

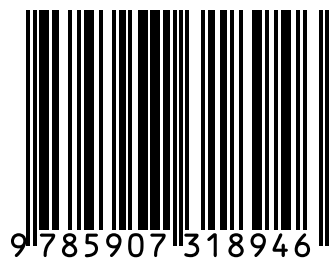


Maturity Certificate, or The Order That Never Was Fantasy of a Hierarchy-Free Future

Oleg Barabanov, Timofei Bordachev,
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“Well, in our country,” said Alice, still panting a little, “you’d generally get to somewhere else – if you ran very fast for a long time, as we’ve been doing.” “A slow sort of country!” said the Queen, “Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!”

Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking-Glass

The “shape of the future” is perhaps the most sought-after concept in the world today. Everyone wants to see it, and international affairs experts are no exception. The more tangled the situation on the world stage, the more radical the changes; and the greater the impact of the factors that were once considered secondary (from technology to societal changes), the stronger the push to understand what lies beyond the bend.

The history and theory of international relations offer a versatile set of tools for analysis and forecasting, making it eminently possible for anyone seeking to dissect the present and model the future, especially since many ongoing processes appear to be reminiscent of past patterns. Searching for analogies in the past and applying past centuries’ templates to current events have become common practice. Often, the result looks convincing. But this is an illusion.

History at these turning points does not fit its own templates. Pivotal eras – and we are living in one – are unlike the steady flow of time. Elements that were there before have now come together to form a completely different picture. A conceptual framework that is unlike the familiar one is needed in order for us to be able to make sense of it. Otherwise, the risk is high that the interpretations will take us even farther from understanding the developments instead of helping us understand them.

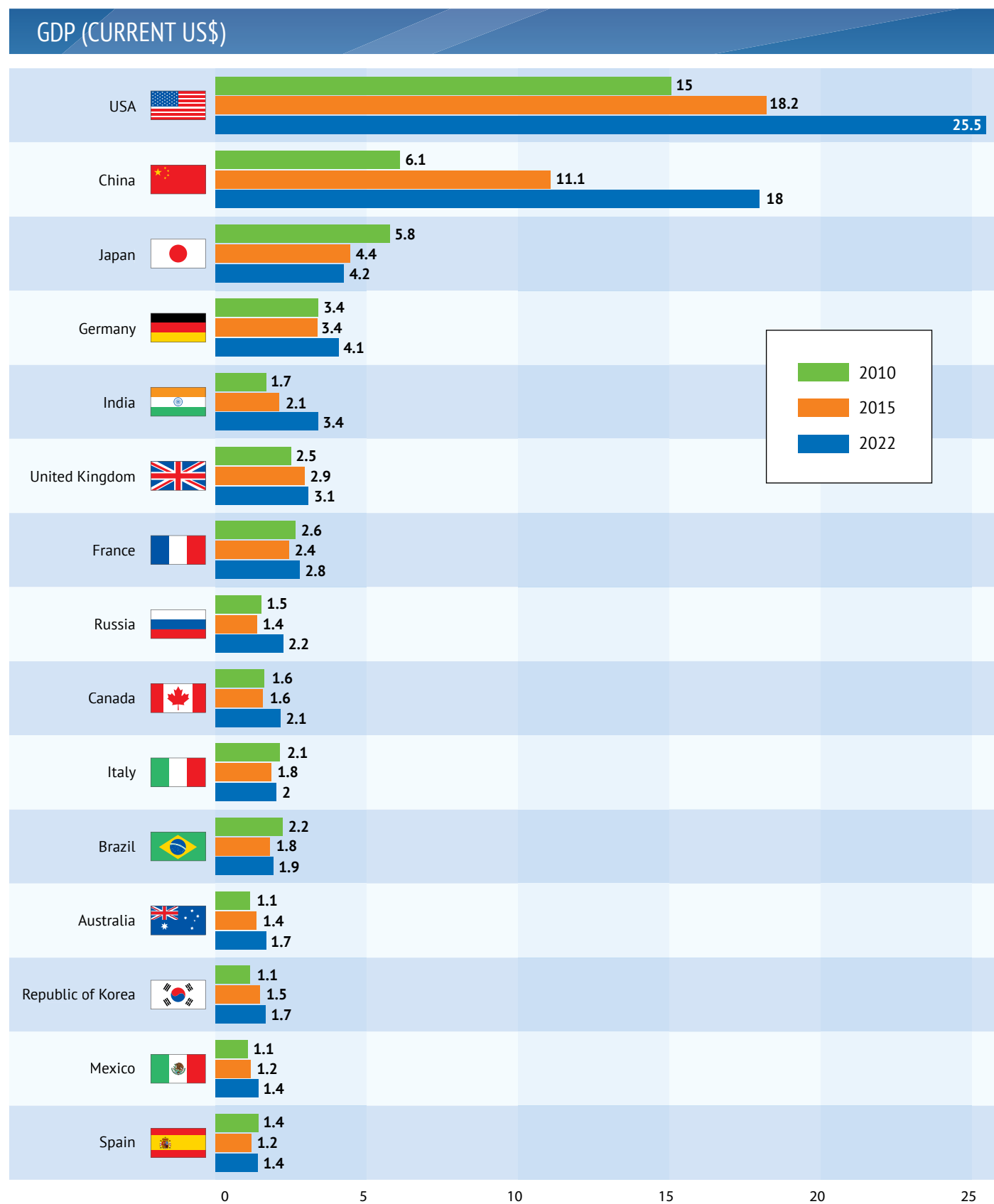
In periods when changes are coming from every which way, it is difficult to see the outcome. Relying on the most commonly used concepts (“hierarchy,” “international order,” “multipolarity,” “balance of power,” and others), the authors of the report attempt to go beyond their conventional understanding. The image of the future now is nothing more than a fantasy, and we currently do not see any other way but to imagine it. Imagination led us to conclude that the emerging configuration of the world will be fundamentally different from what we have become accustomed to over the past centuries.

Hierarchy as the basis of order

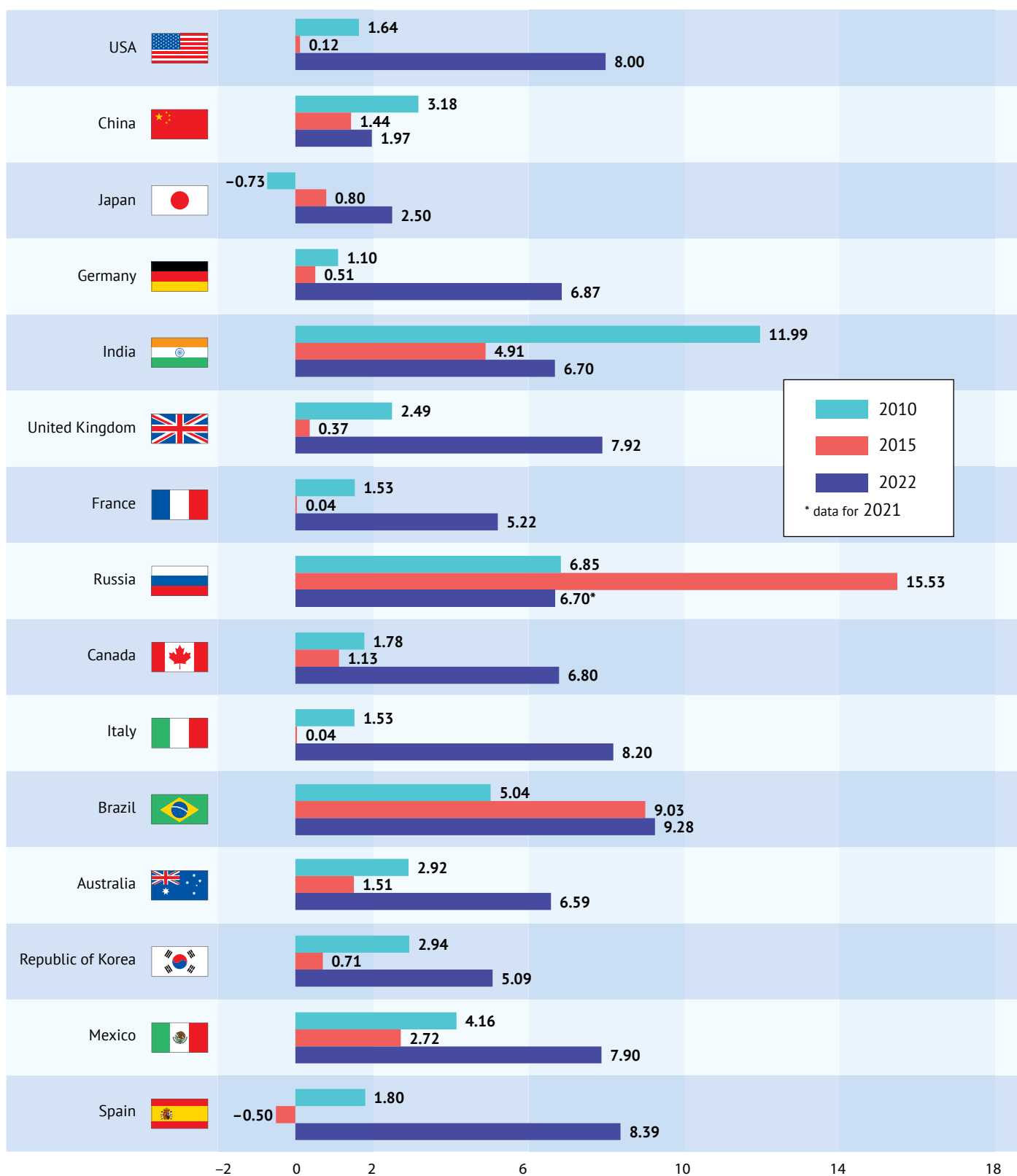
Most descriptions of the international order – whether existing or imminent – invariably include the notion of “many,” such as multilateralism, multipolarity, polycentrism, and so on. This is natural. The number of meaningful international relations actors is unprecedentedly large, more than in a very long time, if ever. The world (especially its European part seeking expansion and dominance) has long been accustomed to the rigid hierarchical constructs that defined the international system. Over the past 200 years, the hierarchy has been consistently becoming less complicated. From the Concert of Europe in the 19th century to the opposing “axes” of the first half of the 20th century, and from rigid bipolarity of the Cold War to the “unipolar moment” which was declared after it ended. The latter was the culmination. In a sense, the “end of history” announced in 1989 was indeed a final milestone. Not the end of history itself, but the end of a specific and quite lengthy phase which was an era of hierarchies.

The outgoing international order (Yalta-Potsdam, which survived in a modified form even in the post-Cold War period) was perhaps the last one based on a balance of power within a limited group of states. In other words, it was hierarchical by nature. If this assumption is correct, then an era that has persisted in international relations for 500 years (since the European expansion into Asia, Africa, and the Americas) is coming to an end. The “end of history” in a sense also meant the end of hierarchy. The “unipolar moment” flatly rejected the need for order in the previous sense, as it envisaged that, as states integrated into the global liberal-democratic paradigm, the nature of their behaviour would change as well.

To be sure, hierarchy has ended. However, it did not end with its complete triumph and the dissolution of the international order therein, but with the exhaustion of the possibilities that it offered. The unification efforts have had the reverse effect, as different cultures and peoples seek to emphasise their identity and distinctiveness even more. The current stage is transitional. Ideological attempts are being made to maintain the dominance of a single set of norms and rules in the spirit of the post-Cold War period. But it is being imposed coercively, as in much



INFLATION, CONSUMER PRICES (ANNUAL %)



Source: World Bank

earlier periods. All of that is unfolding against the backdrop of the limits achieved by globalisation in ensuring an acceptable division of benefits for the leading participants.

As Indian politician Jaswant Singh wrote, “the end of the Cold War did not lead to the end of history. The thaw of the late 1980s only heated up Europe’s ancient feuds. We did not enter a unipolar world. It would be a grave error to believe that simply repeating the mantras of globalisation and markets in the 21st century will subordinate national security to global trade. The 21st century will not be the century of trade. The world still has to deal with the unfinished issues of the past.”¹

The push to preserve elements of the former international order within what is emerging today is an important cause of the current confrontations. However, the gradual convergence of forward-looking states is playing an even more important role. When this process begins to encompass major nuclear powers, the risks for humanity increase. Yet, it is inevitable and will involve learning the safety rules on the go.

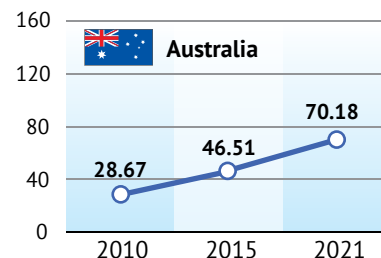
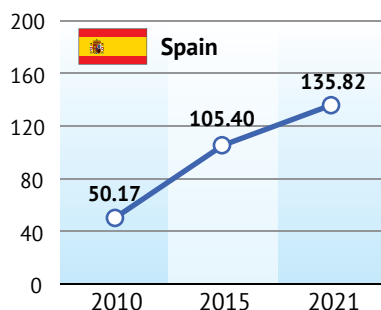
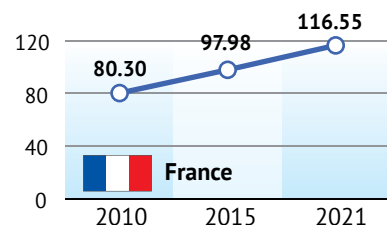
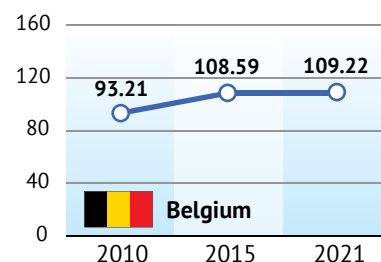
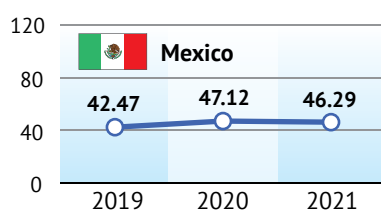
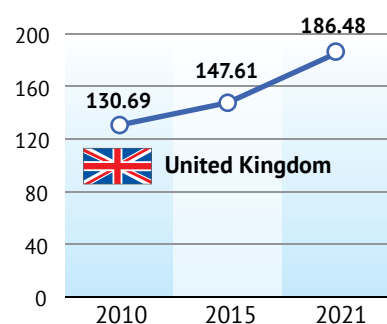
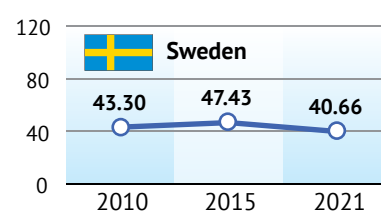
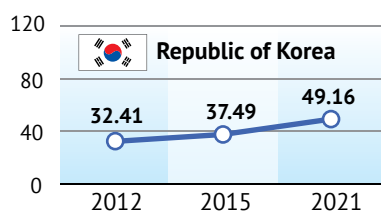
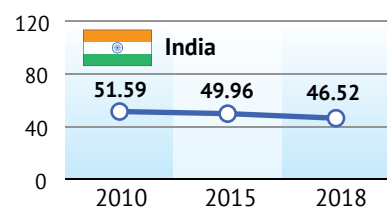
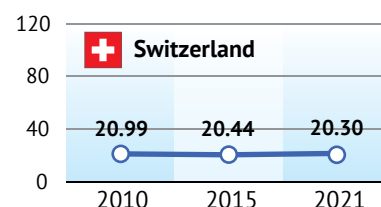
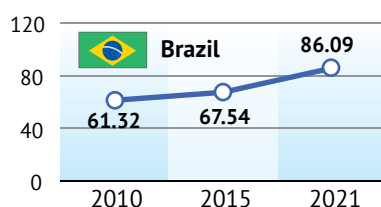
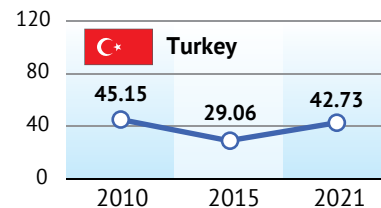
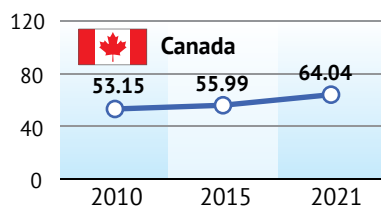
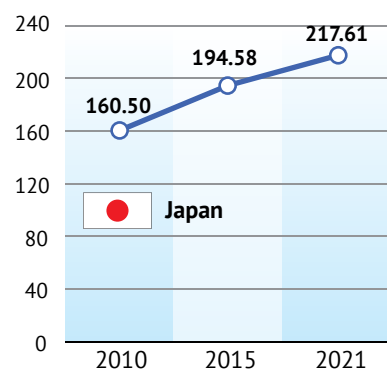
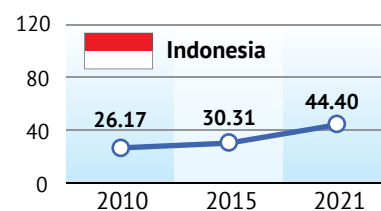
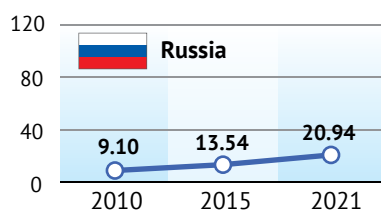
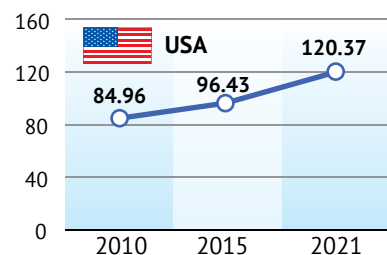
If this “convergence” process is successful, the new international arrangement may not result from a “deal” or a “peace congress” of victors but may emerge as a result of the natural process of interaction between states and the discovery of acceptable options for all. Surprisingly, in the context of global politics, this may happen without winners or losers. This would mark the beginning of a new non-hierarchical era and the emergence of constraints on the worst aspects of previous systems, such as the pursuit of hegemony which tops that list.

Structure as a source of hierarchy

Structure is a key variable of international relations. In its current shape, it was based on agreements among the victorious countries in World War II. They laid the foundation for the creation of the United Nations and other institutions that currently coordinate

¹ Singh J. *Against Nuclear Apartheid // Foreign Affairs*. №5. 1.09.1998. URL: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/1998-09-01/against-nuclear-apartheid>

CENTRAL GOVERNMENT DEBT, TOTAL (% OF GDP)



Source: World Bank

and partly regulate the actions of states on a global level. This set of institutions (organisations and norms) was designed to provide a universal political framework.

In addition to the institutional framework, there is another aspect in the structure of international relations, which is defined by the balance of power. It influences the dynamics of interactions between countries and is not as much impacted by the regulatory element, which makes it more flexible and mobile. A variety of “polarity” constructs reflect the dynamics (real or desired) of the balance of power. Nevertheless, here too, there has been a tendency to tighten the pseudo-regulatory constraints on the behaviour of states. The now popular in the West concept of a “rules-based order” is an example of the efforts to make the boundaries more rigid and, consequently, reinforce the hierarchy.

In such a situation, countries’ freedom to defend and advance their national interests becomes increasingly tentative. And it’s not just about inadequate resources or authority preventing them from taking such action. The structural constraints also play a restraining role. It is not accidental that one of the most common iterations of political realism today is called “structural realism.” Its tenets emphasise that the pursuit of national interests must be carried out within the framework of the established structure of international relations and should not go beyond its limits.

Neo-realists operated on the premise that the behaviour of a state is determined less by its interests than by the structure of the international order which sets the outlines of the strategies. In turn, the structure is determined by the distribution of power potentials among major powers. The international system can be unipolar (with a significant concentration of power in the hands of one state and relatively limited capabilities of others), bipolar (with two competing states and the rest of the world grouping around these two centres of power), or multipolar (with several major powers or their alliances).

Clearly, structural frameworks and constraints did not prevent major powers from occasionally violating them and resorting to military force to achieve their goals. The US military campaigns are well

known. However, the Americans usually justified their actions not by advancing their own interests but by the need to protect the established structure of international relations from the encroachments of its opponents. In line with this logic, US military actions were presented not as a breakdown of the international structure, but, on the contrary, as measures to preserve it. Washington's allies routinely supported such interpretations (with rare exceptions, such as the invasion of Iraq in 2003). In practice, Franklin D. Roosevelt's classic idea about "policemen of world peace" was realised. However, there turned out to be not four of them, as in the original version, but only one, and it issued himself a mandate to maintain "order."

The concept of "revisionist powers" has been put forth as a conceptual and theoretical framework. These states were understood to include those that were potentially or actually ready to challenge the established structure of international relations and its constraints. Russia and China were among the prominent examples of such states. However, even Western analysts occasionally argued that the United States itself was the primary revisionist power.

At least since Vladimir Putin's Munich speech (and perhaps even since the first wave of NATO expansion in 1997-1999), Russia has expressed its disagreement with the above approach. The evolution of Moscow's position allows us to trace three models of initially rhetorical and then real opposition. These models are not unique to Russia, although Russia has consistently adhered to them.

The **first** model argued that the United States' purported pursuit of a unipolar world and dominance posed the main threat to stability of the international system and sustainability of its structure. The upshot is that everyone should act strictly in accordance with the UN Charter and under the auspices of the UN Security Council, and European security issues should be addressed through the OSCE. Echoes of this model can still be heard in Russia's narrative, albeit more out of inertia.

The **second** logical line emerged a little later. Since America is using the military factor in international politics, thus destabilising its structure, other countries of the emerging multipolar world should

be allowed to do the same as well. American intervention in other countries' domestic affairs thus became a precedent. A shift in the balance of power was no longer a unique "moral duty" of the only available "global policeman" to protect the norm and value-based rules of the global system but rather an act of defending one's national interests. This precedent-based justification was used in official Russian rhetoric, such as in the recognition of self-determining territories and comparing Kosovo with Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008. In 2014, a comparison was drawn between Kosovo and Crimea. In the West, this was met with little understanding. According to the prevailing view there, the exclusive right to interpret and violate rules belongs to the hegemon and no one else.

After that, a **third** line of opposition began to be clearly seen in Russia's stance: the denial of norm- and value-based imperatives postulated by Western countries as the main constraints in the structure of international (and domestic) politics. Hence the narrative about opposing sovereignty and universalism. Appeals to history have become increasingly frequent to assert the uniqueness of each nation and state, and therefore, the impossibility of universal rules and values. The phenomenon of "historical wars" and politicised interpretations of past events has spread widely in the 21st century, reflecting the struggle over the principles of today's international relations.

February 24, 2022 marked a turning point where the structure of international relations changed completely. Reinstating it in its previous form is impossible under any outcome of the ongoing conflict. The new situation on the world stage (which may not warrant being described as an "order" for a long time, or even have a clearly defined structure) will evolve under entirely different conditions. This calls for looking at familiar phenomena from a different perspective.

To better understand the genesis of global developments in recent decades and the potential prospects, let's turn to the most common concept – the "pole," or "polarity." Multipolarity is generally considered an established reality. However, the concept needs refinement because its very origins are tied to a hierarchical period in the history of international relations.

Poles as a product of hierarchy

The concept of geopolitical “poles” and “polarity” in international relations was widespread in the academic discourse of the late 1970s in connection with the work of Kenneth Waltz, a prominent American proponent of neorealism. In the Soviet Union and later in Russia, this subject was developed as part of structural and systemic theory.

Classical theorists of international relations have always believed that multipolarity was an enduring reality. Back in the 1940s, Hans Morgenthau believed that a multipolar system enjoyed the greatest stability. Raymond Aron referred to multipolarity expressed in the balance of power among leading states as the natural state of the international environment. Hedley Bull, a representative of the English school, argued in the 1970s that the world order was built on the basis of global governance by a select club of great powers. Morton Kaplan proposed six rules for the stable functioning of a multipolar system which he believed was the most resilient system.

Influenced by the circumstances imposed by the Cold War, the proponents of structural theory conceptualised bipolarity as the most stable arrangement. John Mearsheimer believed multipolarity to be unstable, although he acknowledged it as an integral part of the European architecture of relations between the countries since at least the 17th century. Kenneth Waltz believed that a multipolar system provoked the highest number of conflicts. However, multipolarity – regardless of what one may think about it – was originally regarded by classical theorists as a historical norm.

For the purposes of our discussion, it is crucial to note that all patterns based on “polarity” inherently imply a hierarchical and unequal system of relations. The number of “poles,” that is, the players influencing the overall state of the global environment, is always limited. The rest invariably face discrimination. To fast forward, we would like to note that, in our view, the future international environment may be described in terms of “polarity” with caveats. We believe no one is currently willing to accept such discrimination.

Since the mid-1990s, the concept of multipolarity has become central to Russia's foreign policy doctrine. It was not merely seen as a possible pattern of international order, but was set in opposition to unipolarity as represented by the United States and its allies' global dominance. It was believed that transitioning from Washington-enforced unipolarity to a fairer and more pluralistic arrangement was the way forward for the international system. This arrangement was supposed to be based on the fundamental role of the UN (i.e., on institutions), on the one hand, and on the authority and independence of leading world powers, including Russia, on the other hand.

In 1996, Russian political scientist Alexei Bogaturov presented his vision of the world order, calling it “pluralistic unipolarity,”² i.e., a combination of the leadership ambitions of the United States and the push by less powerful participants in the group to moderate, modify, and align these ambitions with their own aspirations. From the second half of the 1990s, Russia definitively ceased to share the Western thesis that partnership was possible only based on shared values. The country began to strongly emphasise the thesis that had become established in the expert community, which suggested that the coexistence of diverse development models was a possible scenario for a multipolar world order. For instance, in 1996, Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov wrote³ about the conditions for the “final establishment” of this configuration: preventing dividing lines in global politics (meaning the creation of new blocs), abandoning the leaders/followers model, democratising the global economy, and settling international local conflicts.

This new perspective was enshrined in the Russian-Chinese Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order in 1997.⁴ Russia and China stated that the future of global development is directly linked to “multipolarity” which is a “peaceful, stable, fair, and rational new international political and economic order” based on the dominant role of the United Nations Security Council. Such an order represents a system of “long-term country-to-country relations of a new type that are not directed

² Bogaturov A. *Pluralistic Unipolarity and Russia's Interests* (in Russian) // *Svobodnaya Mysl*. 1996. No2.

³ Primakov Ye. *International Relations on the Eve of the 21st Century: Problems, Prospects* (in Russian) // *Mezhdunarodnaya Zhizn*. 1996. No10. P. 3–13.

⁴ *Russian-Chinese Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order* (in Russian) URL: <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/1902155?ysclid=lmb45yn18i615861121>

against third countries” and aim to “strengthen peace worldwide and the common progress of humanity.” The fundamental norms of the new order include “mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, peaceful coexistence, and other universally recognised principles of international law.”

The Russia-China joint declaration proclaimed the principle of diversity in “political, economic, and cultural development of all countries.” Each state is entitled, based on its specific circumstances, to independently choose its development path without interference from other states. In many ways, this declaration of diversity and the right to identity accurately reproduced the idea of “equidistance” that all major Russian political analysts, including Primakov, wrote about, advocating for consensus within the international community regarding the balance of interests of major powers and the role of the UN as an arbiter of international politics.

Importantly, Russia’s understanding of multipolarity conceptually differed from that of the United States by emphasising the interaction of all involved players rather than hierarchy under the guidance of a “club of the elect.” Perhaps that’s why US para-academic circles saw this as “imperial ambitions” and attempts to undermine American influence. In his famous 1998 article “The Benevolent Empire,”⁵ Robert Kagan wrote about Russia’s (and other countries’) aspirations of multipolarity as a destructive force for the United States: “They want the pretense of equal partnership in a multipolar world without the price or responsibility that equal partnership requires. They want equal say on the major decisions in global crises (as with Iraq and Kosovo) without having to possess or wield anything like equal power. They want to increase their own prestige at the expense of American power but without the strain of having to fill the gap left by a diminution of the American role.”

In its 2000 Foreign Policy Concept,⁶ Russia expressed regret that “certain plans” to establish “new equal and mutually beneficial partnerships with the surrounding world” failed to materialise. The US invasion of Iraq and its consequences prompted Russia and China to issue an updated

⁵ See Kagan R. *The Benevolent Empire // Foreign Policy*. 1998. URL: <https://blogs.baruch.cuny.edu/eng2150hfall15/files/2020/01/Kagan-Benevolent-Empire.pdf>

⁶ *Foreign Policy Strategy of the Russian Federation* (in Russian). URL: <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/901764263?ysclid=lmb52l76lo77624143>

Joint Declaration on the International Order⁷ in 2005. It was noted that the formation of multipolarity “is expected to be complex and lengthy.” The document referenced the ideas put forth by Primakov, stating that the “push for monopoly and domination in international affairs and attempts to divide countries into leaders and followers” were rejected as violating the natural course of events in international politics and the emergence of multipolarity.

An attempt was made in Presidential Executive Order 605 On Measures to Implement the Russian Federation Foreign Policy of May 7, 2012⁸ to reiterate Russia’s policy of equidistance in global affairs. In particular, the formula for interaction with the United States was no different from that with China and was about elevating cooperation with both to a strategic level. With regard to the United States, it was emphasised that there was a need to “pursue a policy of maintaining stable and predictable interaction based on the principles of equality, non-interference in internal affairs, and respect for mutual interests.” The same document contains another term – polycentric system – to describe multipolarity.

The 2015 National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation⁹ reaffirmed that the process of forming a “new polycentric model of the world order is accompanied by the growth of global and regional instability,” prompting great powers to “assume responsibility for affairs in their regions.” Moscow viewed this state of affairs as natural, and conversely, Russia’s protection of its interests in Georgia and Ukraine was seen as something that is unnaturally “engendering resistance from the United States and its allies who seek to maintain their dominance in global affairs.”

The 2016 Foreign Policy Concept¹⁰ noted the dispersion of global power and development and its shifting towards the Asia-Pacific region; it said that the space for historical Western dominance in the global economy and politics was shrinking.

⁷ See *Russia-China Joint Declaration on the International Order in the 21st Century* (in Russian). URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/3660>

⁸ Presidential Executive Order 605 of May 7, 2012 *On Measures to Implement the Russian Federation Foreign Policy* (in Russian). URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/35269>

⁹ Presidential Executive Order 683 of Dec 31, 2015 *On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation* (in Russian). URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/40391>

¹⁰ Presidential Executive Order 640 of Nov. 30, 2016 *On Approving the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation* (in Russian). URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/41451>

The 2021 National Security Strategy¹¹ states that the attempts by the United States and the West to isolate Russia from building a multipolar world hamper global stability and “the enhancement of multilateral cooperation in areas that are vital for the international community such as ensuring equal and indivisible security for all countries, including in Europe, and conflict resolution.”

Russia’s vision of a future multipolar world order was based on Sergey Lavrov’s “strategic patience” postulate. Like it or not, multipolarity would eventually prevail because, as classical theorists wrote back in the 1940s, the world system tends towards a balance of power. For this reason, Moscow consistently advocated for its strategic goal of creating a common economic and human space from the Atlantic to the Pacific, which would facilitate the convergence of efforts among the four “Atlases” of the world which are the United States, the EU, Russia, and China.

Finally, in the updated 2023 Foreign Policy Concept,¹² multipolarity, while still “continuing to take shape,” has definitively become irreversible, and countries hindering the “enhancement of multilateral cooperation” use “neo-colonial” practices, which Russia actively opposes. Additionally, the concept places significant emphasis on a civilisational approach, which aligns with the idea of multipolarity, but introduces substantial nuances.

Asynchronous multipolarity

The idea of a multipolar world has garnered support from several major countries, particularly India and China, and a large part of the non-Western world is supportive of it. “After the Cold War ended, the structure of international relations began to take shape under the influence of the strategic choices made by major powers. It is now clear that no single state

¹¹ Presidential Executive Order 400 of July 2, 2021 *National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation* (in Russian). URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/47046>

¹² Presidential Executive Order 229 of March 31, 2023 *On Approving the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation* (in Russian). URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/49090>

can dominate the international system, and the world is moving towards multipolarity,” Du Gong wrote back in 1993.¹³ Even Western experts did not rule out the possibility of such an arrangement, considering it one of the scenarios. Multipolarity started to acquire the features of an ideal vision for the future international order.

However, multipolarity as such does not represent a method for regulating international relations. It is nothing more than a state of the environment, and this state is inherently precarious. To assess the prospects, it is important to have a clear understanding of the kind of multipolarity we are dealing with today.

It can be called asynchronous multipolarity. Different segments of international relations are adapting to the new state of affairs at different speeds and at different times. Some elements of the order take shape more rapidly than others. The varying rates of change in individual elements of the loadbearing structure generates friction and resistance within the material. And this is precisely what hinders the formation of a stable structure, which, as mentioned above, is an integral part of hierarchy.

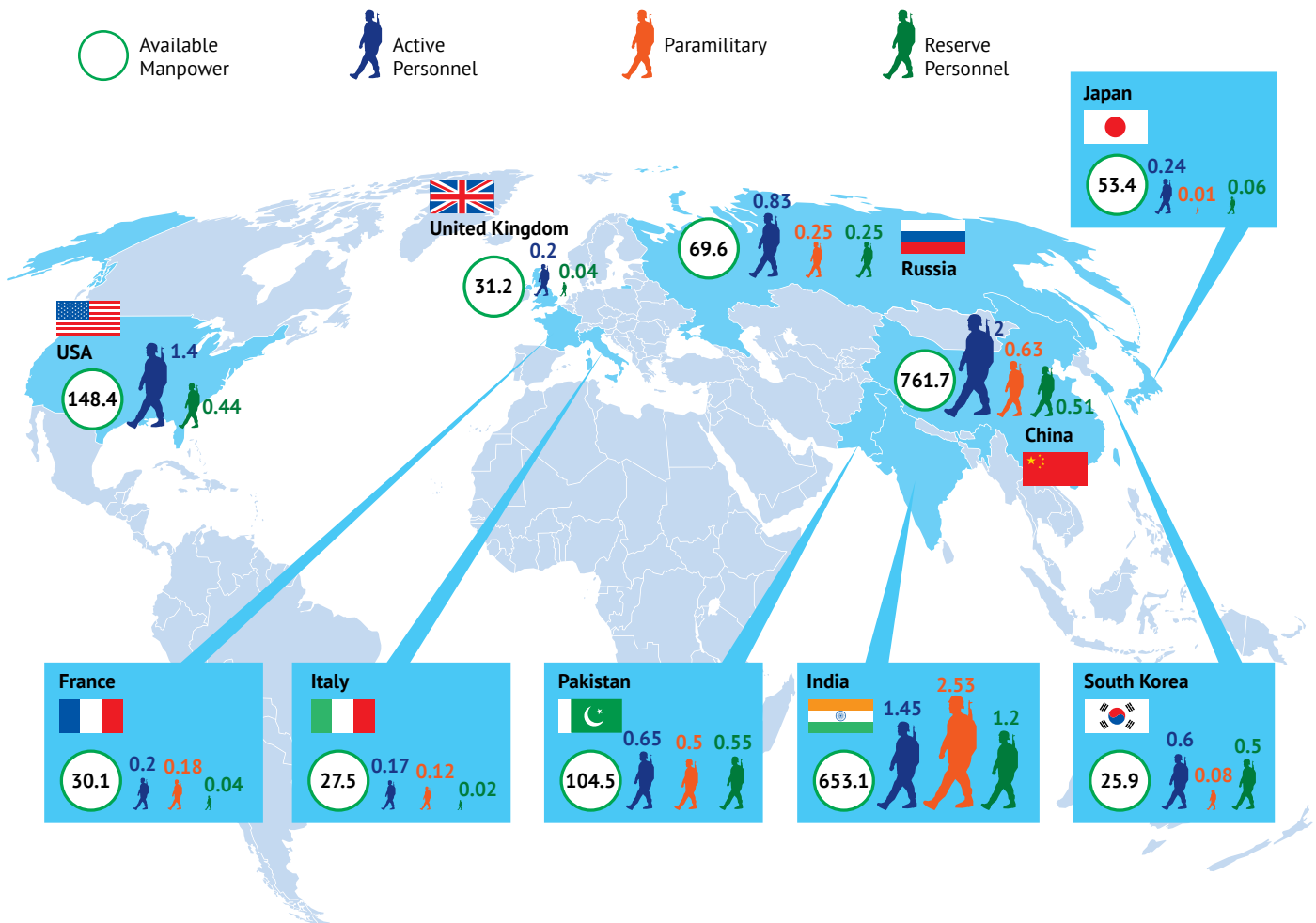
The international order is determined by the distribution of power, but what exactly does it mean? Neo-realists believed it boils down to military potential and the ability to ensure military security. Defence needs a resource base, which, in turn, relies on economic capabilities and human capital. In some cases, military potentials may outpace resource capabilities. Modern multipolarity should be assessed considering such complexity and the asynchronous nature of power variables both in the hands of individual states and within the international relations system as a whole.

From the perspective of the distribution of military power potentials, the contemporary world has long been multipolar. It can be argued that the United States outpaces all countries combined in terms of defence spending, possesses the ability to project power worldwide, and has the most well-trained and technologically sophisticated military. However, the United States cannot arbitrarily initiate a military conflict against a range of states without risking enormous and unacceptable losses; so, military hegemony is out of the question. Other centres of

¹³ Du Gong. *Shije jinruliao geju zhuanhuan de xinshiqi*. In Du Gong and Ni Liyu (eds), *Zhuanhuanzhong de shijie geju*. Pp. 2-3. 1993.

TOP-10 GLOBAL MILITARY POWERS

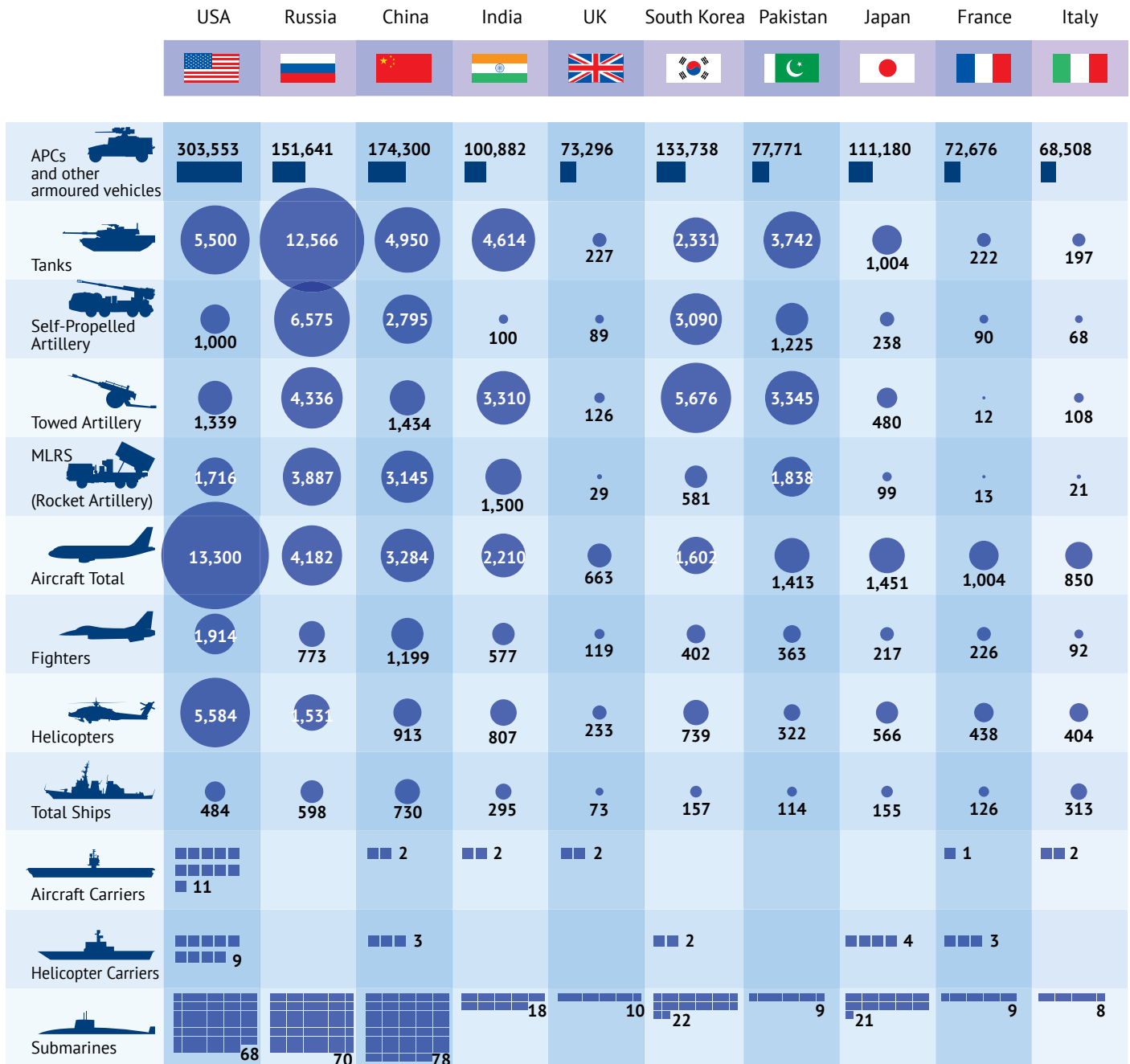
As of 2022, there were 45,503,000 armed combatants around the world, including regular troops, reservists and paramilitaries



Sources: www.globalfirepower.com, www.quora.com, basetop.ru

power are also constrained in their ability to achieve their objectives using military means, especially when larger states stand behind medium or small states. Extensive military and financial support for Ukraine provided by the United States and its allies is significantly obstructing Russia's efforts in its special military operation. In turn, Russia's direct military intervention on the side of the legitimate government in Syria blocked the United States' attempts to achieve its goals in the Syrian civil conflict. The success of a hypothetical military operation by China to resolve the Taiwan issue is far from guaranteed due to Washington's strong restraining role, and so on.

THE LEADING POWERS' MILITARY POTENTIALS: COMBAT VEHICLES, UNITS



Sources: www.globalfirepower.com, www.quora.com, basetop.ru

From the perspective of the military might/resource base ratio, the modern world is even more complex. The United States spends enormous resources on defence and possesses practically all key military and dual-use technologies. It relies on a diversified economy. However, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine demonstrates the limitations of its industrial

capabilities to immediately meet the needs of a large-scale military operation.

China's defence potential is inferior to that of the United States, but relies on a significant resource base that allows for substantial growth, if needed. China trails the United States in several critical technologies, but is quickly catching up. India's capabilities may not be as extensive, but the pace of industrial and technological development, demographic potential, and growing human capital make it a crucial player in the future. Finally, several states that have long been under the US military umbrella, lacked strategic autonomy or incentives for advanced military development, have accumulated industrial, technological, financial, and human resources, or far-reaching ambitions. These include Germany, Turkey, Japan, and South Korea.

Almost the entire potential of processing and extracting industries as well as agriculture can be mobilized for military purposes, while the services sector, apart from transport, information and communication technologies, and medicine turns out to be useless in terms of supporting the war effort. Considering the domination of services in the modern economies (about 78 percent in the United States and 73 percent in the EU), the GDP indicator is virtually useless for assessing the military potential of a country.¹⁴

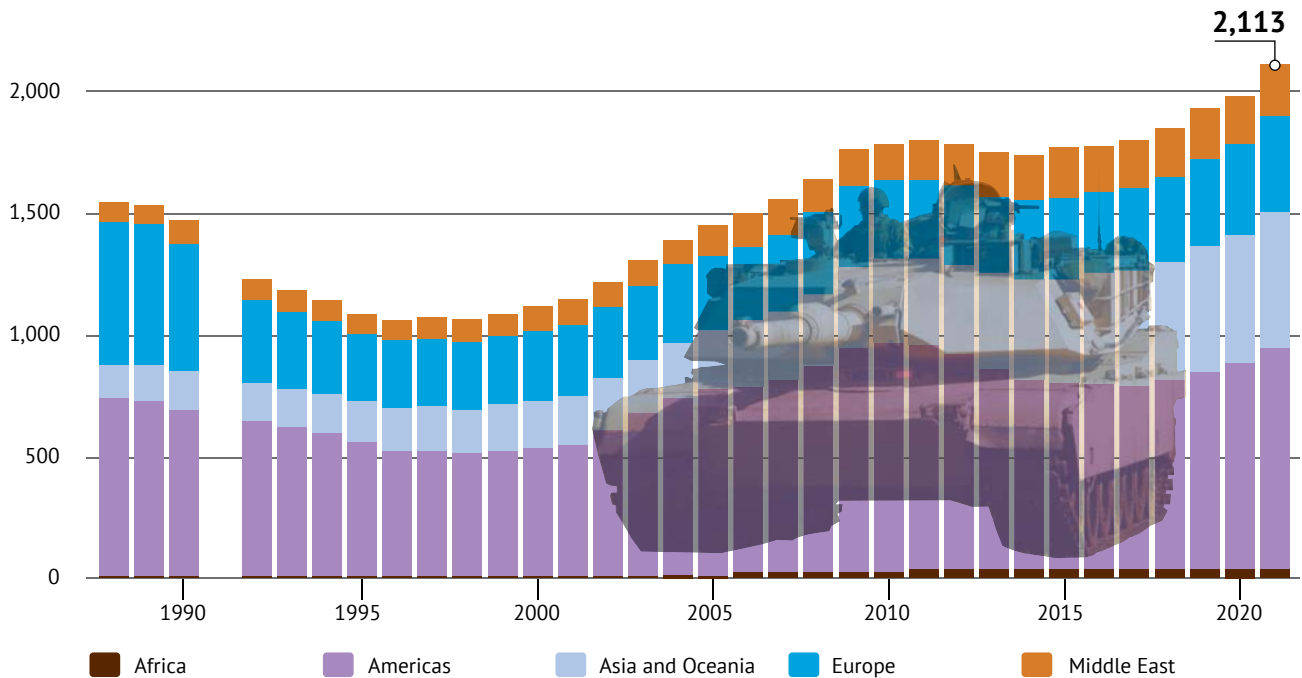
The conflict in Ukraine has become a catalyst for expanding military potential worldwide. This potential can be bolstered through industrial and technological cooperation within the EU or NATO, as well as bilateral alliances involving the United States.

Russia is endowed with all necessary natural resources. Its economy ranks among the top ten globally despite unprecedented sanctions. Russia's technological capabilities are limited, but it possesses critical military technologies, including nuclear missile and space technologies. Vulnerabilities lie in its industrial and demographic potential. To maintain its international standing in the long run, Russia will need large-scale industrial modernisation based on innovative principles.

The complexity of the international order is also determined by the fact that military power is not the only power that can be

¹⁴ More details on this in the upcoming Valdai Club report *Warfare in a New Epoch: The Return of Big Armies*, to be released in October 2023.

MILITARY EXPENDITURES BY REGION, 1988–2021 (BILLION USD)



Source: sipri.org

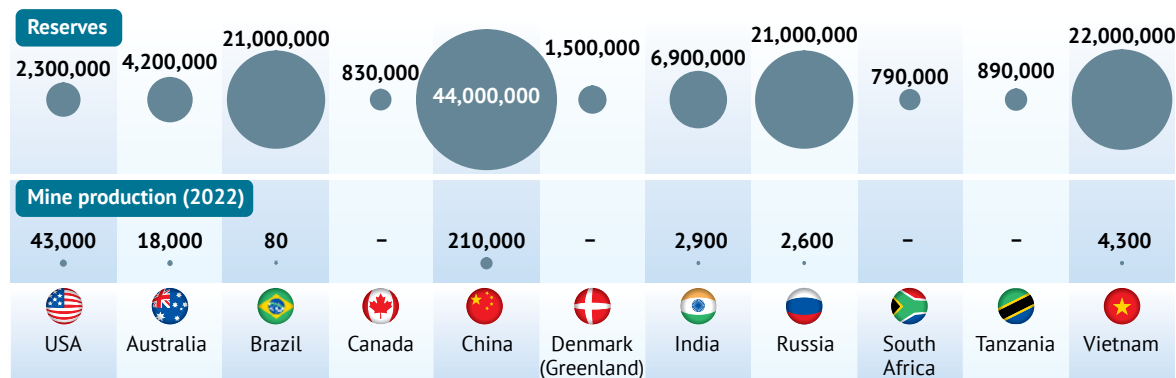
weaponised. This is where asynchrony is most salient. The US banks and the US dollar continue to dominate the financial system as a means of transaction and reserve currency. The policy of large-scale financial and economic sanctions has initiated the process of diversifying settlements. Russia is at the forefront because moving away from Western currencies is a matter of survival for it. Sanctions against Russia make other countries wondering as well. China has been quietly conditioning its financial system for a geopolitical shock scenario for a long time. However, a revolution in global finance has not yet occurred. The Global South, including China and India, continues to use the dollar and the existing algorithms for financial transactions.

The global technological presence of the West remains tangible. True, China has made a powerful leap forward, but Western licences, know-how, critical components, and ready-made products are still part of global supply chains. With Russia's extensive export controls in place, it has been forced to lead the way in withdrawing itself from these chains, while others are not yet eager to do so.

DISTRIBUTION OF THE MAIN NATURAL RESOURCES – HYDROCARBONS, COAL, RARE EARTH METALS



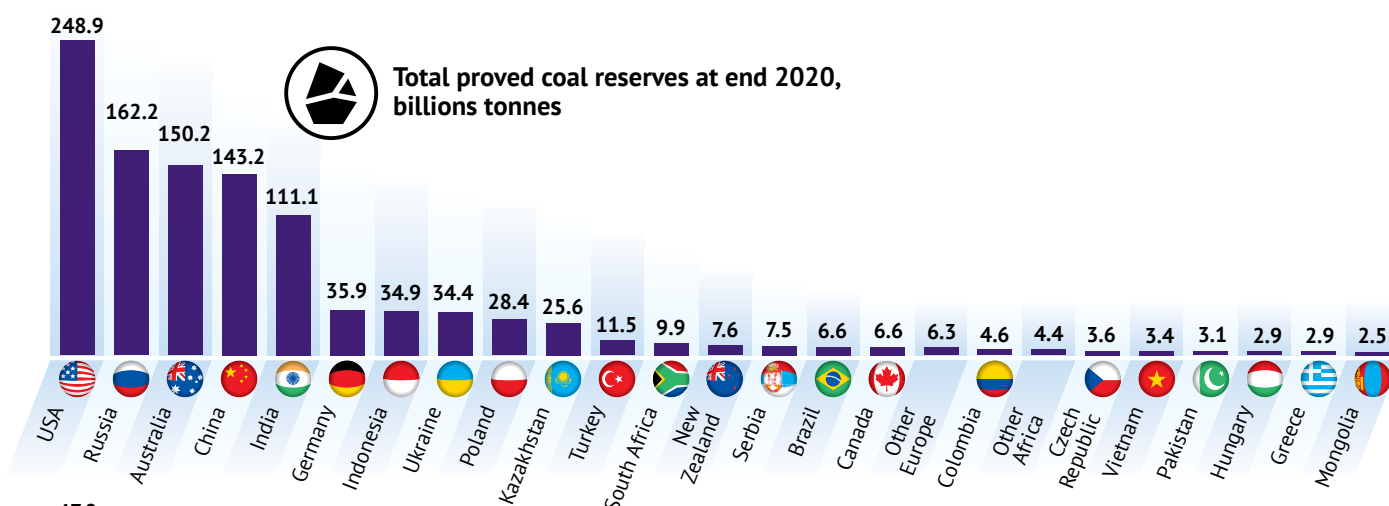
Total production volumes and reserves of rare earth elements, tons



Source: U.S. Geological Survey, Mineral Commodity Summaries, January 2023



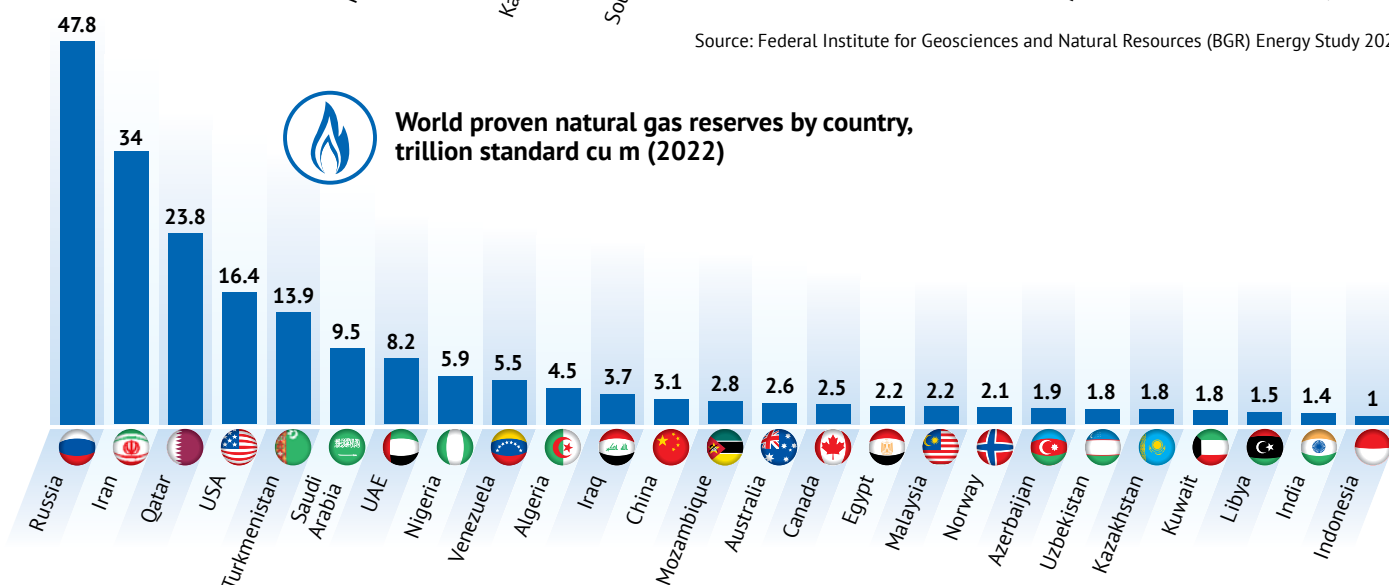
Total proved coal reserves at end 2020, billions tonnes



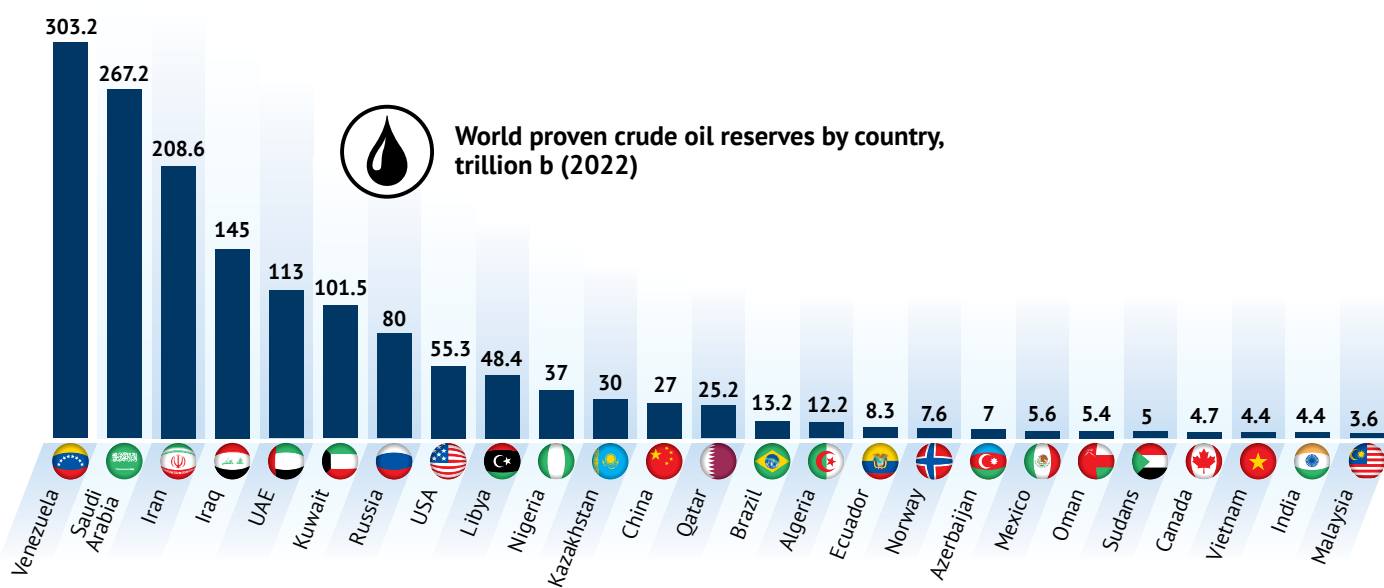
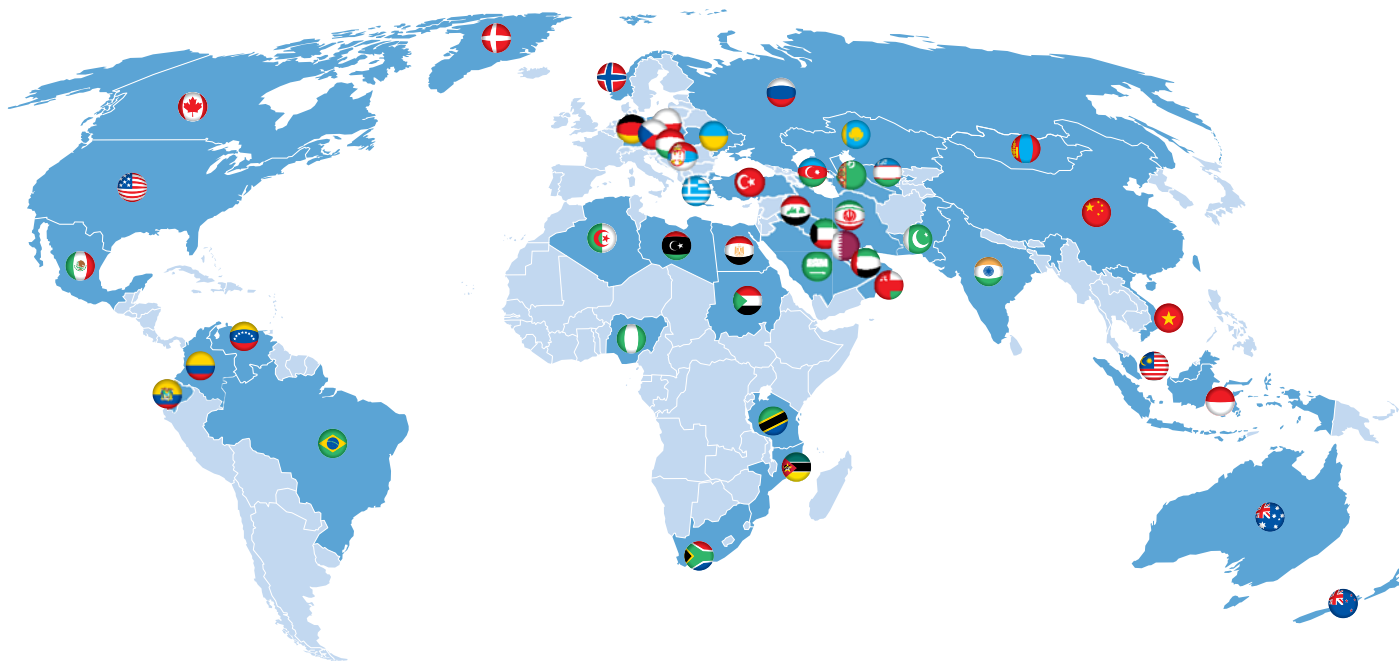
Source: Federal Institute for Geosciences and Natural Resources (BGR) Energy Study 2021



World proven natural gas reserves by country, trillion standard cu m (2022)



Source: OPEC Annual Statistical Bulletin 2023



Source: OPEC Annual Statistical Bulletin 2023

The digital space is another sphere of competition. Western digital giants have managed to assume pivotal positions in global digital service networks. The Ukraine conflict showed that Western digital services can be used to address political objectives. Russia's focus on its own digital platforms is both logical and unavoidable. China had stopped using Western services long before Russia and created its own digital ecosystem. Russia and China could become exporters of digital sovereignty by providing their platforms to third countries in order to diversify their existing services. Western digital giants will retain their key positions in the global network, but this network has been pierced significantly by Russia and China.

Finally, Western media may have lost their global market monopoly, but their role remains decisive. The Western infrastructure for shaping minds, including the education system, exchange programmes, university rankings, databases, and much more, remains at a high level. The English language continues to serve as a means of international communication, and Western popular culture has universal coverage, despite attempts at local cultural resistance.

In summary, we are dealing with an extremely complex model of an international order. The asynchronous distribution of power parameters is a crucial feature of the contemporary international order which has no simple patterns or development scenarios to offer.

Hierarchy as a dying breed

The new international order will not resemble any that has existed before. **First**, there have never been so many independent states worldwide. The most recent international order took shape during the era of European colonial empires (just look at the number of UN members in 1945 and today). **Second**, the vast majority of these states are capable of independently controlling the space within their borders and making important decisions. Attempts to limit sovereignty in the new world are, of course, inevitable, but they will be indirect and fragmentary and will not be able to realistically determine the behaviour of most countries in the world.

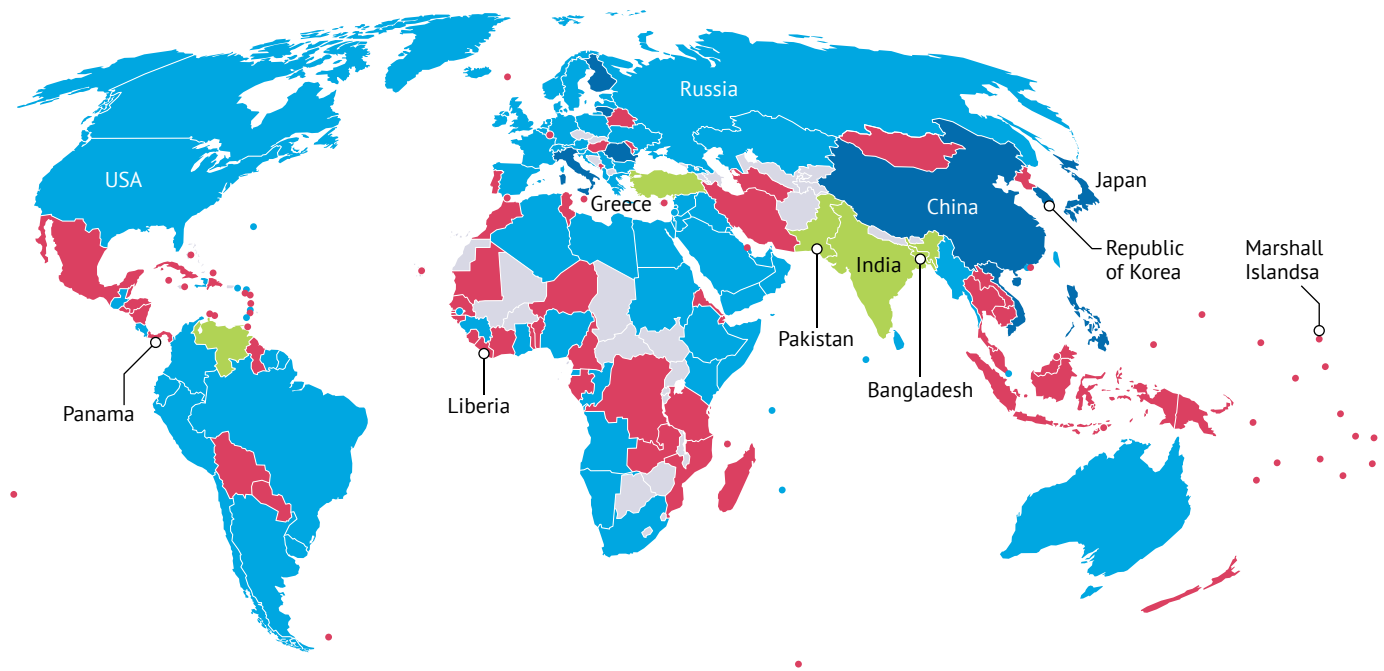
The vision of the future international order upholds the value of sovereignty and autonomy in determining development priorities and the means to achieve them. The issue of international security is addressed through respect for each other's security interests. Binding alliances, in which the freedom of action of the participants is inherently limited, are more likely to become a thing of the past or the prerogative of a relatively narrow circle of Western countries which are truly closely united by cultural and value-based characteristics.

There is no reason to believe that traditional leaders will be able to stop the growing multilayer influence of a multitude of large, medium, and small states that seek autonomy, even if they make significant efforts to do so. It is difficult to imagine the tools that would ensure control by one or even several great powers over such a diverse community. But even if the degree of dependence of one country on its partners remains high, the push for survival in an extremely diversified world will force it to seek ways to enhance its independent capabilities. The fabric of interconnectedness that is affected by the confrontation between the West and its major adversaries has shown a reasonably good ability to recover in changing circumstances on the whole. Even if the great military powers remain in conflict with each other, other countries will not have to divide into warring camps ruled by a hierarchical structure. The experience of 2022-2023 shows that the overwhelming majority of countries in the world refuse to accept such a scenario.

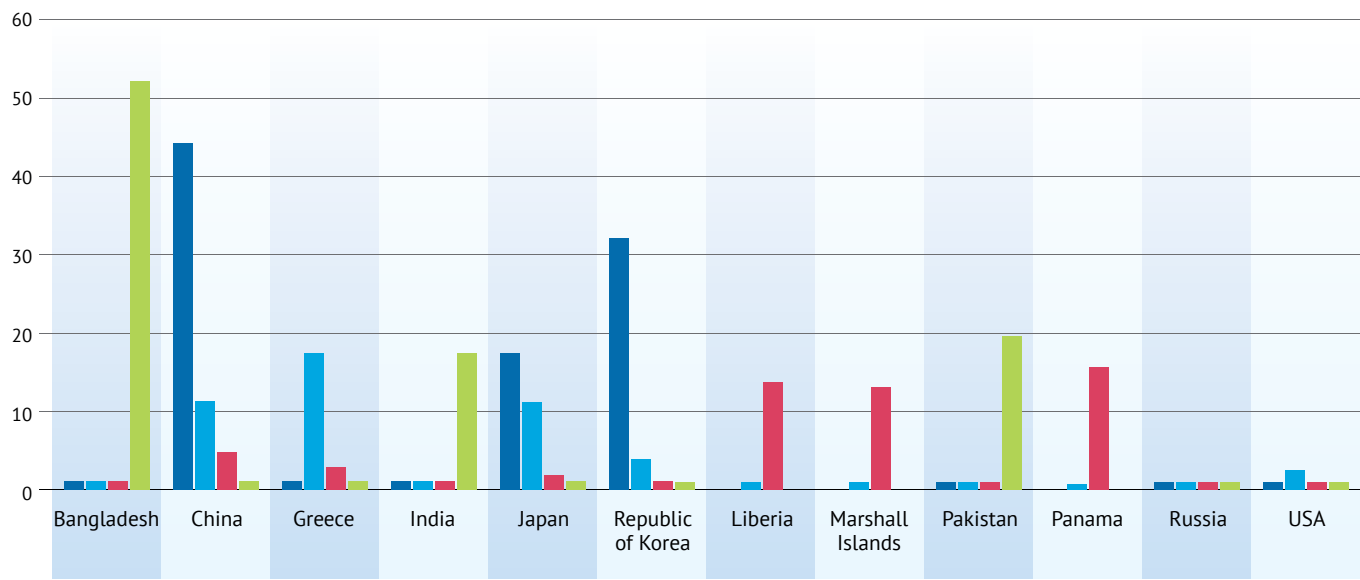
The world of sovereign states, which has expanded over the past century, demonstrates remarkable resilience. More precisely, it exhibits a high capacity for self-correction in the face of a conflict between traditional centres of power and the complete crumbling¹⁵ of the institutions based international order that occurred in the second half of the 20th century. Current events are dramatic, but they show that nothing is indispensable. Not a single international order can be seen as ideal and the only correct one, with chaos being the only alternative. The dismantling of once-effective institutions is accompanied by unpleasant turmoil and increased risks. However, new political and trade and

¹⁵ See Barabanov O., Bordachev T., Lissovolik Y., Lukyanov F., Sushentsov A., Timofeev I. *Living in a Crumbling World*. Valdai Club Annual Report // Valdai Discussion Club, 15.10.2018. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/living-in-a-crumbling-world/>; Barabanov O., Bordachev T., Lissovolik Y., Lukyanov F., Sushentsov A., Timofeev I. *Staying Sane in a Crumbling World* // Valdai Discussion Club, 14.05.2020. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/staying-sane-in-a-crumbling-world/>

BUILDING, OWNERSHIP, REGISTRATION AND RECYCLING OF SHIPS, 2021



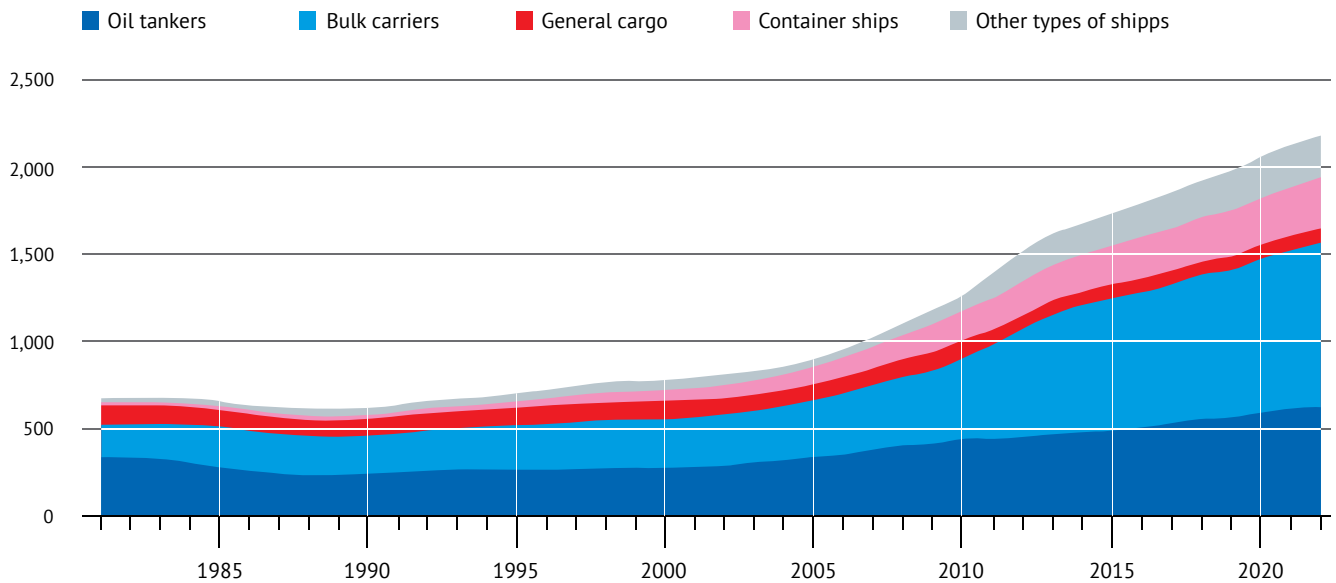
■ Building (gt) ■ Ownership (dwt) ■ Registration (dwt) ■ Recycling (gt)



Source: UNCTADstat (UNCTAD, 2022); Clarksons Research

WORLD FLEET BY PRINCIPAL VESSEL TYPE

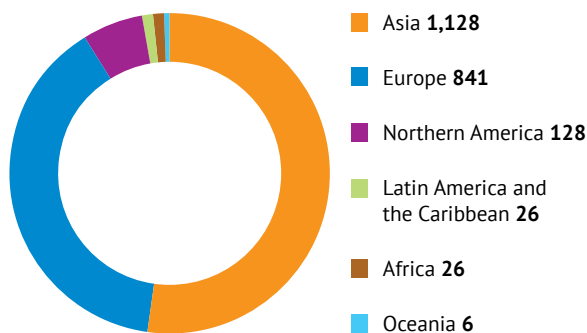
Millions of dead-weight tons



Source: UNCTADstat (UNCTAD, 2022); Clarksons Research
Note: Commercial ships of 100 gt and above. Beginning-of-year figures

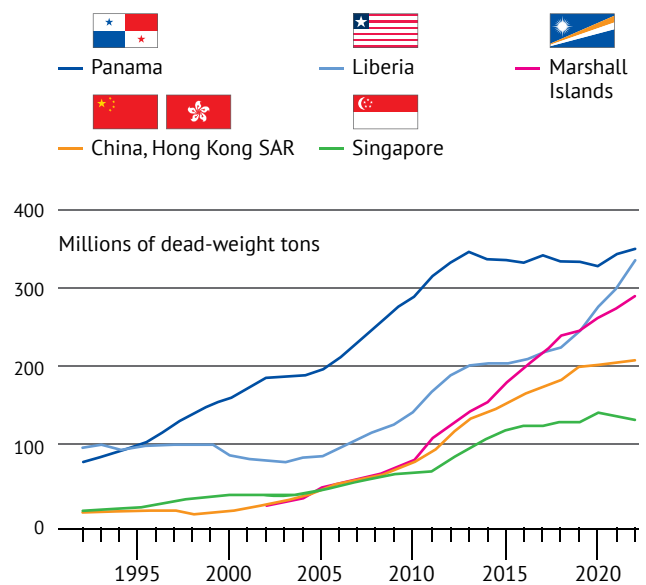
Fleet market by region of beneficial ownership, 2022

Millions of dead-weight tons



Source: UNCTADstat (UNCTAD, 2022); Clarksons Research
Note: Commercial ships of 1000 gt and above. Beginning-of-year figures

Vessels capacity in top five registries



Source: UNCTADstat (UNCTAD, 2022); Clarksons Research
Note: Commercial ships of 100 gt and above. Beginning-of-year figures. Ranked by the values as of 1 January 2022

Concepts and definitions

The unit dead-weight tons (dwt) is used to indicate the cargo carrying capacity of a ship, while gross tons (gt) reflect its size. The latter is relevant to measure shipbuilding and recycling activity, while the former is used to capture the capacity to transport cargo

economic ties and combinations of interests that are outside familiar structures and interaction modes are forming before our eyes. (In this light, the question about interaction between sovereign states and the international community in the information-communication sphere, which remains highly unified and monopolised, is becoming particularly important).

It was believed for a long time that with institutions going through a crisis, the international politics would inevitably slide into chaos. Historical analogies were provided as examples, as indeed, anarchy in international relations¹⁶ is the historical norm. However, what is happening now (we will consider the pandemic as the beginning of the acute phase, which continued with the military-political crisis over Ukraine) is showing that the countries are striving – and fairly successfully – towards self-organisation amid shifting international orders. The ongoing expansion of BRICS is among the steps that indicate the direction the world is moving in.

The crumbling of the previous international order, therefore, does not come as a catastrophe in terms of the survival and development of its individual participants. We see that the absolute majority of them are adapting to the new situation with varying degree of success. They often face serious difficulties but are inherently incapable of standing by in confusion and waiting for someone to help them. The world remains, by its nature, decentralised. The failure of the attempt at vertically integrating it after the Cold War only emphasises this fact. The interaction between the old and the new is dynamic and breaks down into separate processes which thwart attempts at the centralised “assembly of the world” under any banners, be they conservative or revolutionary.

Connectivity and openness

For the international community, with all its participants living in a market economy, it is natural to strive for relationships that are economically advantageous. It is unlikely that we can expect the previous model of globalisation to be replaced by a division into a set

¹⁶ See Barabanov O., Bordachev T., Lissovolik Y., Lukyanov F., Sushentsov A., Timofeev I. *Time to Grow Up, or the Case for Anarchy*. Valdai Club Annual Report // Valdai Discussion Club, 30.09.2019. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/annual-report-time-to-grow-up/>

of regional communities rigidly separated from each other. Instead, a different form of interconnection will emerge. The push to reduce risks will likely lead to the localisation of external economic ties in a bid to increase reliability of supply chains and reduce vulnerability. However, observing what most states are doing today, we can see that they are not willing to close themselves off even within relatively comfortable regional frameworks.

Accordingly, the image of the future that appears favourable to us presupposes the preservation of universal market openness and connectivity. In any case, the desire to limit mutually beneficial cooperation by political means will give way to connectivity. The efforts and resources spent on such attempts will simply be wasted. Dividing the world into warring macro-regional camps seeking autarky is impossible and undesirable. Due to its size, resource and logistical potential, and geopolitical location, Russia is on the side of the majority of states seeking maximum openness.

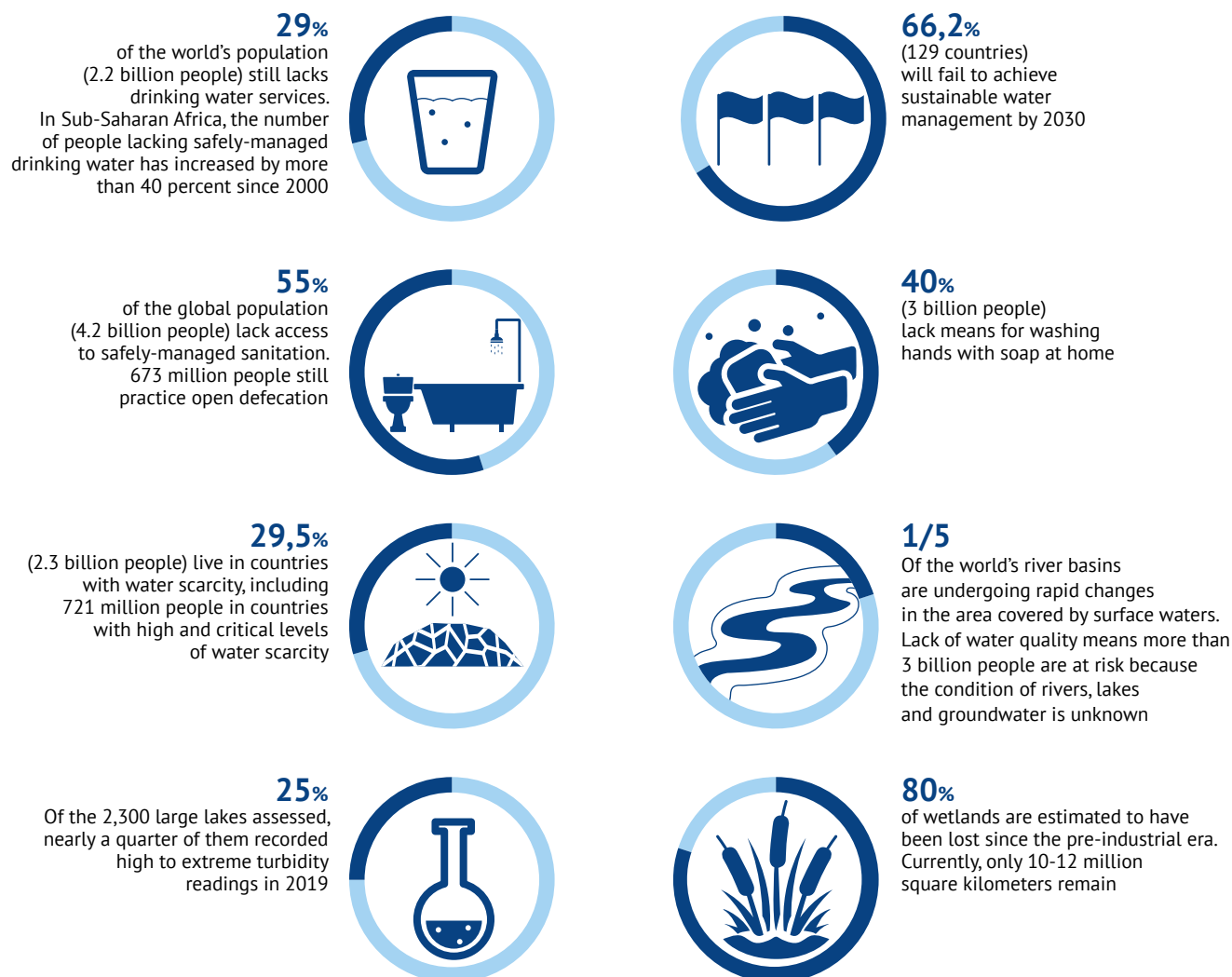
This image of the future entails the preservation and expansion of connectivity between different regions of the planet, and the absence of monopolies in the economy, technology, or politics. In the emerging picture of the world, there should be no dividing lines or political barriers, and no closed or select communities. The experience of the past three years, during which such barriers arose for various reasons, has shown how irrational severing ties is. These ties will be restored, albeit in a different way.

The image of the future is exceptionally dynamic because all participants in the international community are finding new solutions to their challenges, constantly redressing the shifting balance. Its presence is crucial as it prevents the open discontent of any group of countries, which could lead to a dangerous revolutionary situation.

The life of the international community should gradually evolve into a state of dynamic equilibrium, where the ability of the global social organism to self-adjust overcomes the challenges associated with the end of an era based on the balance of power and the dominance of the strong. The ideal image of the future in this case lies not in a specific organisational or ideological packaging, but in the substance of relationships between countries. It's not a one-time achievement

SAFE FRESH WATER SHORTAGES

UNESCO Director-General Audre Azoulay said the world will face a global water shortage of 40% by 2030. The water shortage situation will be aggravated by other global problems, including the consequences of the pandemic



Sources: unwater.org, unicef.org, news agencies

that will last a long time, but an ongoing effort to maintain balance, resolve conflicts, and find solutions to each specific issue. To use business terminology, the solutions that are customer-oriented and tailored to each situation.

The pluralistic multipolarity we are talking about does not involve the existence of several hierarchically organised structures in orderly

competition with each other. It's about the fact that hierarchy will either not exist at all or will be extremely blurred, even where there are prerequisites for preserving it.

Practically the entire familiar infrastructure of international cooperation, starting from its leading institutions, served as a backdrop that camouflaged power politics. This is not surprising since institutional decisions were not made to resolve the problem of injustice inherent in international relations but rather to give it a relatively civilised appearance. In the future, this problem may be alleviated precisely due to the absence of bloc divisions, i.e., the diversity of sources available to acquire the resources that the parties in need can turn to if necessary.

In this regard, the fate of large states will not differ from their smaller counterparts; they will be equally able to utilise various opportunities to address their specific challenges. And they will also encounter the fundamental inability to impose their will and desires on others which is a discomforting surprise for countries accustomed to dominance.

The internal stability of its participants represented by sovereign states, regardless of the methods by which it is achieved, will be the most important factor in international life. This primarily concerns resilience to internal challenges and, second, the ability to resist external pressure. In our vision of the future, it will be a fairly challenging test of countries' ability to resist internal stress; it's an indicator of the quality of state building and societal structures in each country. The cost of internal mistakes increases significantly because it limits the flexibility in dealing with various external partners.

Addressing global issues and challenges is almost impossible through collective effort, because it always implies some form of international leadership. However, the demand for such leadership is low at present. Each state assesses its interests, capabilities, and existing threats. Interdependence exists, but it is not the determining factor; individual state autonomy in making crucial decisions is much more important. We can see that autonomy helps countries maintain the most important achievements of global openness and connectivity even in the face of acute military and political differences between major military powers.

* * *





The Valdai Club's report from last year, titled "A World Without Superpowers"¹⁷ concluded with the following passage: "The democratisation of the international environment needs an appropriate response, which is not about suppressing but harmonising interests and respecting pluralism of opinions and assessments. Hierarchy gives way to distributed interaction. A world without superpowers will need a system of self-regulation, which implies much greater freedom of action and responsibility for such actions."

The events of the past twelve months have confirmed our conclusion. Humanity is entering an era of new political relations. This era is closely tied to the preceding history because the factors and circumstances that will shape the future are inherited from previous periods. However, it will be quite different because the previous concepts will need to be used in a different context.

The name of the emerging system will come after it takes shape. Its qualitative characteristics will depend on many factors, including how responsibly current actors – large, medium, and small (everyone influences international processes now) – approach building their relationships and whether they pass the test for their *maturity certificate* (this expressive name has traditionally been given to the highschool completion document in Russia).

Self-regulation is an attribute of maturity. It is when states can address their issues without the need for suppressive or hierarchical structures, while also not creating insurmountable problems for others. Failing this exam is too dangerous for everyone.

¹⁷ See Barabanov O., Bordachev T., Lissovolik Y., Lukyanov F., Sushentsov A., Timofeev I. *A World Without Superpowers*. Valdai Club Annual Report // Valdai Discussion Club, 24.10.2022. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/a-world-without-superpowers/>

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