
3 heavyweights in the ring: As US-China hostility escalates, what role will be played by the world's other great power, Russia?

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Don't expect a new world order to emerge post-Covid-19. It will be the current big three who dominate, with an informal alliance between Russia and China crucial to reining in American ambitions.

When Covid-19 began to consume the world a few months ago, there were hopes that maybe the pandemic would moderate geopolitical rivalry and encourage international collaboration. What we have seen instead were a spike in US-China tension, a US-British naval flotilla [entering the Barents Sea](#) in proximity of Russia for the first time since the 1980s, [clashes](#) on the Sino-Indian border, and other developments showing that even a shared disaster is not capable to bring peace among nations, especially among major powers.

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What is a great power?

It is difficult to deny that we live in an era of intensifying great-power [competition](#). This is now the central premise of US foreign policy and national security strategy, while other major nations have, openly or implicitly, adopted the same proposition.

But what is a great power? International relations [theory](#) is pretty straightforward on this: "A great power is a state that can contend in a war against every other state in the system and thus can independently provide for its own security vis-a-vis any other country."

In his book *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, Paul Kennedy defines a great power as "a country which is

willing and able to take on any other” state in the international system. And in U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic, Walter Lippmann argued that only *“the great powers can wage great wars. Only the great powers can resist a great power.”*

Soft power may be important in the modern world. But it is first and foremost military might – and the willingness to use it – that makes a great power. You can be rich like Saudi Arabia, have an enviable quality of life like Canada, be technologically advanced like South Korea or have vast natural resources and a huge population like Brazil or Nigeria. But none of that will give you the status of a great power unless your country achieves military preponderance over all other nations – except, of course, your peer great powers.

Unfortunately, we still live in a world where the ability to kill, maim and destroy on a massive scale constitutes the single most important leverage of power. And it is not in a fit of absentmindedness that some nations pursue military primacy. They do it because they want to be able to impose their will upon others – an inherent urge the founder of international political theory Hans Morgenthau called *‘animus dominandi.’*

The list of the contemporary great powers is pretty short: the United States of America, Russia and China. It is these three nations that are far ahead of others in their capacity to wage war. The US, admittedly, has the strongest military among the three, giving it superpower stature, but that does not annul the great-power status of Russia and China: the former is the only country in the world capable of obliterating the US with a nuclear strike, while the latter, steadily building up its nuclear forces, is approaching such a capability.

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In 2008, Russia got involved in a military conflict with Georgia, a partner of both America and NATO. In 2014, Vladimir Putin changed the borders of another Western ally, Ukraine, by reclaiming Russian-populated Crimea.

China has been less audacious so far, but its salami-slicing tactics in the South China Sea have been quite a success, with the Americans essentially powerless to prevent Beijing’s growing dominance in that strategically crucial body of water.

Don’t write Russia off as a great power

The current great-power roster of three is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Germany and Japan could theoretically seek to regain the great-power ranking they once had. However, Berlin and Tokyo, as well as London and Paris, are firmly incorporated into the structures of the US-led alliances, having exchanged full sovereignty for the comfort of an apparently safe existence under American hegemony.

India is probably the most plausible candidate to become another great power. It has both the potential and ambition to reach for the top tier of the global power hierarchy. However, it will still take a while for Delhi to make it to the premier league of world politics.

If India is the most likely candidate to enter the great power ranks in the future, isn’t Russia the most obvious one to drop out soon? It is almost a conventional wisdom that Russia is a declining nation, with poor demographics and a shrinking share of the world’s economy.

Yet reports of Russia’s impending demise as a great power may be exaggerated. Let us not forget that great powers are primarily defined by their war-fighting capabilities. Russia’s stock of formidable weapons and military-related technologies, accumulated over many decades, as well as the wealth of its war-fighting experience, will allow Moscow to continue as a first-rate geopolitical player for a long time yet.

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It also matters that Russia is the most experienced of the three contemporary great powers. The notion of a Great Power first came into being after the Napoleonic Wars, when the four victorious powers of Russia, Britain, Austria and Prussia established the Concert of Europe, later joined by France. Tsar Alexander I, along with the Austrian Foreign Minister Prince Metternich and the British Foreign Secretary Lord Castlereagh, was a founder of the great-power concert that secured relative peace and stability in Europe for almost a century.

America became a great power a century later, whereas China is only now learning the art of a modern great power. Putin and his foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, are full heirs to the Russian tsars’ foreign policy that combined military muscle with adroit diplomacy, even though debacles, such as the 1853 Crimean War, did happen from time to time.

The great-power entente of Moscow and Beijing

The dynamics of the modern great-power triangle are determined by the primordial law of international politics – the balance of power – whereby lesser poles pull together to counter the strongest force. This is why Russia and China have formed a quasi-alliance in opposition to the American superpower. Their entente has much less to do with the supposed commonality of domestic political regimes in China and Russia, the so-called “axis of [authoritarians](#).”

In fact, Russia and China established their “*strategic partnership*” in 1996, the same year the Russian president Boris Yeltsin, who was seen as a liberal by the West, was running for re-election with the aid of American political [strategists](#).

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And Russia's hybrid-type political system of the present day is no more similar to the Chinese party state than it is to American liberal democracy.

Speaking of historical continuity, in the late nineteenth century Tsarist Russia formed an alliance with republican France to prevent Germany from dominating Europe. This makes it unlikely that the Sino-Russian entente will end any time soon. It will continue, and will probably become even more solid, as long as Moscow and Beijing see the US as the overweening power. Alexey Navalny, the leader of the anti-Putin opposition in Russia, bears many hallmarks of a great-power nationalist. Should he or someone like him move into the Kremlin, Russia's foreign policy will not change that much.

The great-power mission in the twenty-first century

Unlike in the nineteenth century, it is now impossible for a few great powers to run the world. If there is to be a global concert of powers in the twenty-first century, it needs to include many more states, not only those that possess military pre-eminence but also those that play major economic and social roles. However, as Paul Kennedy observes, the primary responsibility of the great powers is “*to prevent any actions that might lead to a world war. Their job is simply to hold firm the iron frame that keeps the international system [secure](#).*”

Alas, as things are shaping up now, the great power triangle may not live up to this task.
