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# Taking down a mammoth: Cooperation strategies of great and middle powers in challenging the hegemon

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*The paper investigates, through the analysis of original expert interviews, the conditions under which a group of great powers has emerged in the international system to challenge the hegemonic leader. The findings reveal that the current transition to a multipolar world order is fashioned by challengers which use the values, once promoted by the West, of equality, non-discrimination, self-determination, as well as the institutions originally designed to uphold them, to call out US conduct on the global stage and advance a new multipolar international decision-making model. The US appears as a mammoth, a representative of a past world order governed by coercion, that has lost its credibility as an international peace broker. Beyond cooperating between themselves to dislodge the hegemon, great powers are benefiting from the support of a group of rising middle powers who wish to see China and Russia take on the role of social stabilizer, global spokesperson, and economic leader.*

**Keywords:** *hegemony; unipolar world; multipolar world; BRICS; middle powers*

# Как одолеть мамонта: стратегии сотрудничества великих и средних держав в противостоянии гегемону

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*В статье на основе проведенных экспертных интервью рассматриваются условия формирования в международной системе группы великих держав, бросающих вызов гегемону. Полученные результаты показывают, что переход к полицентричному миропорядку осуществляется за счет действий государств-оппонентов, которые апеллируют к ценностям, некогда продвигаемым Западом: равенству, недискриминации, праву на самоопределение, а также к институтам, изначально созданным для их поддержки. Эти действия направлены на ослабление позиций США и продвижение новой модели принятия решений в полицентричном мире. Соединенные Штаты предстают в образе мамонта – реликта прежнего миропорядка, основанного на принуждении. Как следствие и в духе нормативно-конструктивистской логики, Вашингтон более не способен эффективно выполнять функции мирного посредника и архитектора постконфликтных договоренностей на своих условиях – ключевые для гаранта международного порядка. Помимо координации собственных усилий по вытеснению гегемона, великие державы заручаются поддержкой со стороны восходящих держав среднего уровня, заинтересованных в становлении Китая и России в качестве противовеса американскому гегемонизму, выразителей глобального большинства и региональных экономических лидеров.*

**Ключевые слова:** гегемония; однополярный мир; многополярный мир; БРИКС; державы среднего уровня

**JEL codes:** O10, N90

## Introduction

The theorization of Great Powers, which is one of the foundations of political realism, is state-centric and presumes that challengers, in order to represent a credible threat to a declining hegemon, should acquire all the characteristics of power including its economic, social, military, demographic, and geographical dimensions. This paper explores how a group of rising powers, none of which yet possesses all of the components of power to a sufficient degree to alone take down the hegemon, are through a concerted effort together with middle powers, effectively challenging US power. A hegemon has been defined in the literature as an actor with overwhelming capability to shape the international system through both coercive and non-coercive means (Gilpin, 1981). Middle powers

are generally described as states that are not great powers but have enough power to stand on their own and exert a degree of influence on international relations (Robertson, 2017). For the purpose of this paper, we consider as great challenger powers the four founding members of BRICS, all the while accepting that defining a great power is a contentious issue. Brazil, Russia, India and China are members of various (overlapping) intergovernmental organizations but retain their full strategic autonomy, and their cooperation is based on a circumstantial “joining of forces” rather than a common identity or shared long-term interests. They do, however, display discursive similarities in how an ideal world order is depicted in their respective strategic narratives (Crowley-Vigneau et al., 2024).

A qualitative methodology based on fifteen interviews with scholars and diplomats has enabled the authors to investigate the intentions and worldviews of the contenders, evaluate their willingness and capacity to inflict damage on US power and predict their structural contribution (in Susan Strange’s usage of the term) to a new world order.

This paper looks into the nature of the cooperation of these four countries and their capacity to alter the balance of power in the international system and challenge US dominance. To do so, the authors present an extensive literature review on Great Powers, bringing together traditional concepts with their latest interpretations and carry out an original inquiry based on interviews conducted with specifically-selected IR experts and diplomats from the four focus countries.

The authors demonstrate that a group of rising powers has emerged in the international system equally committed to challenging the hegemonic leader. The findings identify a number of factors contributing to the ongoing transition to a multipolar world order. First, the values of equality, non-discrimination, self-determination, and the institutions created to uphold them, notably by Western powers themselves, have inspired other powers to call out US behavior on the global stage and demand that the rule of law be applied beyond the hegemon’s own interests. Second, US behavior on the world stage has damaged its reputation at home, leading to internal questioning of whether it should adopt a policy of retrenchment, and abroad, leading to contestation of its role as an international peace broker. Besides cooperating to challenge the hegemon, rising great powers are also adopting other roles such as those of social stabilizer, global spokesperson and cultural integrator.

The remainder of this paper proceeds in four parts: a review of the current literature on global power competition is followed by a methodological part showing how the empirical investigation was executed, a findings section highlighting key ideas from the expert interviews and a discussion part showing the paper’s contribution to the existing literature.

### **Great Power Competition: Overview of the literature**

This section recalls the realist tradition, its main tenets and how the emerging multipolar world order is defining structurally and ideationally the competition and foreign policy of states. Special attention is paid to rising powers and their capacity to ascend to Great Power status.

The analysis of Great Power Competition is a classic part of realist studies of international relations, with scholars as far back as Thucydides studying the interplay of states aspiring to dominate the international system. While some note it dwindled away towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and returned to the fore anew in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the rise of great power rivalry, other scholars believe it to be a constant feature of international relations with Nexon noting “competition among great powers cannot return, because it never really went away”<sup>1</sup>. The strategic use, explanatory power and capacity to create positive outcomes of Great Power Competition has been questioned by scholars who believe that focusing on rivalry may actually stir it up (Porter, 2019; Colby, Mitchell, 2020). Nonetheless, it remains a concept of choice for policymakers, with many US administrations using it to analyze the world order (see White House statements and strategy documents on the importance of gaining a comparative advantage<sup>2</sup>).

The core principles of national interest and the struggle for power in an anarchical system were described and reviewed at length by H. Morgenthau (1948) who also defined the survival of the state and the preservation

<sup>1</sup> Nexon, D. (2021). Against great-power competition: The U.S. should not confuse means for ends. *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-02-15/against-great-power-competition> (accessed on November 17, 2023)

<sup>2</sup> National security strategy of the US (2017). <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf> (accessed on November, 20 2023)

of territorial integrity as priorities above all others. Power competition and collaboration are two interaction mechanisms that states deploy when their interests clash in the first case and coincide in the second. States can accommodate other states' desires by deciding which of their own interests are a priority and which are secondary, in order to avoid conflicts (Morgenthau, 1948). The international system is rarely at an even balance and skilled leadership is required to preserve peace. Great Power competition focuses on the struggle between states that are key players in the international system due to military might, economic strength, diplomatic ability but also the belief that they deserve this status (Wohlforth, 2007) and acceptance thereof of other members of the great power club. K. Waltz (1993: 50) defined the main attributes of Great Powers as "population and territory, resource endowment, military strength, economic capability, political stability and competence". Great Powers are more likely than ordinary states to be involved in armed conflicts at any given time because of the sheer size of their resources and ambitions. Great Powers are often recognized as such specifically as a result of their winning a war, making the ability to successfully wage an armed conflict an indelible part of their identity (Levy, 2014). Nuclear weapons are considered to be an essential feature of military preeminence and the majority of Great Powers have them. The prestige linked to nuclear weapons is dual, both demonstrating a country's scientific capacity (as an advanced degree of technical skill is necessary to make them) and its undeniable ability to ensure its own security (O'Neill, 2006).

Great Powers have de facto shown throughout history little concern about ordinary states who are expected to align their policies with one or several large states (Lemke, Reed, 2001). Great Powers do not measure their influence against middle powers or weak states and failure to contain the ambitions of lesser states leads to a significant loss of credibility and most likely to the end of Great Power status (Mearsheimer, 2001). It is assumed that the abundance of resources that Great Powers have at their disposal make it impossible for smaller states to "catch up" (DiCicco, Onea, 2023). Great Powers need to consult with others of their rank before making decisions that affect the international arena in order not to risk unwittingly encroaching on their interests and humiliating them in any way (Schroeder, 1994). Disrespect for another Great Power that threatens their status can lead to rash behavior on the part of the threatened state to uphold their status and show their capacity to deal a blow on other players (Murray, 2018). While middle powers compete mostly with their neighbors, Great Powers have rivalries which are not restricted by geographic considerations, as is illustrated by the competition between the USSR and the US during the Cold War. The rest of the world represents a "playing ground" or battle ground in some cases for their competition (She, 2021). In an anarchical system, Great Powers risk losing ground as their peers gain power according to the rules of a zero-sum game. According to this perspective, states benefit more from increasing their relative power than they do from increasing their absolute power (Schmidt, 2004). Great Powers have a natural propensity to restrict access to the club to other players as the prestige of their privileged status is naturally dependent on its exclusivity (Powell, 1991).

Great Power status is not declarative and this status can only be conferred upon you with the recognition by your peers (Lebow, 2009). Great Powers are defined as such because they have the ability and willingness to compete with others. Being in the club of Great Powers implies recognition and respect from your peers but also responsibilities (Murray, 2018). The scope of ambitions of Great Powers go beyond ensuring their own security as they seek to align entire regions with their economic, ideological or other priorities. Great Powers are considered not just to influence but also to have a responsibility to the rest of the world and frequently on the basis of different institutions form a concert to solve the challenges of the day (Brown, 2004).

Great Powers acquire the ability to compete mainly due to their military and economic might, but their rivalry usually spans a large number of other spheres that are interdependent one of the other: technological innovation, scientific research, financial regulation, discourse control, diplomatic ability (Thompson, 1999, Crowley-Vigneau, le Saux, 2021). Great Powers typically boast ample material resources including expansive territories, large population and high levels of wealth, as well as non-material resources. The possession of material resources in itself defines power according to Mearsheimer (2001), who argues that states who have them will naturally aspire to be recognized as a Great Power. Oppenheim (1912: 170) also insisted that countries owed their greatness to "nothing else than actual size and strength". Material power is called "compulsory power" by Barnett and Duvall (2005: 49) suggesting that possessing resources leads automatically to a change of other

players' behavior (DiCicco, Onea, 2023). Other scholars disagree and focus on states' capacity to convert resources into power and in some cases their inability to do so (Kline, 1994). Great Powers may also need immaterial resources, such as a great diplomatic corps, an effective education system, active civil societies, in order to be able to project power abroad (Ibid., 1994). Nevertheless, countries that have the ability to become Great Powers are thought to naturally gain from doing so, as only decisive players on the international stage can shape it to their advantage. Conversely, failing to transform economic potential into military power pushes states to the sidelines of the global decision-making process and the likelihood they will be overtaken by other more ambitious states is high, leading in some cases even to an existential threat (as explored by Israel and Evans (1995) in the case of the Netherlands at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and start of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries).

The place of different states in the international system is nevertheless liable to change as it cannot be stabilized forever. Scholars have concentrated on the analysis of transitions from one dominating power to another. According to the literature, states that have the potential to become Great Powers eventually seize the opportunity to rise and compete at an international level (Mearsheimer, 2006). The risk of war and conflict is high in a system characterized by a zero-sum game and dominated by Great Powers: the constant determining of spheres of influence and the aspiration for global domination of one state bring about frequent altercations (Kapstein, Mastanduno, 1999). Great powers may on occasion seek a revision of the status quo and attempt to oust one or several players from the privileged club: this is typically a time of open conflict on the international stage (Luard, 1992). Another perilous time is when the leading power in a unipolar world is downgraded to becoming a Great Power among others and has to accept multipolarity (Layne, 2006). As it shrinks, the power gap between the dominant power and its competitors, encourages the former to seek out ways to maintain its "privileged standing" (Istomin, 2023). Proponents of the idea of a balance of power believe that the international stage is at its most peaceful if might and influence are relatively evenly shared between Great Powers and none dominates the others thus generating an equilibrium (Levy, 1981). Great Powers attempt to prevent each other from becoming dominant by forming coalitions and most bids to become an uncontested leader have historically failed (Schroeder, Schroeder, 2004). Other scholars hypothesize that only unipolarity or the predominance of one state over all others can ensure lasting peace and stability on the international stage (Wohlforth, 2014). Power transition theorists, by holding a war ledger to historically determine what provokes violent conflicts, concluded that it is rivalry and an equal distribution of power between major players that leads to periods of increased warfare (Organski, Kugler, 1980). History offers many examples of violent transitions, habitually referred to as "hegemonic wars" including the two world wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Gilpin, 2015). Peaceful transitions are also possible, as in the case of the UK allowing the US to become the dominant power without any military confrontation taking place. Some sceptic scholars underline the very specific context of that transition as the two countries shared not only economic and political values but also had a common cultural background (Klein et al., 2008).

The international system is thought to currently be undergoing a power transition from a unipolar to a multipolar structure. Some realist scholars from the US emphasize the resilience of the United States and its capacity to remain the primary and uncontested power for years to come (Wohlforth, 2014). They argue that fear that the US is in decline is nothing new and that previously on three different occasions (during the 1950s with Sputnik, the 1970s with Vietnam and stagflation and in the 1980s with Japan viewed as a possible challenger) the threats that were identified did not lead to any permanent structural change in the international arena (Wohlforth, 2007). Each occurrence of a redistribution of power does not necessarily offer contender states the opportunity to take over. According to this perspective, the most serious contender is currently China and this country does not have all the features of a great power, with its economic potential being overestimated: having a large economy does not necessarily allow a country to wield power (Wohlforth, 2007). The United States has, according to Brooks and Wohlforth (2023), no true rivals and retains an unparalleled ability to project power through balancing, the number and degree of commitment of its allies, superior technological capacity and military capability.

Other scholars recognize the decline of the US, the rise of not one but several competitor states, seeking to revise the international order. America's doctrine of intransigence towards political opponents has led to

organized opposition against US unilateral global decision-making (Balatsky, 2024). New alliances between them, particularly between China and Russia, bringing together their vast economic and military capacity, are deemed to effectively counterbalance American supremacy. US reluctance to accept multipolarity runs the risk of actualizing the threat of a major hegemonic war (Layne, 2006). A US decision to accommodate China and other powers may result in a more peaceful transition (Ward, 2017). Much depends on China and Russia's intentions and their aspirations on the global stage. Contemporary realist scholars view with suspicion assumptions that China seeks to develop only its economic might and limit itself to a regional influence, with J. Mearsheimer noting that there is no such thing as a "peaceful rise" (2001). Most theorists, regardless of their school of thought, recognize the fact that China and Russia's rise has already led to aspirations to participate in global decision-making. The degree to which these great powers are satisfied (or dissatisfied) with the way they are being treated by the United States and other major actors may determine the course they take during the transition and whether it becomes violent.

The Russian school of international relations does not view the emergence of a multipolar world as a recent phenomenon and argues that its grassroots appeared in as early as the 1990s, a period during which American scholars focused on studying the uncontested nature of US power (Shakleina, 2023). The concept of "pluralistic unipolarity" was developed to explain the US's preeminence but also its dependence on political and military allies (Bogaturov, 2006). The US is described as the center of a mono-polycentric structure that can influence outcomes, but does not control all that happens. The end of the bipolar order led to both poles being disbanded according to Batalov, as one existed and defined itself vis-a-vis the other, leading to a situation of nonpolarity, a sort of vacuum that required all states to redefine their position in the international system (Batalov, 2001). A stable international order can only be the result of a joint effort of the international community and its acceptance will depend on the participation of a large number of states (Batalov, 2005). During the 2000s, the US required states to sacrifice their interests in the name of a common liberal good without making the same sacrifices itself and it failed to enlarge the core of states that supported it despite the rapid emergence of India, China, Brazil and other, whose loyalty it became unable to command (Shakleina, 2023). The theorization of the US as an "empire" in American scholarship that underlined its impunity led to a harsh rejection by Russian scholars and its political leadership (Bogaturov, 2006). In spite of their different worldviews, the US, Russia and China have been the main players on the world arena since the 2010s, going from cooperation to confrontation, and mobilizing the support of their respective allies (Shakleina, 2023). Opposition between the Great Powers broke out over the US's liberal interventionist policies and particularly over Libya, Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan and Kosovo. The US has sought to consolidate its power by using the EU as a platform for global agenda-setting and China as a custodian of the global economy while itself remaining the military enforcer of the world order (Voskressensky, 2019). However, the tables have started to turn and US retrenchment from the 2000s onwards led to aspirations from China and Russia to offer the world a different model of development (Brooks et al., 2012). The progressive US decline and the aspirations of its competitors to project power have led to an increase in "the use of armed force in political signaling", with clashes in Eastern Europe, the South and East China seas, the Middle East being cases in point (Istomin, 2023: 92). The US's policy of engagement with China facilitated according to some scholars the country's rise and failed to avoid the development of a rivalry (Mearsheimer, 2021).

While the EU is a pole of power that shares some of the US's ideological worldview and supports (or at least fails to oppose) for the most part its global agenda, it is Russia and China that have become true contesters of the current world order. Russia's intentions are voiced more clearly than China's, which maintains to this day its desire to cooperate with the US, while nevertheless resenting its "political manipulation"<sup>3</sup>. China's bid to overturn the current situation has been so far regional rather than global in nature, and limited in scope to the selective contestation of some material and normative pillars of the US led-order (Foot, 2020). China is slowly leveraging its economic power, through debt-trap policies and trade wars, but has kept its foreign policy statements conservative (Kim, 2019). Moderation in China's rhetoric and peaceful statements should not be considered as a guarantee that China's empowerment will necessarily be non-violent. Additionally, the country has started to declare its interests in a clearer form

<sup>3</sup> China hails Xi-Biden meeting despite "dictator" remark (2023). <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-67447121> (accessed on November, 20 2023)

than previously, with Xi Jinping openly addressing a contentious issue and noting that “reunification with Taiwan must be fulfilled”<sup>4</sup>. China is effectively engaged in Great Power Competition with the US in East and Southeast Asia, where the former is using anti-access and area-denial strategies to limit US naval access to seas in the region and the US is responding in kind (Caverley, Dombrowski, 2020).

Russia has gone from expressing clear irritation at US meddling in its internal affairs and its encroachment on its zone of influence in Eastern Europe to entering in 2022 an indirect military conflict with the US and Western Europe in Ukraine. The worsening of the relationship unfolded over several decades and led to the use of different strategies to contain the other party. The US specifically targeted Russian interests through subversion by promoting liberal democratization at all costs and fomenting unrest resulting in color revolutions in Eastern Europe (2003–2004 Rose revolution in Georgia, 2005 Tulip revolution in Kyrgyzstan and the 2004 Orange revolution in Ukraine). “The desire to accelerate liberalization in some instances had little correlation with the local environment and was based not so much on an analysis of the specific conditions in each country, as they were on some idealized belief in democratization as a universal tool for addressing the economic and political challenges of modernization” (Baykov, Bolgova, 2023: 591).

Russia has also been accused of using subversion techniques to forward its interests and discredit the US. This is unsurprising to some scholars who note “Subversion–domestic interference to undermine or manipulate a rival–has always been a part of great-power politics” (Kastner, Wohlforth, 2021). Subversion can be viewed as an effective low-cost and low-risk, at least compared to military confrontation, way of weakening and discrediting your opponent (Kastner, Wohlforth, 2021), although some contend that it carries limited benefits and hidden costs, particularly when it is targeted at major powers (Istomin, 2022). While the existing literature presents how great powers emerge, evolve and fail, and considerations on the trajectories of the US are ubiquitous, there is a gap as to how BRICS countries, not individually but as part of a joint strategy, contribute to the downfall of the US-led world order. The role of Brazil and India is particularly understudied.

This section provided an overview of the existing debates in the literature concerning how great powers interact on the international stage. The following section highlights the research design that allowed the authors to carry out an investigation into the strategies developed by rising great powers to challenge the hegemon.

## Methodology

The research is based on a realist worldview, characterized by the belief that the international system is anarchical, and that states are rational actors that strive to survive and improve their security by increasing their power. Sovereignty is a primary concern for all states and a hegemon that threatens state sovereignty needs immense resources to keep rising powers that feel threatened at bay. Morality and values have a limited role to play, however a balance of power on the international stage can help maintain peace. This conceptual background guides our analysis of the emergence of multipolarity.

The authors use a qualitative data collection process, including fifteen expert interviews conducted between January and March 2023. The goal of the study is to determine, based on the consultation of professors in International Relations and diplomats from four countries, how and to what extent rising powers can influence the decline of the US and contribute to the emergence of a multipolar world. More specifically, the research question is: What are the strategies adopted by competing great powers to accelerate the decline of the US and promote multipolarity? The semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide consisting of twelve main questions and twenty-four probes. The questions aimed at determining in a neutral way the respondent’s perspective on the role of the US in the international system, its ability to maintain its global power, the ambitions and cooperation strategies of middle powers as well as the expected structure of the international system in ten to twenty years’ time. The respondents who predicted a decline of US power (which turned out to be all the respondents) were asked about the reasons for the country’s downfall. These causes (US behavior of the world stage, Western values that empower lower-ranking states) and their description of the future world order are presented in the findings section of this paper.

<sup>4</sup> China-Taiwan tensions: Xi Jinping says “reunification” must be fulfilled (2021). <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-58854081> (accessed on November, 20 2023)

First contact with the experts and diplomats was made during embassy dinners and formal receptions in Moscow in the course of the years 2023–2024, such as:

- the celebration of the Chinese New Year (January 2023) at Chinese Embassy in Moscow;
- the reception at the Chinese Embassy dedicated to the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China and the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Russia (September 2024);
- celebration of India's 78<sup>th</sup> Independence Day and Bharat Week celebration at the Embassy of India in Moscow (August 2024);
- Independence Day of Brazil celebrated in the "Zaryadye" Concert Hall (September 2023).

On such occasions, the authors identified specialists with a deep understanding of the global system and capable of conveying the viewpoint of their country on changes taking place in the world order. The experts were contacted after the event and asked whether they would be willing to be interviewed, with the goal of the research project being explained from the start as well as the possibility to retract from the study up until the results are processed. Prior to conducting the interviews, the authors checked that the respondents met at least one of the following criteria:

- at least 5 academic articles published in Q1 and Q2 journals (Scopus ranking) over the past five years (2020 to 2024) on the international power system;
- a permanent position in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, Brazil, India or China at the rank of Second Secretary or higher;
- a permanent position of Head of Department or higher in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, Brazil, India or China.

Respondents were also selected to represent the four countries' nationalities with four respondents being Russian nationals, four Indian nationals, four Chinese nationals and three Brazilian nationals. A detailed anonymized list of the experts interviewed is available in Appendix. This purposive sampling does not claim to be statistically representative of the entire population of these countries but aims to present different perceptions of the changes in the power balance as well as the dominant perspectives of the four focus countries in their respective decision-making, policy and expert (epistemic) quarters.

The study was carried out respecting ethical best practices, with the protection of the anonymity of all respondents. All the interviews were transcribed and coded based on overarching themes, and the factual information provided by respondents was triangulated and fact-checked through the use of secondary sources including reliable news outlets, legal websites and official documentation. One of the limitations of this study is that the respondents are all male, which is partially but not completely representative of the social composition of high-level positions in diplomacy and academia. Additionally, the fact that interviews were conducted in Moscow after 2022 may have had an impact on the selection and stance of the respondents, who are more likely to sympathize with Russia than randomly selected diplomats and experts from those countries. However, this is not a selection bias as readers are duly informed of the way the respondents were chosen. Another limitation of this research is the limited scope (four countries) which excludes South Africa and other more recent additions to the BRICS organization from the study. The goal was however to focus on the larger and more powerful members of the organization, specifically the great powers, and how they build their strategy by attempting to cooperate as a united front.

## Findings

The research design described in the previous section allows us to answer the research question by revealing the three main strategies of rising powers in attempting to take down the hegemon. The interviews provide novel insights on the behavior of Brazil, Russia, India and China in the face of current challenges and new opportunities.

### ***Strategy number 1: Rising great and middle powers capitalize on the fatigue with the Western world order and the mistakes made the US***

The first finding transpiring from the study is that the US is in decline and that this regress results from internal challenges and the contested actions of the West on the world stage that a group

of competitors has decided to capitalize on. There appears to be a consensus among respondents who outline the US track record of intervention in foreign countries since 1945, its disrespect for international law, its promotion of a liberal agenda only when it suits its interests and its failure to protect the international community against cases of genocide and the infringement of human rights, including the use of torture, on its own territory. While most respondents agree with the realist idea that states look out for themselves and their populations first, the hypocrisy of diffusing messages of global cooperation while actively undermining other states' interests gives rise to resentment among those interviewed but also, they claim, among the populations of their countries of origin. The US failure to effectively address contemporary global problems such as climate change was underlined by respondents from Brazil and India. Respondents from China and Russia criticize the "collective West" rather than just the US, seeing Western European countries and particularly the UK as enablers of US dominance. They also perceive the West as jointly responsible for the historical colonial crimes committed by European countries. The behavior of contesting great powers ranges from a relatively passive strategy of waiting until the US has sufficiently declined before engaging in a direct confrontation (India and Brazil) to calling out US actions on the world stage and openly clashing with the frail hegemon (China and Russia). The belief that US power has been damaged by the country's actions and will lead to its demise is however shared by all respondents to some degree.

*"It's not powerful competitors but US policy that has undermined the Western world order. Smaller Western partners have a bloody history (think of the UK's opium wars) but it is the US which has a recent track-record of extreme violence."*

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, interview 2

*"No one needs to put in any effort to discredit the idea that the US is a source of international peace. It has targeted 29 countries since 1945 and has dropped with its Western allies an average of 46 bombs a day for the last twenty years. It's not like the world community hasn't noticed."*

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, interview 6

*"The US is a conflict-ridden country, from political instability reflected by riots over presidential elections to gun violence, the use of torture and racial riots. Intervening abroad, it has spread itself too thin."*

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of India, interview 8

*"The Iraq war represented a turning point beyond which the US could no longer plead it was respecting international law in any tangible way. Now we feel no moral obligation to align with the US. We are free to take whatever stance we choose on recent conflicts, particularly the Ukrainian conflict."*

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of India, interview 7

*"It was great for the US when promoting liberal values coincided with its national interests. It does not any longer and its leadership treads a fine line. Now the US has to turn a blind eye to all the things Modi does that it disagrees with, particularly its cooperation with Russia. The US cannot afford the loss of a strategic partner which it uses to contain China."*

Russian University, interview 14

*"US policy in Gaza has made people angry across the world. The failure to apply the responsibility to protect in a genocidal situation shows once again the US's double standards."*

Brazilian university, interview 3

*"The US lags behind in important projects for humanity, such as combatting climate change. It should be leading the way but instead each administration one after the other champions new oil and gas production, particularly in some of the most environmentally damaging forms such as fracking."*

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil, interview 5

*“Our proverb ‘Use if it suits you, disregard in other cases’ applies perfectly to the US use of international institutions. When the UN helps to legitimize US aggression, they use it, when they fail to gather support, they do without it.”*

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, interview 12

### **Strategy number 2: Rising great and middle powers use governance principles developed by the West to demand equality on the international stage**

The second major finding is that, although rising great powers no longer believe in the US’s stance on liberal values, they are intent on using Western-lobbied principles of equality, the rule of law and representativeness to promote their own rights in the face of the hegemon. Like the middle class which emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and converted economic success into political power, rising powers in the international system are seizing new opportunities to fight the established international political order. Some respondents underline the turning point that the Ukraine crisis represents in International Relations, with the US realizing it commands the loyalty of fewer states than it expected. The impact of economic sanctions was also overestimated and the US inability to undermine Russian development has weakened the perception of US power. Rising powers, represented by BRIC nations, are the new mouthpiece and stronghold for global values and rights. The West is confronted with a contradiction by which it cannot deny other states the privileges it allows itself and its partners because of the ideological stance it has taken.

*“BRICS, a new group of powerful states has emerged claiming for themselves the rights that the West has proclaimed to be universal. We want an equal right to govern the international system, to establish the rules and enforce them, to decide which countries present a threat and which do not.”*

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil, interview 5

*“The Ukraine conflict and the failure of the US to command loyalty from the great powers including China and India reflects a significant change in the current world order. Countries chose their national interests above bandwagoning.”*

Russian university, interview 14

*“Russia is constantly trusting those around her and being betrayed. Our leadership always believes in the good faith of other governments, in their security guarantees, in their empty promises and this often leads to disappointment. [...] The West has tricked too many countries though, and the coalition to end US domination is growing.”*

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, interview 6

*“Globalization should be global, it should not turn into Americanization. Yes, I’m happy to watch programs, listen to music and use technology from around the world. No, I don’t want everything all around me to show only US culture. Americanization is the instrument of US power.”*

Russian university, interview 15

*“The US has had to soften its ‘either you’re with me or you’re against me’ discourse. First, the US threatened India for cooperating with Russia. Now the US is using balancing techniques, particularly by intensifying its collaboration with Pakistan.”*

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of India, interview 10

*“Russia is a testing ground of what happens when a powerful country angers the West. Although the US has tried to make an example of it, it has failed and shown the limits of its power to contain its rivals.”*

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil, interview 4

*“We have global multilateral institutions. The system is there for multilateral governance. We just need to use it. We need to express the aspirations of the international community.”*

Indian university, interview 9

*“It is time to express our beliefs that all countries should be entitled to economic growth, should not fear random punishment or infringements of their sovereignty. We are economically empowered to fulfil this role of speaker of global interests.”*

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of India, interview 10

### **Strategy number 3: Cooperation with lesser powers provides rising powers the legitimacy and power to challenge the US**

The third finding reveals the ambitions of BRICS countries to end the unipolar world and promote multilateral governance by actively enrolling the support of less powerful states in the global arena. The strategy is characterized by displays of solidarity of small states with the ambitions of BRICS countries to reform the international system. BRICS countries also put together initiatives to support a widening of the number of participants in international decision-making. Respondents express wide support for BRICS intentions to challenge the US and embrace a new leadership role in the world. Many emphasize the role of the Ukraine conflict in forcing countries to define their loyalties and resist US pressure. Not only is the US economically and socially in decline, its strong stance against Russia has fostered globally a new awareness that the largest countries and economies on the planet wish to see the end of Western dominance. Respondents also noted that BRICS countries have different geopolitical interests and countries within the organization can balance each other and avoid the emergence in the future of a new absolute hegemon. BRICS countries recognize that the new multipolar geopolitical system would still rest upon traditional components of power but believe that an understanding of different interests and mutual respect that allow for a peaceful multipolar world order.

*“We will finish US dominance. Not on our own but with the other countries – India, the Emirates, Iran- the mood is brave. We talk for the underdog.”*

Russian university, interview 15

*“When we complain to the Chinese, ‘why don’t you support us publicly?’ [about the Ukraine conflict], they answer: ‘would you prefer actions or words’. And it’s true, the Chinese don’t need to make big speeches, they help through actions, they help oppose the NATO actions.”*

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, interview 6

*“States pursuing their national interests rather than non-descript universal ideals. This is the basis for productive intergovernmental cooperation. Interests may not always coincide but at least the game is predictable and shared goals can be identified.”*

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil, interview 4

*“India has turned from an important tool in the arsenal of the USA allowing it to counter Russia and China into a challenger in its own right.”*

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of India, interview 10

*“The friendship, if you can call it a friendship, between India, Russia, China and Brazil is circumstantial. We don’t all have the same geopolitical goals, culture or values. But we all want to be equal in the international system. And you know who made us want that? Three guesses! The West.”*

Indian university, interview 9

*“We can agree to agree on some issues and to disagree on others. We don’t act like children, we don’t get offended. We bargain. We make sure everyone comes away happy from the negotiating table. We don’t demonize countries who do things differently like the US does.”*

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, interview 11

*“Interests are more important than values. They make a better basis for cooperation. BRICS countries understand each other’s vital interests and that’s how they manage to cooperate. They avoid topics that hurt.”*

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, interview 1

*“BRICS promotes values that smaller states can relate to. It’s a union ‘against’ rather than a union ‘for’. Against tyranny, against unilateralism, against external intervention in state sovereignty. But as the BRICS countries have different interests, they won’t form a coherent whole.”*  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil, interview 5

*“BRICS is strong because countries believe that each of them is making a bet on multipolarity not bipolarity or unipolarity. They trust each other not to become the next hegemon. They also balance each other’s ambitions. In any country steps out of line, the other states will react to keep multipolarity.”*  
Brazilian university, interview 3

*“Trust but verify. A dear Russian proverb. BRICS are happy to trust and check each other. And so the rest of the world stay happy too.”*  
Russian university, interview 15

This section highlights the strategies adopted by rising powers in the face of changes in the power balance on the international stage, which range from taking advantage of US weaknesses and allowing it time to “shoot itself in the foot”, to consciously using Western values to promote a more equal participation in international affairs and gathering sympathy from smaller states.

## Discussion

The findings, which are based on the perceptions of our group of respondents, suggest that we are undergoing a power transition to a multipolar world in which the US will remain for a time one of several great powers, a phenomenon long-predicted in the Russian academic literature but only recently supported by irrefutable evidence. US theorization of an enduring unipolar world no longer has the ear of the international community and an argument that was easy enough to support when it was first formulated (Wohlforth, 1999) is becoming increasingly difficult to defend (Brooks, Wohlforth, 2023).

The lessons from power transition theory and the study of historical cases shed a light on US behavior: as the power gap between the hegemon and its competitors was narrowing down over several decades, the US sought to undermine its main rivals, China and Russia. While confrontation with the former has yet been limited to war-mongering and economic warfare, the US and Russia are involved in more severe hostilities that aim to isolate and incapacitate Russia as an international actor. Times of power transition are considered as some of the most unstable and the myth that China or Russia could have a “peaceful rise” have long been dispelled. Our findings add to the literature the idea that it is not so much an equal distribution of power between major players that leads to periods of increased warfare (as noted by Organski, Kugler, 1980), but the natural decline of the hegemon and, to a lesser extent, global dissatisfaction with the world order. Despite significant military and economic capacity, Russia and China caused almost no significant disruptions and engaged only in covert contestation, until the actions of the US became unacceptable to the majority of the global community. The ideological hypocrisy of the US’s liberal stance engendered additional discontent as misunderstandings and confusion over its intentions grew. The US did not start belligerent activities to contain the rise of rivals, its entire period of hegemony is marked by meddling in global affairs and contesting other countries’ spheres of influence. Hence, the great powers rivals to the US enjoy a large support base among middle powers that wish to see a greater balance of interests in the world.

This paper demonstrates that these principles voiced by the US and the West (but that they failed to apply), are now in high demand in the international community. States are looking for new leaders, as guides in a new multipolar world, to implement these values. The push for the transition away from US leadership comes from powerful rivals but also from middle powers, which have acquired new means to influence world politics, through new information technologies and economic innovation. This group of “background” states has come to the fore since the start of the Ukraine conflict, expressing in deeds and words its support to a new multilateral world order, and de facto pushing great powers to accelerate the power transition away from a unipolar world.

The emergence of a new multipolar world order however implies a number of risks for rising and middle powers. First of all, power asymmetries between middle powers with nuclear weapons and those without them could increase with the end of the unipolar world, as the absence of a leader to keep the former in check could lead to greater vulnerability of the latter. As the former hegemon walks back on its security guarantees globally, non-nuclear states may find their sovereignty threatened by middle powers with nuclear arsenals. This could lead to further proliferation of nuclear weapons as middle powers all seek to ensure their independence through any means available.

Second, even though rising power have not declared their intention to become a unilateral world power, as indicated by the interviews conducted, it remains a distinct possibility that having acquired the power to dominate, a new Great Power will seek to consolidate its power by weakening potential competitors.

This study also yields a number of policy recommendations for great powers seeking to accelerate the downfall of a unipolar world.

First, a heightened integration of trade with BRICS countries and a reduction of trade with the West would allow Russia, China, India and Brazil to cope better with potential upcoming US sanctions. This would imply developing joint projects and pooling resources in strategic areas such as AI and biotechnology, and further controlling the sales of rare minerals.

Second, the great powers should define a clearer model for their mutual military protection for when the US enters its last phase of decline and possibly engages in risky behavior lashing out at competitors. Creating alternative organizations to NATO but also to the World Bank, World Trade Organization and other Western-led organizations could help challenge the existing world order.

Third, a more coordinated diplomatic approach would allow BRICS countries and their allies to adopt similar positions on key international issues and present a united front rather than cave in to temptations of small national gains. Global public outreach initiatives should be further developed to promote BRICS vision of a multipolar world and denounce the hypocrisy of US policy.

## Conclusion

A rising group of great powers has emerged in the international system and institutionally organized themselves to effectively challenge the hegemonic dominance of the United States. The findings highlight several key factors driving the shift toward a multipolar world order. First, the principles of equality, non-discrimination, and self-determination — values enshrined in institutions largely created by Western powers — have inspired challenger powers to criticize US actions on the global stage and demand that the rule of law be applied impartially, beyond the interests of the hegemon. Second, US behavior has tarnished its international reputation, prompting domestic debates about whether the country should pursue a policy of retrenchment and leading to challenges abroad regarding its role as a global peace broker. The future world order appears as multipolar as BRICS countries can balance each other's power and ensure no new hegemon emerges in the near future.

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**Appendix**

| <b>Interview number</b> | <b>Interview date</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Place of work</b>                  | <b>Nationality</b> | <b>Interview language</b> |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|---------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|
| 1                       | 02.02.2023            | M             | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China  | China              | English                   |
| 2                       | 06.02.2023            | M             | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China  | China              | English                   |
| 3                       | 05.10.2023            | M             | Brazilian University                  | Brazil             | English                   |
| 4                       | 05.10.2023            | M             | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil | Brazil             | Spanish                   |
| 5                       | 09.10.2023            | M             | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil | Brazil             | English                   |
| 6                       | 25.08.2024            | M             | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia | Russia             | Russian                   |
| 7                       | 28.08.2024            | M             | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of India  | India              | English                   |
| 8                       | 28.08.2024            | M             | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of India  | India              | English                   |
| 9                       | 08.09.2024            | M             | Indian University                     | India              | English                   |
| 10                      | 10.09.2024            | M             | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of India  | India              | English                   |
| 11                      | 15.09.2024            | M             | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia | Russia             | English                   |
| 12                      | 10.10.2024            | M             | Chinese University                    | China              | English                   |
| 13                      | 12.10.2024            | M             | Chinese University                    | China              | English                   |
| 14                      | 23.10.2024            | M             | Russian University                    | Russia             | Russian                   |
| 15                      | 23.20.2024            | M             | Russian University                    | Russia             | Russian                   |

Source: authors.