

# The U.S. and rising powers

by Michael Schiffer



A destroyer of the South China Sea Fleet of the Chinese Navy fires a missile in the South China Sea on Nov. 17, 2007. Dozens of warships were deployed in a competitive training exercise to improve combat capability of the fleet. AP PHOTO/XINHUA, ZHA CHUNMING

**In the 21st century, there is more and more global competition for power and resources. What role will the U.S. play? What kind of relationship will the U.S. have with the rest of the world?**

*The likely emergence of China and India as new major global players—similar to the rise of Germany in the 19th century and the U.S. in the early 20th century—will transform the geopolitical landscape, with impacts potentially as dramatic as those of the previous two centuries. In the same way that commentators refer to the 1900s as the ‘American Century,’ the early 21st century may be seen as the time when some in the developing world, led by China and India, come into their own.*

*National Intelligence Council  
Mapping the Global Future (2007)*

In 1999, in the wake of the Asian financial crisis, the meltdown of the Long-Term Capital Management hedge fund spooking the markets and economic crises in Russia and Brazil, the cover of *Time* magazine featured “The Committee to Save the World”: the chairman of the U.S. Federal Reserve and the secretary and deputy secretary of the U.S. Treasury. With the cold war over and with what U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright (1997–2001) termed the “indispensable nation” enjoying a unipolar moment of primacy on the world stage, the conceit of the magazine cover—that the U.S. was the world’s sole great power—did not seem much of a stretch.

Now, just a decade later, that conceit seems the relic of a bygone era. While there is no ques-

tion that the U.S. remains the world’s most powerful actor, with unparalleled military, economic, diplomatic and cultural strength, other major powers—China, India, the European Union (EU), Japan and a resurgent Russia—have appeared on the horizon along with a host of others, like Brazil and South Africa, as increasingly important players. America’s unipolar moment, it seems, was brief, and the world now appears to be moving rapidly toward multipolarity or what one analyst has termed the “post-American” era.

In part, this is a function of U.S. policy mis- cues during America’s era of supposed ascendancy, but it is more fundamentally related to deep structural changes in the distribution and diffusion of power around the globe that have been years, if not decades, in the making. It is

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not necessarily that the U.S. is losing power in an absolute sense, but rather that the rapid rise of “the rest” across so many dimensions is creating new *relative* differentials, with the U.S. comparatively less powerful now than it was even just a few years ago. Moreover, changing technology is creating—and redistributing—new forms of power around the globe.

### Lessons from history

Classic international relations theory holds that during periods of “power transition,” when shifting power relations between nations create new patterns of power distribution, there are dangers that a misalignment of communications, expectations, perceptions and legitimacy among major powers can lead to breakdowns and the potential for conflict throughout the international order.

Indeed, a common source of instability is the result of friction between rising powers, which may believe they have been deprived of a “seat at the table,” and dominant powers unwilling to relinquish their positions, regardless of new realities.

From the decline of Spanish hegemony ushering in the Thirty Years War (1618–48) through the first and second world wars and the end of the British Empire, periods of power transition seem more often than not to be characterized by upheaval and violence be-

fore a new global equilibrium settles in.

The system can also come under stress, perhaps paradoxically, if rising powers fail to be responsible stakeholders in the global order and play the critical role of major powers in providing public goods and maintaining system stability. When dominant powers in decline find themselves unable to underwrite a well-functioning system, rising powers are called on to mind the gap. For example, following World War I, the U.S. retreated into isolationism and walked away from incipient international organizations and norms, failing in many significant ways to live up to its obligations as a rising power to uphold the global order. Although the causes of World War II were many, complex and varied, the vacuum created by the failure of the U.S. to engage and play a constructive role—providing the clout that the declining powers of Europe, drained by the Great War, no longer could—was surely among them.

Although some analysts contend that a clash between rising and dominant powers is inevitable, there is nothing automatic or mechanistic in this process. Policy choices and decisions—great and small—matter.

### What makes a major power?

Defining which states constitute the major powers of any era is never an

easy task and can be quite subjective. Broadly speaking, however, major-power status can be considered to be a function of the combined capabilities of force, wealth and ideational influence that a state can bring to bear upon the actions of others. Although major-power status is often seen as a function of superior military might, at least in general discussions, military power is just one dimension of the question.

For example, political scientist Kenneth Waltz has suggested a set of five different measures to assess a state’s power: its population and its territorial extent; its natural resources; its economy and economic capacity; the stability and facility of its political system; and its military strength. British historian Paul Kennedy likewise identified population size, urbanization rates, level of industrialization, energy consumption and industrial output as key measures of power in the 20th century, and as the basis of a nation’s military power. Other analysts offer similar sets of criteria by which to measure and track state power.

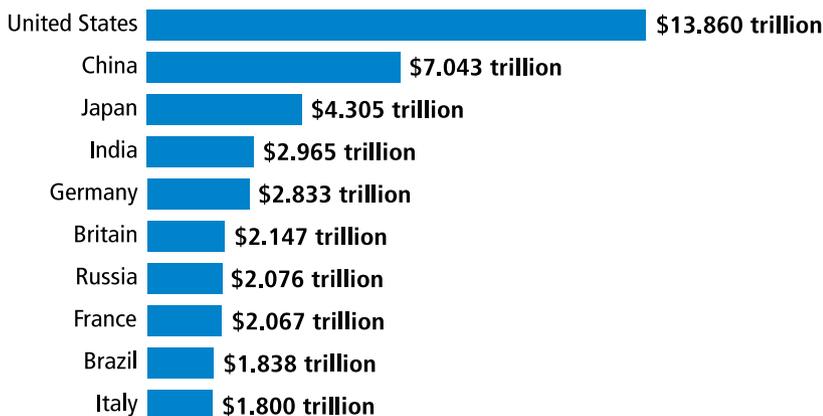
At the broadest level, much of the current public interest in the question of rising powers has been sparked by the remarkable economic growth of China and India. The scope and implications of the recent emergence of these two new players on the global scene can be clearly seen through an economic prism.

### Traditional power

For over a decade, China’s economy has grown annually at a 10% clip. By 2050, China’s economy will have grown 50-fold and will have overtaken the U.S. as the world’s largest economy (although the U.S. will still be richer because of its per capita gross domestic product, or GDP). India’s economy grew at close to 8% a year during the last decade, and if present trends continue, it will be one of the top three economies of the world by mid-century.

Spurred by the explosive growth in China and India, the world has been witnessing a transition from a global economy dominated by Europe and the U.S. to one dominated by the Asia-

### World’s Top Economies: Approximate GDP – Purchasing Power Parity



SOURCE: Central Intelligence Agency-*The World Factbook*, 2007 estimate

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People hold placards and burn firecrackers to celebrate the India-U.S. nuclear deal, in Ahmadabad, India, Sept. 6, 2008. Nations that supply nuclear material and technology overcame fierce obstacles and approved a landmark U.S. plan to engage in atomic trade with India, a deal that reverses more than three decades of American policy. AP PHOTO/AJIT SOLANKI

Pacific. The U.S. may still be China’s single-largest trading partner, but if the 27 states of the EU are considered as a whole, trade between the EU and China now eclipses that between the U.S. and China. With these changing trade patterns come significant changes in the flow of information, ideas, politics and diplomacy. These changes are leading, in some quarters, to a sense of “Asian triumphalism,” as Singaporean diplomat and scholar Kishore Mahbubani phrases it. According to Mahbubani, Asians who for centuries have been bystanders in world history are now ready to become codrivers and join the West in shaping global economic institutions, from the Interational Monetary Fund (IMF) to the World Bank.

Although economic growth has recently received considerable attention, for many, military power remains the gold standard for status as a major power. Perhaps no state serves as the poster child for burgeoning military muscle as much as China whose military has made a quantum leap in recent years, following in the wake of its dynamic economic expansion, marked by more than a decade of double-digit growth in its military budget due to a significant increase in efforts to enhance military capability.

One sign of China’s growing mili-

tary power can be seen in efforts by the Chinese Navy to extend its offshore capabilities and increase its strategic maritime depth, building a fleet with modern submarines and new destroyers while revising its naval doctrine to

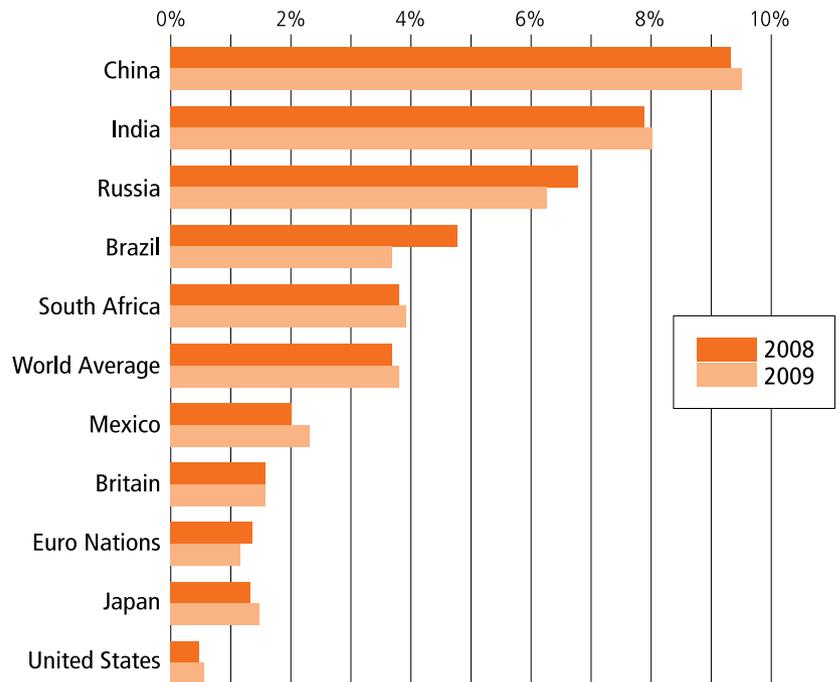
emphasize the ability to operate in the South and East China seas and, indeed, even beyond.

China’s military growth in the past few decades has been tremendous and spurred serious concerns in some areas regarding the country’s intentions. Indeed, looking at China solely though the prism of certain military modernization statistics, Beijing appears to be rising, and rising fast, soon to have, as a recent Pentagon report put it, “the greatest potential to compete militarily with the U.S.” on a global scale.

### Going nuclear

Another measure of military power in the new global era relates to the development and possession of nuclear weapons—and being treated as a legitimate “nuclear weapons” state, which the 1970 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) limits to the U.S., Russia, China, France and Britain. India has chaffed at this distinction for many years, and for many, the U.S.-India nuclear deal was as significant for its tacit acknowledgement

**GDP Forecasts:** Projected Percentage Change, Year Over Year



SOURCE: International Monetary Fund

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NOTE: Chart does not take into account global economic crisis of fall 2008.

of India as a nuclear weapons state—as too important to be outside the club, if not quite in and of it—as anything else, but with this acknowledgement coming at considerable potential cost to the future health and endurance of the nonproliferation regime itself.

Other major-power aspirants, such as Brazil or South Africa, have had nuclear programs in the past, but opted not to develop nuclear weapons, pursuing major-power status via other avenues. Japan, of course, has disavowed both nuclear weapons and offensive military power under its Peace Constitution, but in recent years has not been shy about its status as a “virtual” nuclear power, able to “go nuclear,” at least technically, on short notice. So long as nuclear weapons are seen as having currency as an indicator of major-power status (it is possible to have nuclear weapons and not be a major power, but is it possible to be a major power without nuclear weapons?), there is likely to be some tension between responsible nonproliferation norms and major powers’ orientation toward their own potential nuclear aspirations.

### Petro-power

Another significant dimension of power, as in eras past, are energy and natural resources, which appear likely to remain prominent features of new power modalities in the 21st century. In the context of the cross pressures of climate change and the need for emerg-



*Brazil's President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva holds up samples of biodiesel during his visit to Petrobras oil company in Rio de Janeiro, Oct. 26, 2007. AP PHOTO/RICARDO MORAES*

ing economies to maintain high levels of growth, energy-related questions—and the limiting factor that a lack of access may create—are critical, cutting several different ways for states that are aspiring to major-power status.

There can be little question, for example, that Russia’s reemergence on the world scene following its precipitous decline in the post-cold-war decade has been fueled almost exclusively by the riches accumulated from growing global demand for, and rising prices of oil and natural gas. (Senator Richard Lugar (R-IN) has described a new era of “petro-superpowers,” whose strength and influence is in direct proportion to their hold on oil and gas supplies.) Others, such as Brazil, likewise appear ready to leverage their access and expertise with new and alternate energy such as biodiesel, or, like Japan, to assert a position of world leadership through the development of new technologies for energy efficiency or alternate and renewable fuels.

Beyond the economic and military dimensions of power there is a range of other factors, such as demographics, that are also part of the traditional calculus of major-power status. Demographics are again a factor in the perceived rise of China and India, the two most populous states on the planet with seemingly endless supplies of labor, providing both with considerable influence on the global stage. Conversely, on the other side of the linkage is Russia. In recent years, the Russian people have faced several very serious health issues including high rates of HIV/AIDS and alcoholism, resulting in a declining life expectancy rate, now estimated at 65 years overall; 59 years

*World leaders at the G-8 summit, July 9, 2008, in Toyako, Japan. From left to right: IEA Executive Director Nobuo Tanaka, IMF Managing Director Dominique Strauss-Kahn, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Brazil's President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, South African President Thabo Mbeki, Japanese Prime*



for men. With a fertility rate of only 1.4, well below the normal replacement rate, Russian demographic trends are on the decline, which poses an interesting question about whether it is possible to be a major power and, at the same time, endure a demographic crash.

### Legitimacy of ‘power’

A final factor to consider in major-power status lies in the simple acknowledgement of that status by the other players in the international system. One way to measure the emergence of Brazil as a global player can be found in the increasing frequency with which Brazil, previously excluded from the council of the powerful, is recognized as a member of the club. Since 2003, Brazil has had observer status at G-8 (Group of Eight leading industrialized nations) meetings and U.S. policymakers in recent years have taken pains to refer to Brazil as a global partner and key regional power in Latin America. This sort of “recognition” is not just empty rhetoric, but has important practical and concrete applications. First, recognition and a drawing in of rising powers by the established order is a critical element in assuring that eras of power transition are smooth and peaceful. Second, given that the outcome of great historical events has often been determined when the dominant powers meet to discuss them, such as the Congress of Vienna (Nov. 1814–June 1815) following the Napoleonic wars, or the

Paris Peace Conference in 1919, who is invited into the room—and given a seat at the table—is of more than a passing interest to those invested in the outcome.

In today’s global system, the United Nations Security Council is the authorized and legitimized space for such a concert of powers and permanent membership on the council—currently reserved for China, France, Russia, Britain and the U.S.—confers status as a global stakeholder. This is precisely the problem for aspirants like India, Japan, Germany, Brazil and others who see permanent council membership as a club that no longer reflects the true distribution of global power.

This “acknowledgement” of great-power status feeds directly into two additional features of major-power status that are critical to both the exercise of a state’s power and to the proper functioning of the international community: legitimacy and the provision of public goods.

Indeed, as one analyst has noted, “A nation’s material power can be measured in fairly simple terms. On the one hand, military and economic strength may be arduous to acquire, but relatively easy to gauge. Moral authority, on the other hand, is more subjective and has no indices equivalent to GDP



CARTOONS.COM/ANGEL BOLGAN

or naval fleet tonnage. Yet the moral high ground is politically a very powerful place, and it cannot be unilaterally claimed or declared. In other words, legitimacy is in the collective eyes of the beholders.” For a major power, legitimacy, though harder to measure than these other metrics of power, can prove to be just as useful in the pursuit of interests. If power has to do with the ability to influence the actions of oth-

*Minister Yasuo Fukuda, U.S. President George W. Bush, Chinese President Hu Jintao, Mexican President Felipe Calderón, South Korean President Lee Myung-bak, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, EU President José Manuel Barroso, World Bank President Robert Zoellick and OECD Secretary-General José Ángel Gurría Treviño. AP PHOTO/PABLO MARTINEZ MONSIVAIS*



ers, being seen as legitimate in one's actions and goals can play a critical role in shaping the reaction of others to one's policies, gaining support and shaping outcomes.

### Power in a new era

Beyond these base features—wealth, military power, demographics and the like—the elements of major-power status must also be relevant to the realities of the new era and its defining features. Traditional concepts, like the geopolitical importance of spatial and geographic location that were stressed by analysts in the 19th and early 20th centuries, for example, became less relevant in an age of ballistic missile technology that rendered traditional force-space ratios irrelevant. Although many traditional elements of power remain crucial, the realities of a globalized, digitalized world of the 21st century have introduced new power dimensions that have allowed some unlikely countries to contend for major-power

status. While not a comprehensive enumeration, some of these new elements of power are the nature of soft power, globalization and innovation.

In an era of instantaneous global communications, soft power can be seen as playing an increasingly important role in a major power's portfolio. The concept of soft power was developed by Joseph S. Nye, Jr., dean of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, who summarized it as "... the ability to shape the preferences of others.... [It is] leading by example and attracting others to do what you want." This persuasive attractiveness plays out through popular culture, public diplomacy and the power of national ideas and ideals. American soft power helped further U.S. goals in the cold war. Today, many analysts point to China's marketing of its soft-power assets—be it as an exciting place to do business, an interesting culture or an alternative political model with notions of nonintervention and state

sovereignty—as essential to its rise.

But other rising powers also benefit from the increasing importance of soft power in shaping today's world. Indeed, in some ways it is the increasing importance of soft power that has allowed them to aspire to major-power status. Brazil has emerged on the world scene not only due to its vibrant economy, but also its vivacious culture, with the image of Brazil—its music and its beaches—helping to create an effective "brand" that leverages its economic potential in trade and its diplomatic profile in regional and global affairs.

The interconnectedness of the global economy and trade has likewise changed the complexion of traditional measures of economic power and the accumulation of national wealth. The level of worldwide trade, measured as a ratio of exports to GDP, is twice as high today as it was a century ago. Foreign direct investment and cross-ownership—of real estate, corporate assets, stocks and bonds—between the

## Who are the rising powers?

**SINCE THE POPULARIZATION** of the concept of great powers in the 19th century, academics have tended to apply the term to European powers, with the U.S. and Japan as exceptions. Thus the 1884 Congress of Berlin divided up Africa among the European colonial powers; the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 saw Europe—along with the U.S. and Japan—redraw the map of much of the world in the wake of World War I; and Tehran (1943) and Yalta (1945) saw the Allied powers remake the world again following World War II.

As the world enters the 21st century, the global landscape is shifting. Few would argue with the idea that the U.S., EU and Japan remain among the ranks of today's major powers. Likewise, few would contest the idea that China and India have emerged and have converted their rising influence to major-power status. Russia, as always, remains "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma," possessing some elements of major-power status—its vast energy resources, its nuclear arsenal—while other features, such as its demographic decline, argue for a less certain status.

Beyond these six, debate remains over how to measure the relative power and influence of rising powers like Brazil or South Korea, which clearly possess some elements of power but perhaps not enough—or not enough yet—to be included in the ranks of the globally influential.

Another is Turkey. Its claim to major-power status rests in part on its strategic location between Europe, Asia and the Middle East. Like real estate prices, power can, at least along one dimension, also be derived from "location, location, location." Turkey's geography provides it strategic influence on critical issues like energy. It also has conceptual influence, offering a model for secular Islamic development and politics. Turkey's continued political evolution will be a key marker for navigating between Europe and the Islamic world. Turkey will clearly exert considerable and perhaps decisive influence on some of the key issues facing the international community in the decades ahead. Turkey appears to have a claim on rising-power status in some respects, yet at the same time, its economy and military, while regionally influential and significant, seem to fall short as measures that provide the basis for global major-power status.

Regardless of how one may choose to answer the question of who is in, who is out and why, it seems reasonable nonetheless to conclude, as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (2005–2009) acknowledged in a speech in 2006, that "in the 21st century, emerging nations like India and China and Brazil and Egypt and Indonesia and South Africa are increasingly shaping the course of history." Indeed, with China and India seemingly on their way to great-power status, the political consolidation of Europe and the rise of "middle powers" such as Brazil and South Africa, the world is arguably witnessing a shift in power dynamics that has been unparalleled in 200 years.

major powers is unprecedented, creating truly global flows of capital, people and goods. When the New York Stock Exchange catches a cold, London, Tokyo and Shanghai all sneeze—and vice versa.

The creation of new financial structures and instruments has also changed the potential utility of national wealth accumulation (for example, through trade surpluses) as a tool of state power. Projecting power is no longer simply about being able to translate wealth into military force. China holds approximately \$600 billion in U.S. treasuries and China's total foreign currency reserves of some \$1.9 trillion, as of October 2008, seem to give it potential economic clout, even if analysts remain divided on exactly how China might operationalize this potential leverage in useful ways.

### Human capacity

A third feature of the new global order is an emphasis on innovation and the ability of a nation to compete in producing the scientific and technological breakthroughs that lead to economic (and other) power that will shape and influence the way people live. This is demonstrated by a debate often popularized through misleading statistics about how many engineers China or India is producing versus a decline in engineers produced in the U.S. When seen through the prism of inter-



*Panasonic's new eco-house system is seen on display in Tokyo, Japan, Feb. 13, 2008. The superclean technology creates energy from the chemical reaction of hydrogen combining with oxygen in the air to form water. Developers say fuel cells for homes reduce emission of global-warming gases by a third, compared to conventional electricity, due to their energy efficiency AP PHOTO/JUNJI KUROKAWA*

national patent applications, the U.S. still stands head and shoulders above the rest, with some 53,000 patent applications in 2007, compared to 28,000 for Japan and just 5,000 for China.

An emphasis on innovation also opens the door for new players on the world scene, who may lack some of the traditional prerogatives of major powers, to seek influence and leverage. South Korea, for example, is a global leader in new and emerging technologies like cloning, robotics and biotechnology, fields that seem destined to have as much influence in shaping the decades ahead as the automobile

sector did in shaping the last century. South Korea is now on track to become the world's ninth-largest economy, and with some 90% of its homes wired for high-speed internet, to cement its place as a hub in the networked world of the 21st century.

These elements may not be definitive for determining major-power status in the years and decades ahead, but measuring the ability of states to pursue their interests and shape events through these new and alternative dimensions of power will be a critical factor in discerning the character of the world to come. ●

## New global challenges

This era of rising powers and shifting global-power dynamics is defined not just by new elements of power status, but also by a host of new and shared global challenges. The ability of current and emerging powers to navigate these challenges—together or alone—will help define the 21st century.

First, there is the challenge of energy and natural resources. As rising powers place increasing demands on the world's resources and commodities—think energy and food, but also

water and a fragile ecosystem—will the 21st century see a return of geopolitical competition and mercantilist economics?

Looking at the “new international energy order,” defense analyst Michael Klare argues that America's sole superpower status is falling to the increasing influence of “petro-superpowers” like Russia and “Chindia,” and he warns of the danger of a new cold-war environment driven by energy competition. To head off potentially disastrous competition, Klare urges a

U.S. diplomatic initiative to build collaboration with China (rapidly moving to second place in carbon emissions) to develop alternative energy resources, such as biodiesel fuels; ultralight, ultraefficient vehicles; and an innovative plan to use new coal plants (currently in development) to strip carbon waste that can then be buried.

Indeed, the International Energy Agency's 2007 World Energy Outlook report concluded that growing demand from India and China is transforming the global energy system. Without

cooperative and collaborative mechanisms in place, major powers now compete around the globe to lock in long-term secure energy supplies.

The international energy market has also long depended on the notion that the U.S., in its role as global police officer and provider of public goods, would be willing to use force, if needed, to manage its operation. As energy security analysts Daniel Moran and James A. Russell have noted in their examination of the militarization of energy supplies, “international markets have always been sustained indirectly by the armed forces of major participants, above all by the great maritime powers (first Britain, now the U.S.), whose interest in the expansion of global commerce was and is backed by armed forces that secure an essential piece of the system: free transit of goods across the high seas.”

Thus, as a recent Stanley Foundation analysis brief concludes, the energy market has never been immune to political and strategic influence. Oil has been used as a weapon by oil-producing states in the past, and its price (along with that of natural gas) is reflective of a range of political pressures to which a perfectly efficient, private, agnostic market would be indifferent.

Closely related to energy security is climate change. Global emissions of “greenhouse gases” (gases that trap heat in the atmosphere) nearly doubled over the last 30 years, driven in large part by the economic growth of China, India and other rising powers (and by the failure of major powers to curb their behavior). With the threat of climate change mounting—warming temperatures, an increase in severe and unpredictable weather events, in some places, drought and the spread of tropical diseases—the global community will have to cut greenhouse-gas emissions dramatically in the coming decades simply to mitigate the worst effects of climate change.

However, for many rising powers a mandate to cut emissions is tantamount to putting the brakes on economic growth—a trade-off that may have unacceptable political consequences if mounting unemployment leads to social unrest. From the perspective of rising powers, any climate-change regime that does not demand severe concessions from already established powers—countries that have already had the opportunity to reap the benefits of industrialization—would be viewed as unfair and illegitimate.

In an era of concentrated power,

solutions to a challenge like climate change can be imposed on others. Yet in an era of diffused power, with different perspectives and interests, the questions remain as to who determines what a just and fair climate-change regime is and how it is enforced.

A third key global challenge lies in nuclear nonproliferation. Under the NPT, states without nuclear weapons pledged not to acquire them, while the five nuclear weapons states agreed to take actions to reduce their arsenals with the aim of eventually giving them up. The NPT and the core understanding animating it held for close to 30 years, deterring new states from acquiring nuclear weapons. However, in the two decades that have followed the cold war, stresses have increasingly threatened the “grand bargain” that buttressed the NPT regime for most of the second half of the 20th century. Those stresses include proliferation activities by a number of NPT signatories like North Korea and Iran that allow them to develop nuclear-weapons capability while remaining in compliance with the NPT; the international community’s treatment of nonsignatories like Israel, India and Pakistan; and the shortcomings of nuclear-weapon states like the U.S. and Russia to reduce their stockpiles.

A common characteristic of the strains facing the nonproliferation regime is their connection to the changing global order. If it were ever the case, it is certainly true today that the U.S. can no longer dictate the rules of the nuclear game. Russia is resurgent and unwilling to blithely accede to U.S. wishes. Regional power dynamics and security competition drive nuclear ambitions. Furthermore, the status associated with the possession of nuclear weapons makes it valuable for states seeking a seat at the global head table. The widespread reconsideration of nuclear energy in the context of climate change further complicates nonproliferation efforts.

A fourth challenge shaping the new era is the rise of terrorism and nonstate actors. In many respects the rise of terrorists with global reach can



*The United Nations Security Council discusses the situation in the Middle East, Sept. 26, 2008, at UN headquarters in New York City. Saudi Arabia, the Arab League and the Palestinian president urged the Security Council to save the faltering Middle East peace process by demanding an end to Israeli settlements in Palestinian territory. AP PHOTO/DAVID KARP*

be seen as the dark underbelly of globalization. Terror networks that may have their origin in a very specific political grievance are now able to operate worldwide through new information technologies, buoyed by global black markets of weapons and drugs which provide resources and material that “super-empower” what might otherwise have been troubling, but localized, manifestations of extreme and violent ideologies.

According to a recent Stanley Foundation paper, Joseph McMillan, a former Department of Defense official, has described such nonstate groups as “armed bands” that benefit from the globalization of information: “The information revolution is a major facilitator of almost anything a terrorist group would want to do, from collecting intelligence to propagating its ideological message to recruiting, indoctrinating and training new personnel.... Thorough indoctrination in what soldiers would call ‘the commander’s intent,’ coupled with the most sporadic of communications, could yield an unprecedented degree of fluidity and unpredictability in terrorist operations.”

A fifth challenge lies in the question of whether, as in eras past, internal domestic or cultural factors in major powers may be leading to a world in which there are multiple competing ideological frameworks, each with its own set of rules, interpretation and enforcement mechanisms. Political scientist Samuel P. Huntington famously put forward his “clash of civilizations” theory in 1993. More recently, Robert Kagan, neocon political commentator, has proposed that a division exists in the world between Western democracies and an “axis of authoritarianism” centered in China and Russia. Kagan suggests that a new, long struggle between ideologically opposed major powers is on the horizon. Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev, in the *American Interest*, offers his concept of a clash of civilizations between postmodern states and premodern illiberal ones, pointing to a Europe that is seeking to move be-



*A worker uses a blowtorch on a construction site in Beijing, China, Jan. 24, 2008. For over a decade, China’s economy has grown annually at a 10% clip. By 2050, China’s economy could overtake the U.S. as the world’s largest economy. AP PHOTO/GREG BAKER*

yond the use of force as a mechanism to arbitrate disputes and a Russia still reliant on flexing military muscle.

Krastev’s suggested ideological clash was read by many as the subtext of Russia’s actions against Georgia in the summer of 2008, which were seen as a return to a 19th-century “sphere of influence” approach. Russia’s military actions were in essence an announcement that it was not to be challenged in setting and enforcing the rules in what it terms its “near abroad,” and an exclamation point on an announcement that Russia was resurgent as a major power. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and a decade in which Russia’s economy was in shambles and its military second-class, it had seemed that Russia was destined to be a second-tier power. Yet there can be little doubt now that Russia was flexing its military muscle as a reminder that it must still be counted in the top tier.

There is an undeniable danger in major-power rivalry that breaks down along these sorts of ideological lines. Different and competing approaches to questions of sovereignty, legitimacy, intervention, the use of force and other normative practices, and the resultant implications for the shape of global order, is a formula that, lack-

ing the existence of broadly accepted ameliorative mechanisms seems destined to create friction, rivalry and perhaps even worse consequences.

### **A new global order?**

Thus, a final challenge for the new era of multiple rising and major powers lies in reinvigorating—or recreating—the structures of global governance that reflect power alignments in the international system at a given historical moment. As power relations evolve, global governance structures must either prove themselves sufficiently plastic to cope with new realities or risk rupture, to be replaced by new institutions and norms reflecting new realities.

Are there areas of convergence and/or divergence in the ways that major and rising powers view the current international civil order and its shared rules? Can effective multilateral approaches be developed for global governance in an era of multiple and rising powers?

In the aftermath of World War II, the U.S. helped establish a system of global institutions, norms and other mechanisms that were both capable and adequate to address the challenges of global-problem solving and adjudication, and also reflected



CAGLECARTOONS.COM/FREDERICK DELIGNE

the alignment of interests and powers in the world as it then stood. The five permanent members of the Security Council were the victorious powers of the war (with the exception of China), but they are no longer, some 60 years later, the five strongest or most important global players.

### Reshaping institutions

Since the norms of the international order are ultimately enforced by the major powers in a period of transition, the rules of the road can become ambiguous and it can be difficult to determine who plays the role of enforcer if different powers have different views. Thus the risk of conflict becomes higher. In many important respects the current gridlock in international institutions such as the UN and World Trade Organization (WTO) can be seen as a reflection of changes in power dynamics and the diffusion of power.

More recently, the global financial crisis in the fall of 2008 has thrown this question of the adequacy of international institutions to capably meet the challenges of the new global order into sharp relief.

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown summed up the conventional wisdom about the shortcomings of the post-World War II system of financial institutions—known as the Bretton

Woods system—when he said in October 2008, “The old postwar international financial institutions are out-of-date.... We need cross-border supervision of financial institutions; shared global standards for accounting and regulation; a more responsible approach to executive remuneration that rewards hard work, effort and enterprise but not irresponsible risk taking; and the renewal of our international institutions to make them effective early-warning systems for the world economy.”

In the wake of the financial crisis, numerous commentators concluded that the G-8 should exercise a coordinating and aligning role in the international community. But as the functional challenges of the crisis made clear, the G-8 as presently constituted does not have the right set of players gathered around the table. Many have ideas for how to determine the right set of players. Robert Zoellick, president of the World Bank, has proposed the creation of a G-14, drawing in additional stakeholders who would put their national interests at risk in addition to bringing their economic and financial power to bear. Others have suggested different configurations and geometry. Underlying all the proposals is a sense that no matter what set of players, the *right* set of players reflecting new power equities and realities needs to be woven into the institutional

architecture in order for it to prove adequate to the challenges of the new era.

### The end of unipolarity?

The financial crisis also appears to have highlighted another significant feature of the new era. After more than a half century in which the U.S. set the standards for the shape and functioning of international institutions, other powers are now asserting their prerogatives. The U.S., with its power in relative decline, has been compelled to accept that others are now setting the rules of the game. A newsmagazine cover story on “the committee to save the world” in the fall of 2008 would likely have featured European political leaders and central bankers playing the key roles in shaping the policy response, leaving the U.S. to accommodate, and in the unfamiliar position of following, not leading.

An additional consideration is how to restructure multilateral organizations to reflect the reality of new- and emerging-power dynamics. Though these institutions often serve as shock absorbers, smoothing relations among contending powers, there is also some danger that during periods of power transition, regional and global institutions may themselves become mechanisms for furthering competition among powers. Something of that dynamic was visible when Japanese and Chinese competition and rivalry played out in the run-up to the launch of the East Asia Summit in 2005. Japanese and Chinese interest in the institution waxed and waned in perfect proportion to one another, each clearly measuring the potential of the institution in zero-sum terms rather than as a way to ameliorate and smooth over competition.

In the end, global and regional systems are the mechanisms that allow nations to participate in multilateral, cooperative action. Managing today’s transnational threats and challenges requires a cross-regional, principled and multilateral “coalition for global governance” that incorporates as many of today’s middle and rising powers as possible.

One of the salient features of the challenges of the new era—be it non-

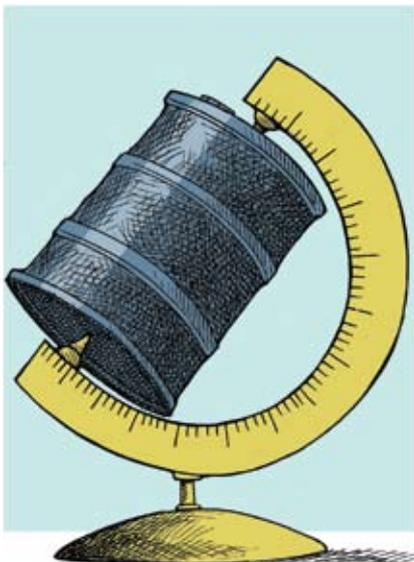
proliferation, terrorism, energy or architecture—is that the very essence of the problem presented to the international community is shared and common.

### The U.S. role in a multipolar era?

As this new world has started to come into focus, increasing amounts of ink are being spilled in response to the question of the strategic options available to U.S. policymakers.

Broadly speaking, several schools of thought have arisen about how the U.S. should react and deal with the changed and changing global circumstances. One school, citing the dangerous and turbulent nature of the world, stresses “primacy,” advocating that the U.S. maintain unrivaled military power to protect its interests and that it allow, in the words of the 2002 National Security Strategy of the U.S., “no peer competitors.” A second school, though it does not emphasize primacy, underscores the inevitability of a clash among the major powers, driven either by “realism” or cultural and civilizational issues. A final school acknowledges the reality of what has been termed the “post-American era,” but is divided over the best response, with some advocating the embrace of a multipolar world and a networked future, while others promote a retreat to isolationism, with good fences making for good neighbors.

As Mona Sutphen and Nina Hachi-



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gian, coauthors of *The Next American Century*, have argued, the best bet for the U.S. may be to take advantage of the new global reality and view other major powers—both established and emerging—not as competitors but as potential collaborators in dealing with global challenges. In a world of multiple major powers, a focus on strategic collaboration, while hedging in case things go sour, is likely to prove beneficial over the long haul, especially given the number of serious transnational issues that confront the world today. What might such an approach look like?

### Collaboration and recognition

First, the U.S. needs to appreciate the multidimensionality of the rise of other major powers. The real challenge of a China or an India is not so much in the military sphere, but rather along other dimensions of power—economic, cultural, diplomatic—where they will be “peer competitors” of the U.S. in the international community.

Second, the U.S. needs to appreciate the reality that power is relative and that the changing balance of power in today’s world is due at least as much to the erosion of American power—such as the decline in U.S. soft power in the context of Iraq—as because of the rise of other major powers.

Third, as other major powers seek to integrate and embed themselves in international institutions and seek positive relations not just with the U.S. but with each other, it will be difficult, if not impossible, for the U.S. to construct alignments that might hold down any one, let alone all, of the other major powers.

Fourth, so long as there is uncertainty about the strategy and objectives of any of the rising powers, the U.S. will be neither friend nor foe of that power. There can and should be cooperation on issues where there is a mutuality of interests. Confrontation can be avoided, but strategic transparency will be needed if the U.S. is to pursue positive relations.

Fifth, the goal of U.S. policy is not to try to prevent others from rising, but

rather to strengthen the mechanisms that will cushion the impacts of these changes in power distribution around the world. The U.S. should engage other major powers in enforcing international norms and standards—to be “responsible stakeholders” in the international community. The U.S. can build or expand areas of cooperation, such as climate change or the prevention of pandemics, where there are obvious shared interests. Additionally, the U.S. can strengthen its own ability to compete by getting its own house in order, addressing fiscal imbalances and pressing domestic issues that undermine core strengths (such as an educated and skilled workforce) and the U.S. position in the world.

Lastly, the U.S. needs to recognize that its own worldview will be critical to defining this new era, even as American power appears to be in relative decline. Whether the U.S. approaches these issues as zero or non-zero sum will shape and influence the views of other major powers, and over time, the world and the views of other major powers will tend to reflect the U.S. approach, for better or for worse.

Why should the U.S. seek such a collaborative and cooperative approach? The basic reason, according to Sutphen and Hachigian, is simple: given the realities of the challenges the U.S. faces in the 21st century, there is nothing that it can do on the global stage that could not likely be done better with the cooperation of others.

The U.S. cannot determine the future or the choices of other major powers. That task ultimately belongs to them. But by working with other major powers to tackle shared global challenges, the U.S. has a once-in-a-generation opportunity to shape the environment in which these powers make their choices while peacefully integrating these states into a rules-based international order—and, in the process, embedding them into the web of norms and responsibilities that come with being active players on the world stage. ●

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