCENTRISM AND THE EURASIAN BALANCE OF POWER

The situation is now quite different. From the Victorian through the 'unipolar' era of the post-Cold War, the small number of great powers having disproportionate sway over the planet seemed to be the way of the world. Historically speaking, however, this was an outlier. Most of human history, including Eurasian history, has been multipolar.

Dr. Christopher D. Mott

Washington Fellow, The Institute for Peace and Diplomacy, United States and Canada

Material and strategic factors indicate that an age of multipolarity is now upon us. Rather than a return to a 'New Cold War,' this will be a polycentric order with an increased degree of regionalization. This will make the concept of permanent and ideological alliances obsolete unless they are specifically embedded in regionally unique arrangements that prioritize strategic autonomy towards any single outside great power. Fears of a single power dominating all of Eurasia are thus unlikely. Crafty middle powers can exploit this set of circumstances for their own gain if they understand this dynamic.

Middle Powers and Polycentrism

The fear of Eurasian hegemony is one based on an assumption that one power could dominate the world's largest landmass, and in so doing, dominate the world. First summarized by Halford Mackinder's geopolitical treatise "The Geographical Pivot of History" in 1904. The thesis has since seen many modern revisions and adaptations, perhaps most famously by Zbigniew Brezinski in 1997's "The Grand Chessboard" which argues, from a specifically U.S.-centered perspective, that the core element of grand strategy is the prevention of any pan-Eurasian alliance from taking hold. While the variants of this theory are correct to notice the importance of geography and the clustering of great powers on the Eurasian landmass, both were written at a time when non-great power nations had little say over their regional affairs.

The situation is now quite different. From the Victorian through the 'unipolar' era of the post-Cold War, the small number of great powers having disproportionate sway over the planet seemed to be the way of the world. Historically speaking, however, this was an outlier. Most of human history, including Eurasian history, has been multipolar. As the economic dominance of the U.S. gave relative ground to numerous developing countries and the massive edifice of the Soviet Union collapsed, it was only natural that opportunities for regional powers to grow multiplied. The world has already returned to a state of normality, even if some in the North Atlantic are reluctant to admit it.

The rise of China and the reassertion of Russia are much talked about, of course. But this furthers the mythology of a 'New Cold War' when only these powers are focused on. Equally important is the growth of capability and influence of the 'Middle Power' nations. In the white paper "Middle Powers in a Multipolar World" we at the Institute for Peace and Diplomacy define these nations as a regionally anchored and potent state that may lack the ability for truly global influence but nevertheless remains one of the dominant actors in a specific geographic area. To quote the report directly, middle powers are defined by four main attributes:

1. Geo regionality: they are states situated in and shaped by their particular regions within a regional security complex [RSC]. These complexes are historically dynamic and can enlarge or shrink somewhat over time. Moreover, the geographic constraints and advantages that define their territorial expanse and put them in a favorable, if not inherently dominant, position vis à vis the RSC's other actors also inform their pride of place and sense of history, determining and locking in their vital interests across time.

2. Relative Material Advantage: They are states that possess a certain degree of material capability and operational resources enough to create and maintain comparative superiority—both militarily but also in terms of economic and human capital—allowing them to outperform their proximal neighbors in the pursuit of their goals.

3. Status as a Cultural State: They represent countries with long historical memories, often espousing distinctive values, committed to the preservation of their cultural form of life in the present and the future, and aspiring to achieve recognition and respect of their peers. The historical and cultural continuities also breed greater solidarity and higher internal stability with an attendant and heightened level of interest in the immediate abroad that is shaped by their singular historical and cultural legacy.

4. Limited, Non global Aims: Due to their comparatively limited capabilities (namely, the inability to pursue interests far beyond their regions as great powers can), and thanks to their emphasis on cultural particularity and prioritization of vital interests, these states have narrower goals and strategic concerns that are limited to the near abroad, and which do not change drastically over time, enduring even between different political regimes.

A middle power is thus unable to be dominated by even great powers in its near-abroad. It functions, practically speaking, as its own center of gravity in a specific region. A key aspect of this is not sharing a direct border with a (global) great power, which gives it room to project. So, while a state with the economic and developmental rankings of South Korea or Canada would be a middle power if they were somehow relocated to Africa or South America, the fact they are overshadowed by global powers in their own backyard severely limits their ability to function with the strategic autonomy of states like India, Türkiye, Iran, Indonesia, and others.

A middle power is thus unable to be dominated by even great powers in its near-abroad. It functions, practically speaking, as its own center of gravity in a specific region. A key aspect of this is not sharing a direct border with a (global) great power, which gives it room to project.

What this does is to create conditions of polycentrism, where there is no 'world order' so much as multiple orders within the world. Eurasia, which contains so many divergent cultures, geographies, and interests, is no stranger to this effect. In fact, it is likely to serve as a testing ground for just how much potential middle powers must influence their near abroad. This applies even to landlocked and supposedly 'remote' areas of the supercontinent, which are often regarded by North Atlantic powers as facing a future of inevitable domination by the titans of China and Russia. The center of the system and its most important variable is its lack of center, in other words.

In a world where there are many flexible poles of powers that are capable of shifting alliances with relative ease, power can migrate more easily than unipolar or bipolar systems. It is far more diffuse, divided, and able to avoid being easily locked down into supposedly permanent blocs such as NATO or the Warsaw Pact once were. Such a world has little space for universalist ideology or the belief that the national interest can be conflated with causes of world transformation. There is now an open market on the nature of regional relationships, and such a return to the normal state of interstate relations means those who are the fastest to adapt to the realities of polycentrism will have an advantage, no matter their size or share of overall global power.

Eurasia: A Panoply of Power Poles

While massive continent-spanning hegemonic powers such as the Achaemenid Empire, Mongol Empire, and the Soviet Union have certainly existed in Eurasian history, the unity and dominance of these powers were always incomplete or brief. After two generations of unity, the Mongols split into four sometimes-hostile parts. Additionally, their structure of governance was often decentralized and allowed a wide range of autonomy for vassal and frontier relations. The Soviet Union's time as Eurasian hegemon was even briefer and only one of its successor states (Russia) became a world power after its collapse. In the case of both of these examples, the reassertion of Chinese power played a role in their scale back.

China, meanwhile, has probably held the rank of being among the top of the world's powers more times than any other state in human history. Yet, despite the local dominance and even global economic sway of such states as the Han and Tang Dynasties as well as the unquestioned growing power of the People's Republic today, even Eurasian-specific hegemony has so far eluded it. This is because the geography of the Eurasian supercontinent is as hostile to singular rule as a contiguous land mass could be.

While there is an almost-unbroken temperate grassland, which stretches from Hungary to China's Northeast, and this once facilitated the growth and domination of nomadic steppe empires, this was a particular ecological niche that could only really be exploited by a particular lifestyle. Settled agrarians (and now industrial developing countries) cannot exploit this niche as decisively as the Turco-Mongolians of old once could, save as inland trade routes. The rest of Eurasia is cut through with deserts, towering mountain ranges, and, perhaps most importantly in a present era of supposed globalization and technological development, massive political and cultural divergence. Ancient rivalries as well as modern suspicions can be just as difficult barriers to bridge as the challenges of traversing vast swathes of space with uneven infrastructural development.

Contrary to what the commentariat obsessed with 'New Cold War' paradigms and the like seem to think, the geopolitical situation in Eurasia proper is one of multipolarity, and the rise of the middle powers as well as the limits of the great powers illustrates this perfectly.

Central Asia's population, though much smaller than East and South Asia, is growing at an impressive rate, seeing an almost opposite demographic trend to that of China and Russia. Coupled with its positioning on a trifecta between South Asia, East Asia, and Russia, it no longer seems like a buffer zone, but rather a fully independent region capable of playing outside influences off each other in order to increase its own divergent development. If coupled with positive and mutually reinforcing relations within the region itself, a reduction of outside great power influence is possible, and a diminishment of the threat of any singular outside power achieving full dominance becomes increasingly remote.

An even more anti-hegemonic set of circumstances exists in the Middle East. Not only has the region lacked

a dominant power for over a century, but present conditions seem to be locking in a dynamic multipolarity that already is diminishing external great power influence. In the post-colonial era, the Middle East saw much competition between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, but neither could ever dominate the region. The Pan-Arab project likewise collapsed, preventing a third pole from achieving a more indigenous form of domination. Attempts by the United States to engineer friendly democracies through regime change operations met with failure across the board, and largely (and ironically) empowered Iranian alliance networks throughout the region. This is coupled with the intensity of many of the rivalries, such as that between Iran and Saudi Arabia or Israel and most of its neighbors. Further afield, there are chaotic conflicts erupting on the flanks of the Arab world in Sudan, the Sahel, Yemen, and the ever-simmering civil war in Syria. The conditions in the southwest of Eurasia are already intrinsically anti-hegemonic. Much like in Central Asia, this creates opportunities for local actors to shop around and force the great powers to bid for their cooperation, but unlike Central Asia, there is not even the ghost of a chance for pan-regional cooperation.

Europe and East Asia provide similar, though not as obvious examples. Here, Russia in the west and China in the east overshadow any regional competition on a one-to-one basis. However, these are highly developed and economically weighty regions, which are quite capable of asserting their own interests without being automatically dominated by the nearest great power. The ability of such countries to stand in opposition to attempts of hegemonic revisionism has great potential, as well as their ability to engage in partnerships with the more distant but extremely powerful United States, preventing them from being satellite outliers of their giant neighbors.

Everywhere an autonomous power can rise, the Eurasian future looks to be one of divergence, rather than convergence. This is contrary to the assumptions of many commentators in the North Atlantic geopolitical world. It becomes imperative to examine how these regional powers will likely navigate this multipolar phase.

Balance of Power in a Polycentric Future

The Ukraine War's effect abroad has been one of the most notable elements of the end of any pretense to a unipolar order. One of the most comprehensive sanctions policies in history was leveraged by an international coalition in response to the full-scale Russian invasion of that country. However, it soon became apparent that

conditions of multipolarity undermine attempts by great powers to cut each other off from global markets. Reindustrialization is made easier, not more difficult, by the layer of protectionism sanctions can provide, if the country targeted is resource-rich, and there is never a lack of potential partners whom one can do business with who will be eager to make money off of the trading opportunities now abandoned by the countries imposing the sanctions.

As of the time of this writing, no country has moved faster into this future than Türkiye. Embracing its favorable geopolitical position astride the Black Sea as well as a pragmatism to compartmentalize its policies towards allies and rivals alike, Türkiye is able to exploit the niches now opened by other powers whose rivalry is much more Manichean in nature. From serving as an arms dealer to Ukraine while also keeping channels open with Moscow, to being a NATO member who bucks the trend of attempting to facilitate negotiations with foes of the alliance, old assumptions about the ideological and inviolable nature of security arrangements that stem from a Cold War era no longer apply to the present. Even in Central Asia, long thought by many outside of the region as too remote to ever have any fate besides being dominated by Russia and China, Türkiye has used fears of Russian overreach in its near-abroad to make gains related to expanding its economic and political interests. Seen as a far less threatening power to the sovereignty of countries like Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan, a growing partnership with Ankara makes logical sense even beyond any common ethnic identity.

Ankara's geopolitical tactics are a harbinger of a form of balancing that will become increasingly commonplace with time. The nature of polycentrism, however, is not that other countries will become like Türkiye specifically, but that they will become adjusted to more forcefully acting within their own geographic contexts. In the case of the Central Asian region, Kazakhstan in particular faces danger from its long and mostly flat border with Russia and the large numbers of ethnic Russians that live in its northern territories. It, therefore, does not make the cut as a middle power. However, due to its resource wealth and high state of development, it could hypothetically partner with more distant and populous Uzbekistan in a regional defense pact to increase its potential autonomy vis-a-vis the great regional powers. Such kinds of niche exploitation are not only made possible by the growing capability of middle powers, but also because of the opportunities presented by multiple powers occupying the same region.

As of the time of this writing, no country has moved faster into this future than Türkiye. Embracing its favorable geopolitical position astride the Black Sea as well as a pragmatism to compartmentalize its policies towards allies and rivals alike, Türkiye is able to exploit the niches now opened by other powers whose rivalry is much more Manichean in nature.

Moscow and Beijing might be partners now, but that cannot be assumed to be a permanent situation. Furthermore, their good relations are contingent upon neither overreaching in their near abroad at the expense of the other. While they might have some success in keeping other further afield powers from establishing too much influence, they cannot stop a diversification of relations by Central Asian countries without stepping on each other's toes.

Other Eurasian middle powers, such as Iran and especially India, have even greater advantages, with their direct access to the ocean and their further relative distance from the population centers of great powers. Iran's non-state proxies and clout chasing in the culturally distinct Arab world are the most famous examples, but the countries' relationship with Russia clearly fluctuates based on the perceived threat from the United States. It is reasonable to assume that in a world where Washington was not so fixated on regime change in Iran, Tehran's approach to Eurasian affairs would be more nuanced and seek to maximize its own autonomy from the great powers.

India may share a long border with China, but it is of forbidding terrain in remote and sparsely populated areas and therefore does not cancel out India's middle power potential. New Delhi's capability for not only being an independent power-pole but also facilitating through trade and technology exchanges the options for geopolitical diversification that other regions have open to them. India has made a concerted effort to build security relationships in Southeast Asia and economic strategic depth in both the Middle East and Central Asia. The eventual outcome of these policies is hard to read currently, but the smaller countries clearly see an opportunity to diversify their relationships as a hedge against the great powers.

The diversity of opportunity is growing in proportion to where it has been for generations. This means that the balance of power has shifted more in favor of middle

power actors. The question remains: how could such up-and-coming states use this opportunity?

Revisionist vs Restrained Middle Powers

As middle power capacity grows in the world, there will inevitably be a temptation to use it like the great powers do, be it through military force or sanctioning pressure. For reasons already explained, multipolarity will not allow sanctioning to be particularly effective in this world save for very specific circumstances where a middle power has a monopoly over smaller countries' trade routes (for example South Africa and Lesotho) or access to specific rare resources. There will always be other parties willing to do business with a sanctioned country, be they middle or great powers.

The threat of military force is perhaps the most likely to be used under conditions of multipolarity, and here is where the danger lies for the rising middle powers. While increased opportunities for middle powers to assert themselves will, inevitably, have a strong basis in growing hard power capabilities and deterrence, this also introduces the possibility of using this growing capability within the region to score some easy victories against peer or smaller powers.

The position of middle powers compared to great powers may be growing, but they are still at a disadvantage in a head-to-head. In order to properly maximize their position, middle powers would be wise to understand that smaller regional countries will be calculating their relations with them on the basis of the Balance of Threat theory. This means the perceived threat of a country matters more in grand strategy than its overall power balance.

Overly revisionist middle powers risk becoming seen as more dangerous to their smaller neighbors than great powers, which could increase the odds of a great power being invited to increase its influence as a counter-balancing measure. An example of this would be Syria inviting the Soviets into the Tartus Naval Base in the Cold War as deterrence towards Israel. Revisionist middle powers thus could undermine regional advantages they might otherwise enjoy.

Restrained middle powers, on the other hand, seek to sell themselves to smaller countries using the Balance of Power theory rather than the Balance of Threat. The overall amount of potential power often makes these middle powers seem like less dangerous partners so long as there are stable and non-hostile relations in the region. Those who can play the long game and be more diplomatic and patient with their smaller neighbors will likely find that over time they can better secure their regions for autonomy outside of the great power paradigm. For this type of regional coalition-building polycentrism to work, there must be not only predictability in middle power behavior but also relatively cohesive regional solidarity around the middle power. While fear can play a part in this, coming to a long-term arrangement certainly will decrease a great power's ability to dictate events in a particular region where an active middle power resides.

The balance of power is still disproportionately with the big established great powers, of course, but the proportions have changed. As power is not concentrated in one or two capitals but more globally diffused, the relative capabilities of middle power nations to be more autonomous and dynamic actors undermine concepts such as 'permanent' alliance blocs and grand ideological struggles for the fate of the planet.

Conclusion

The balance of power is still disproportionately with the big established great powers, of course, but the proportions have changed. As power is not concentrated in one or two capitals but more globally diffused, the relative capabilities of middle power nations to be more autonomous and dynamic actors undermine concepts such as 'permanent' alliance blocs and grand ideological struggles for the fate of the planet. This is true even - and perhaps especially- on the Eurasian landmass, undermining fears of a hegemonic unipolarity arising to dominate the supercontinent.

As the world diverges into a more regional and decentralized phase, geopolitical polycentrism will become the dominant form of geopolitics for an increasingly assertive crop of middle power nations. This will occur even in regions that seem far from global trade reach and maritime flexibility. These nations will then have to choose how to assert their growing capabilities to ensure that their near-abroad becomes an asset in their rise rather than a liability. All the while, the great powers will be watching.