

TOWARDS A FUZZY WORLD ORDER: WHAT ROLE FOR NATO?

Bi-polarity, multi-polarity, the end of globalization, or Cold War v. 2.0. New explanations of world order abound. Often, they are asserted rather than reasoned by pundits looking for their 15 minutes of fame. This paper is much more modest. It eschews grand statements about world order. Rather we demonstrate that the future is far less clear cut and predetermined. Yes, a global binary is emerging around U.S.-China competition, but it is what we describe as fuzzy bifurcation. If our analysis is accurate, then it affects the behavior of other actors differently than a tight bi-polar system. In this paper we look at the implications of a fuzzy bifurcation of world order for that most important of alliances – NATO.

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Thinking about world order in international relations occurs at both the conceptual and the empirical level. At the conceptual level, the question du jour is what shape the world order will take if we assume that we are in a post-Liberal International Order. At an empirical level, the key concern is the role of the principal players in the organization of that world order. We usually focus on states—the USA, China, Russia and Europe and the other key international regional players. Less attention is paid to alliances as actors beyond their immediate strategic environment. They are usually analyzed as actors specifically in the security domain—NATO in Europe, U.S. bilateral alliances in the Asia Pacific, and now AUKUS and the Quad in the Indo-Pacific. This is an increasing lacuna in conventional analysis. It is time to think of alliances in the broader context of the changing global order and their role as stabilizers or destabilizers of that order. Our purpose in this short paper is to examine the contemporary role of NATO (especially since the Russian invasion of Ukraine) as an actor in the ongoing discussion of what we call a fuzzy, bifurcated world order.

“We are ready to stand guard over the world order (Xi Jinping to Vladimir Putin, Moscow - 21 March 2023)”

Some assert that we are shifting into a bipolar or multipolar era, both interpretations according to the Cold War narrative that a rejuvenated NATO plays a familiar foundational role as a buttress for the ‘West against the rest’.¹ According to these analyses, the Covid pandemic and the Ukraine war have prompted a “turning point”² and globalization is widely touted as ending.³ At the very least, hyperglobalization is ending and even Davos has swapped its usual one-world thesis for the theme of “History at a Turning Point.”⁴ It is a symptom of a world “splitting in two,” China

1) Angela Stent, “The West vs. the Rest,” *Foreign Policy*, 2 May 2022.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/05/02/ukraine-russia-war-un-vote-condemn-global-response/>

2) Christoph Heusgen, “The War in Ukraine Will Be a Historic Turning Point,” *Foreign Affairs*, 12 May 2022.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/germany/2022-05-12/war-ukraine-will-be-historic-turning-point>

3) Adam S. Posen, “The End of Globalization?” *Foreign Policy*, 17 March 2022.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2022-03-17/end-globalization>

4) Mark Leonard, “The Decline and Fall of Davos Man,” *Project Syndicate*, 30 May 2022.

<https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/fall-of-davos-man-geopolitics-replacing-globalization-by-mark-leonard-2022-05>

and Russia forming the basis for a bloc in opposition to the West.⁵ As a result, historian Niall Ferguson⁶ has proclaimed Cold War 2.0 and, as M.E. Sarotte has written, the ‘Cold War Conundrum is Back.’⁷ For some, containment is the only option.⁸ The future is the past.⁹ Historians will refer to the post-Cold War world as but an ‘era’ of American unipolarity that has now ended.¹⁰

There are worse things than an American-run world, suggests Robert Kagan.¹¹ Having complained about American cajoling (Bush and Obama) and then bullying (Trump), Europeans now reluctantly concur, at least in the security domain. Their illusion of Europe as a war-free haven has been punctured. And lest Americans indulge in schadenfreude, it isn’t just Europeans facing an existential crisis. With the ongoing 6 January investigations in the U.S., the last vestiges of a belief in the moral superiority of trans-Atlanticism have evaporated, and the rest of the world knows it.¹² Strong leaders, who bend the rules, are back in vogue¹³ in the Global South, and even in parts of Europe, stretching from Sweden in the north to Italy in the south, where right wing parties flourish electorally.

The parallels between the past and present are problematic. The Cold War era was relatively stable. This new era is proving distinctly disorderly.¹⁴ With some notable exceptions, formal allies, albeit often reluctantly, were fairly consistent in their support for the U.S. or Soviet position across the realms of diplomacy, economy and security. Now they are not, even among formal American allies such as NATO members Hungary and Türkiye, and security partners like India and Saudi Arabia. Beyond the clamor that everything has irreparably altered, we must therefore ask what is changing and what is remaining the same?

5) Michael Schuman, “The World is Splitting in Two,” *The Atlantic*, 28 March 2022.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2022/03/ukraine-war-china-covid-lockdowns/629401/>

6) Niall Ferguson: “Now We are in Cold War II,” Belfer Center, 28 April 2020.

<https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/niall-ferguson-now-we-are-cold-war-ii>

7) M. E. Sarotte, “The Classic Cold War Conundrum is Back,” *Foreign Policy*, 1 July 2022.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/01/iron-curtain-russia-ukraine-cold-war/>

8) Ivo H. Daalder, “The Return of Containment: How the West Can Prevail Against the Kremlin,” *Foreign Affairs*, 1 March 2022. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-03-01/return-containment>

9) Tanisha M. Fazel, “The Return of Conquest? Why the Future of Global Order Hinges on Ukraine,” *Foreign Affairs*, 6 April 2022. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-04-06/ukraine-russia-war-return-conquest>

10) Francis P. Sempa, “Our Elites Need to Recognize that America’s ‘Unipolar Moment’ is Over,” *Real Clear Defense*, 24 March 2022. https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2022/03/24/our_elites_need_to_recognize_that_americas_unipolar_moment_is_over_823466.html

11) Robert Kagan, “The Price of Hegemony: Can America Learn to Use Its Power?” *Foreign Affairs*, 6 April 2022. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-04-06/russia-ukraine-war-price-hegemony>

12) Angela Stent, 2 May 2022.

13) “Arabs Believe Economy is Weak under Democracy,” *BBC News*, 6 July 2022.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-62001426>

14) Daniel Treisman, “Putin Unbound: How Repression at Home Presaged Belligerence Abroad,” *Foreign Affairs*, 6 April 2022. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-04-06/putin-russia-ukraine-war-unbound>

The popular view is that it's a lot of the former and little of the latter. Beyond that, the dominant view in Washington is that the global system will devolve into twentieth century-style bipolarity dominated by the U.S. and a rising China, with Europe and Russia respectively aligned. Most of the Global South, albeit reluctantly will pick sides, and one current fight between China and the USA is for their 'hearts and minds', as many avoid a commitment to either in the midst of the Ukraine conflict.¹⁵

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But one undoubted effect of the Russian invasion has been to give a major boost to the role of NATO. An organization whose mission was mocked by Donald Trump as “obsolete”, one that Emmanuel Macron described as “brain-dead” has now been invigorated, finding two renewed objectives—to defend democracy and European sovereignty. It has reemerged as a key international actor, now extending to the wider context of exacerbating debate between China and the USA. Indeed, it has now launched an initiative named "Futures in the Indo-Pacific", seeking to develop and deepen its security cooperation to regional partners in Asia.¹⁶ Nonetheless, the portents of NATO's future are not as clear as Washington's consensus might optimistically assume.

Continuity and Change: The Countervailing Logics of Fuzzy Bifurcation

In a classic periodization of history, a consensus has developed that the pandemic and war have proven pivotal to a broad, emphatic change.¹⁷ But, rhetorical flourishes aside, the harder task is to identify what has and will continue, what has and will change, and what the consequence of that mix will be – in the intersection where change and continuity meet. While the logic of geopolitics pushes awkwardly towards two insulated blocs, the logic of geoeconomic globalization endures.

15) Shivshankar Menon, “A New Cold War May Call for a Return to Non-Alignment,” Foreign Policy, 1 July 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/01/nonalignment-international-system-alliance-bloc/>

16) “NATO Launches New Cooperation Initiative with Experts from Partners in the Indo-Pacific Region,” NATO/OTAN, 25 January 2023. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_211244.htm

17) David A. Bell, “Does Putin's War Mark a New Period in History?” Foreign Policy, 1 July 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/01/world-history-new-era-russia-ukraine-war-covid-19/>

Beyond the legislation that promises the onshoring of American and Chinese manufacturing production with long-term time horizons,¹⁸ it is a world of continuity, where globalization's tentacles are currently adapting and rerouting, but are not retreating. America and China will continue to create two competitive geopolitical poles—to bifurcate. There is a clash. It predates Donald Trump, the pandemic, and the Ukraine war, having been underway since the U.S. reoriented towards the Indo-Pacific over a decade ago.

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The result of this unfolding process will not, however, resemble the Cold War, where geopolitics and geoeconomics aligned to create two insulated blocs. It is now far messier and more complicated. It is a world where allies—facing competing logics—are unreliable. They may side with the U.S. on one issue, hedge on another, and oppose it on a third. It is a world, where “ally,” “partner,” “competitor,” “rival” and “adversary” are expedient and contextual terms. Joe Biden already finds this a frustrating world. Xi Jinping perhaps finds it easier to manage, although his diplomatic services’ all-to-frequent descent into the language of ‘wolf warrior diplomacy’ suggests that we should not overstate China’s ability to deal with its challenges.¹⁹ We call this the world of fuzzy bifurcation.

Fuzzy bifurcation describes a global system where the logics of geoeconomics and geopolitics clash rather than align. Distinct from the bipolarity of the Cold War, it is ‘fuzzy’ because the firm bonds that tied allies together across different policy domains then have now been replaced by frayed, porous relationships that shift from one policy issue to another. In this context, relationships are neither reliable nor transparent. National security is inevitably key, but not always paramount. It’s a world, where states, their strategies and their behavior lack the consistent alignment of the Cold War world. It is a world where the ‘weak’ can exercise a surprising

18) “Congress Passes Investments in Domestic Semiconductor Manufacturing, Research and Design,” SIA.
<https://www.semiconductors.org/chips/>

19) Clea Caulcutt and Stuart Lau, “China Sends Top Wolf Warrior Lu Shaye to the Dog House,” Politico,
26 April 2023. <https://www.politico.eu/article/china-lu-shaye-ambassador-france-diplomacy/>

degree of independence, even among America's closer allies.

The Implications for NATO - and Beyond

The implications of this dynamic for NATO are significant. Hungary is embedded in NATO and the EU, yet Viktor Orban calls the latter's leaders "opponents"²⁰ as he continued to buy Russian oil and gas, refuses to provide armaments for Ukraine, and rejects any discussion of Ukraine's NATO membership.²¹ Like Hungary, Türkiye haggles over Sweden's admission to NATO, after spending the last few years oscillating in its relations with NATO and Russia.²² France supports Ukraine with arms, but Macron talks to Putin and wants to avoid "humiliating" him. Further, he rejects any measures in Taiwan that would make European states American "vassals".²³ All, in distinct ways, undermine NATO solidarity. Only the UK—increasingly reliant on the U.S. since it left the EU—has consistently stood with the U.S., both within and beyond NATO.²⁴

The intricate web that weaves NATO together is more fragile than its proponents generally acknowledge. It is hard to reconcile a NATO (or, more broadly, a European) commitment to play an active maritime role in the Indo-Pacific when concurrence over such fundamental issues such as who can join the organization, and even who can partner it, seem unattainable.²⁵ Domestic politics, and the divergent wedge between economic and security interests, undermine institutional coherence. That problem is likely to become exacerbated in European countries if the mild European winter of 2023 is followed by a colder one in 2024 and they confront greater oil and gas shortages.

This trend is unlikely to abate. Globalization has and will continue despite American efforts to introduce export controls,²⁶ decouple global supply chains and undermine Russia through a powerful sanctions regime. Continued projections that the Russian

20) "Hungary Election: Viktor Urban's Victory Hailed by Putin," BBC News, 4 April 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60981648>

21) Lili Bayer, "'What?!' Orban Throws Cold Water on Ukraine's NATO Hopes," Politico, 21 April 2023. <https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-hungary-ukraine-nato-membership-aspirations-twitter/>

22) "Why are Turkey and Hungary Against Sweden Joining NATO?" Reuters, 5 April 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/after-finland-joins-nato-why-is-turkey-making-sweden-wait-2023-04-04/>

23) Jamil Anderlini and Clea Caulcutt, "Europe Must Resist Pressure to Become 'America's Followers,' says Macron," Politico, 9 April 2023. <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-china-america-pressure-interview/>

24) "China: MI5 and FBI Heads Warn of 'Immense' Threat," BBC News, 7 July 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-62064506>

25) "EU's Borrell Asks European Navies to Patrol Taiwan Strait," The Defense Post, 23 April 2023. <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2023/04/23/borrell-european-navies-taiwan-strait/>

26) "U.S. Aims to Expand Export Bans on China Over Security and Human Rights," New York Times, 5 July 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/05/us/politics/us-china-export-controls.html>

economy would collapse under the weight of western sanctions have, to NATO's dismay, not materialized,²⁷ suggesting that the war will be more protracted and the prospects of a Ukrainian victory less likely. European strategic autonomy in the form of an independent military force – which would potentially undermine NATO's solidarity – looks as fanciful as ever. There have even been credible claims that Germany has spent none²⁸ of its new defense budget and the EU's 'strategic compass' initiative on joint defense innovation and production has been characteristically slow to get started.²⁹

We should parenthetically add that these dynamics of fuzzy bifurcation are not confined to NATO or its members. Alliances, formal and informal, are more fluid than ever. Asian states may cleave towards the USA on security but sustain their economic links with China. Indonesia, for example, is one of the USA's larger defense partners in the Indo-Pacific, cooperation including military exercises and events.³⁰ Yet it invited Russia to a meeting of the G-20 in November 2022 despite Western objections, resulting in the U.S. and many European states boycotting a subsequent finance ministers meeting.³¹

Likewise, when asked about this country's rejection of the American-sponsored sanctions regime, India's Minister of External Affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, commented "Europe's problems are not India's problems, as India lines up to buy record amounts of Russian oil,³² even as they attend Quad meetings. And Saudi Arabia refuses to pump more oil to assist European countries, while Brazil and Mexico reject the sanctions regime, and Brazil (and Argentina) agree to trade with China in Yuan instead of dollars.³³ Like their European counterparts, their interests are often too nuanced to throw their lot in with the U.S. simply. It's a fuzzy world.

27) David McHugh, "Russia's Economy Hold Up, But Growing Challenges test Putin," AP News, 13 March 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/russian-economy-ukraine-war-putin-sanctions-0231252b7a145040530245b58590f7f0>

28) "German Military Boost Fails to Spend Single Euro," BBC News, 14 March 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64955247>

29) Johannes Nordin, "The EU's Strategic Compass: Building Consensus Ahead of Strategy," Institute for Security & Development Policy, 1 April 2022. <https://www.isdp.eu/the-eus-strategic-compass-building-consensus-ahead-of-strategy/>

30) Bich Tran, "A Renewed Focus on Indonesia-U.S. Relations," CSIS, 17 February 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/renewed-focus-indonesia-us-relations>

31) "Putin and Zelensky Both Invited to Indonesia G20 November Summit," Le Monde, 29 April 2022. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/04/29/putin-and-zelensky-both-invited-to-indonesia-g20-november-summit_5981996_4.html

32) "India Finds Russian Oil an Irresistible Deal, No Matter the Diplomatic Pressure," New York Times, 4 May 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/04/world/asia/india-russia-oil.html>

33) "Brazil Takes Steps to Transact in Yuan as China Ties Grow," Bloomberg News, 30 March 2023. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-03-30/brazil-takes-steps-to-transact-in-yuan-as-ties-with-china-grow>

The Future of a Fuzzy World and NATO's Role in It

Geopolitics is spinning into a world divided between the U.S. and China. Of the major powers, including India, Japan, Russia, and the EU, only the U.S. and China have major populations, military might and global economic clout. The others only have two of the three at best. This is most evident in U.S. leadership of NATO, as it aids Ukraine, secures Finland's membership, and attempts to shepherd Sweden through the organization's admissions process despite Türkiye's objections. But NATO's new focus on China³⁴ may be more symbolically representative of this accelerating bifurcation. It is a process spurred by Biden's repeated clarion call for a division between democracies and autocracies. But we conclude, this is unlikely to work.

Some of America's closer allies (such as Hungary and Poland) are not authentically democratic and plenty of democracies (such as Israel, Mexico and Brazil) hedge, and are reluctant to join the fray. In a fuzzy world, values are not the basis for coalitions and allies are unreliable, even on the biggest of issues. Meanwhile, some economic unraveling may take place. But a meaningful and sharp detachment will be too complex and costly. Biden is unlikely to secure agreements with formal allies like Israel or partners like Saudi Arabia that diminish their diplomatic or economic relations with China and Russia or bolster the immediate delivery of oil and gas to the West. Such is the collision between geopolitics and geoeconomics.

A fuzzy, bifurcating world may be less dramatic than "Cold War 2.0." But it is a more accurate state of affairs. The United States will have to adapt to the idea that the support of even their closest NATO allies will be more contingent than consistent. Bandwagoning with the U.S., even by NATO members, is not assured unless it evidently suits their interests. Instead, it will have a greater reliance on balancing incentives and coercion. It is a world for which the Trump administration was ill-equipped, and with which the Biden administration now wrestles.

Tangibly, we can anticipate that the EU will strive for what it labels greater "strategic autonomy"—in truth little more than a capacity to assemble the necessary resources to act independently to protect its security and prosperity—if only to provide some insurance should Trump, or a comparably inclined nationalist, return to the White House. But unless Americans are willing give up their cellphones or most of the clothes they wear in a patriotic act, globalization-- wounded but with staying power—will continue apace.

34) "A More Muscular NATO Emerges as West Confronts Russia and China," New York Times, 29 July 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/29/world/europe/nato-expansion-ukraine-war.html>

Clean lines of Cold War bipolarity misstate the new order. This messy world has been evolving for some time. The pandemic and war have simply made the contrasting logics of economic globalization and political polarization between China and the U.S. more transparent. There is a bifurcation, but it is fuzzy. In that context, NATO membership will – for many members – occasionally be more of a convenience than a tie that binds.