

THE CHANGING OF POST-COLD WAR GLOBAL ORDER: NEW CENTERS OF POWER ARE EMERGING – THE SHIFT TOWARDS A MULTIPOLAR PERIOD –

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The post-Cold War period, which began in the early 1990s and was generally considered a unipolar stage, with the United States as the only superpower, has passed into a new phase, largely, due to the global consequences of Russia and China’s actions, marked by the events generated by Russia from 2006 until 2014 and in particular by the triggering, on 24 February 2022, of a new unprovoked war against Ukraine, a country invaded for the first time in 2014 and partially occupied for almost nine years but also by China’s actions in the South and East China Sea. The last decade and, in particular, the recent period is characterised by a global strategic competition between the US, China, and the Russian Federation and the alliances they belong to, accelerated by the Ukraine war and the tensions in the Indo-Pacific region, with consequences, among others, on the aspects regarding international order and defence-related aspects to the global strategy. BRICS has firmly committed to promoting the interests of the Global South, to creating a new more inclusive international order, forcing major structural changes to global and regional security architectures. Thus, a conflict of interests emerges between the actions and the role of the US, as a superpower, in the world arena and the actions of China and the Russian Federation, mainly to create a highly multipolar global situation and to evolve as a regional and global hegemon.

Keywords: international order; China; world superpower; Russia; strategic competition;

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

International order – based on respect and uphold of international law and the United Nations Charter, the equality of the sovereign states and the prohibition of the threat and use of force, as well as on the right of all peoples to self-determination and universal human rights, to ensure a lasting future in security and freedom – has been increasingly challenged lately. (Germany National Security Strategy, 2023, p. 19).

The status quo regarding global and, in particular, regional security was deeply changed after 24 February 2022, when the Russian Federation invaded Ukraine. The event with global consequences has affected peace and severely transformed the security environment, causing generalised instability and amplifying the strategic and systemic competition, involving operational aspects of the defence, largely determined by the actions of Russia and China. In these circumstances, *The NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*, adopted on 29 June, at the NATO Summit in Madrid, states that the Russian Federation is the most significant and direct threat to allies’ security, as well as to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area, because it uses conventional, cyber and hybrid means to undermine the rules-based international order and China’s coercive ambitions and policies challenge the Alliance’s interests, security and values. The Alliance must identify the ways to address the systemic challenges posed by China to Euro-Atlantic security (NATO, 2022, pp. 1-5).

China has been taking actions in the South China Sea (SCS) that have raised concerns among the US and its allies. These actions include building a large island with advanced military facilities in the Spratly Islands group, which China has occupied, and militarising the Paracel Island and the Scarborough Shoal. These activities, along with the actions of China’s naval forces in support of its claims against neighbouring countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei, and Malaysia, have increased US concerns that China may gain effective control over the SCS, which is a region of strategic, political, military, and economic importance to the US and its allies and partners (O’Rourke, 2023, summary). Thus, the SCS has become an arena of strategic competition between the US and China in the past 10-15 years. The US concern is also amplified by China’s naval forces’ actions

on the Senkaku Islands area in the East China Sea (ECS), administered by Japan. The Chinese domination of the seas and adjacent regions to the SCS, ECS and the Yellow Sea can deeply affect the US strategic, political and economic interests in the Indo-Pacific region with consequences on other areas' interests. Details are presented in *Figure 1*.

The last period can be characterised as marked by Russia and China's actions to create a highly multipolar global situation, with three superpowers – the United States, Russia, and China – thus triggering political, ideological, and military competition for influence across multiple geographic regions (Congressional Research Service, 2023, p. 38).

According to John Mearsheimer, scientist and professor of political science at the University of Chicago, the definition of *great power* is “a state having sufficient military assets to put up a serious fight in an all-out conventional war against the dominant power – that would be the United States – and possessing a nuclear deterrent that could survive a first strike against it” (Work, 2015, p. 3). Holbraad Carsten, scientist and professor of political science at the Australian National University, asserted that a *superpower* is one “able to wreck half the world, and committed upon conditions to do so. Also, it must command the technology and economy to maintain into the foreseeable future the strategic forces needed for that destructive capacity” (Holbraad, 1971, p. xi). The superpower deploys vast conventional forces worldwide and maintains them for unforeseeable future events. A *hegemon* is “a state so powerful that it dominates all the other states in the system. No other state has the necessary armed forces to undertake a decisive fight against him. Essentially, a hegemon is the only great power in the prevailing political or social order. A state that is to a great extent, or significantly, stronger than the other great powers in the system is not a hegemon, because it confronts and deals with or accepts other great powers by definition and does not dominate them in a significant way – a situation that implies a lot of effort or ability to obtain or maintain such a state”. Actually, at that time, the great power deemed another great power as a significant threat to the balance of power. Hegemony entails the control or influence of the system, which is usually considered the entire world (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 40, 166).

The international security environment after the Second World War has changed dramatically. To highlight the dispute for global supremacy, the following periodisation, detailed below, was used in the article.

The Cold War period – on the whole, it is considered to have lasted from the late 1940s until the late 1980s, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989

or early 1990s, as a result of the disbanding of the Warsaw Treaty in March 1991 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union into Russia and the former Soviet republics in December 1991, key events marking the end of the Cold War. It is described as a strong bipolar situation, with two superpowers, the United States, supported by the NATO Alliance, and the Soviet Union, supported by the Warsaw Pact Alliance, which were in a political, ideological and military rivalry to promote their interests in several geographical regions of the globe.

The post-Cold War era, on the whole, is considered to last between the late 1980s or early 1990s until 2006-2008 or 2014 or 2022. Since 2006, the number of countries facing net decreases in freedom has increased. In February 2007 Russian President Vladimir Putin criticised and rejected the concept of unipolar power at the *International Security Conference* in Munich. In 2008, Russia invaded and occupied part of the former Soviet Republic of Georgia, triggering a financial crisis and deep recessions in the United States and Europe, combined with China's ability to manage this crisis and successfully conduct the Summer Olympics in 2008 (Götz, 2019, pp. 134-138; Repucci, 2021, p. 2). Another marker was in 2014 when China continued its actions in the SCS and ECS, fully militarising at least seven artificial islands in the Spratly Archipelago, which it built from December 2013 to October 2015, creating 1,295 hectares (3,200 acres) of new land since 2013 – Mischief, Gaven, Subi, Cuarteron, Fiery Cross and Hughes Islands, former reefs – which it raised in a disputed area, these being aspects associated with China's economic growth and military modernisation. The seizure and annexation of Crimea in March 2014 represents the most relevant marker of the transition from the *post-Cold War* to the *Multipolar era*. Compared to the Cold War period, the post-Cold War era is, on the whole, described by a low level of political, ideological and military rivalry between the great powers. This period is also considered a unipolar situation with the United States as the only superpower in the world. In this period Russia, China or another great power has not been considered a relevant challenge for the status of the United States, as the only superpower in the world or for the US-led international order. On 24 February 2022, the Russian Federation resumed the invasion of Ukraine. Taiwan's invasion by China would be the last and significant confirmation of the transition to the Multipolar era (Congressional Research Service, 2023, p. 38).

The Multipolar era – the world is undergoing profound changes, we are living in an era that is increasingly multipolar and marked by rising systemic rivalry. The global order is being changed – new centres of power are in progress, and the world of the 21st century seems to be multipolar. Russia's brutal war of aggression

against Ukraine fundamentally challenges the European and global security order, a fact that confirms that we are already in a period of increasing multipolarity. Great powers are trying to undermine and adjust the current international order under their conception of systemic rivalry and their revisionist notions of spheres of influence (Götz, 2019, pp. 134-138). In this international context, China could be a partner – without whom many of the most pressing global challenges cannot be resolved, but it is also a systemic competitor and rival. Today's Russia is, for now, the most significant threat to peace and security in the Euro-Atlantic area. China attempts through different actions to reshape the existing rules-based international order, is adopting with increasing intensity a dominant position in the region, acting in opposition to the US and its allies' interests and values. Russia's aggression war against Ukraine is a flagrant violation of the United Nations Charter and the European Cooperative Security order. Its purpose is to suppress Ukraine's state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the political existence of a state and finally the materialization of his imperialist policy of the spheres of influence.

Through the enhancement of conventional and nuclear forces, Russia threatens global strategic stability and pursues its interests in the international arena through a policy that tries to undermine international law, human rights and international order. During its war of aggression against Ukraine, it threatened periodically the West with the use of tactical nuclear weapons and China purposely used its economic influence to attain political objectives. (Germany National Security Strategy, 2023, pp. 5, 13, 23). Among the characteristics that highlight the amplification of the competition between the great powers can be listed: Russia and China denying, disputing, or arguing the key elements of the US-led international order, respectively the inadmissibility of altering international borders by force or coercion and priority for peacefully solving disputes between states, without the use, or threat of use, of force or coercion; systemic employment by Russia and China of new types of information and cyber military operations, or paramilitary, in an aggressive or provocative way, sometimes assimilated to hybrid warfare, gray-zone operations or ambiguous war – in the case of Russia – and tactics of gradually achievement, over a period of time, in small stages of goals, which are less likely to be noticed or gray-zone operations – in the case of China's actions; the renewed competition for new allies and partner states between the three great powers; technological competition, especially in the field of emerging disruptive technologies, between the United States, China and Russia. This new international security situation has led analysts to define it, as a tripolar or multipolar world. (Congressional Research Service, 2023, p. 39).

Signs of passing to the Multipolar world. The most relevant sign, decisive for the transition from the post-Cold War era to the Multipolar era, was Russia's seizure and annexation of Crimea in March 2014, by using force, an act representing the first annexation of a territory belonging to a state by another state in Europe, since World War II. Other signs of transition – but not only limited to them – referring to China were: the increasing economic growth, modernising military capabilities to sustain the so-called high-intensity technologically sophisticated conventional war, development of nuclear weapons technologies, development and deployment of new emerging disrupting weapons systems, and development of mobilisation capacities to carry a large-scale conflict of extended period. All this is associated with China's actions in the SCS and ECS and those regarding the possible invasion of Taiwan – these were phased, gradual, and amplified, crescent in evolution, sophistication, development and, on capacities, by successive additions at time intervals. China's strategy is to use a series of aggressive actions and reduced-extensive challenges to produce a much larger action or result, that would be difficult or illegal to be carried out all at once, also representing a divide-and-conquer tactic used to dominate the adversary's territory, piece by piece. Such military operations are too small to result in a war, creating confusion for the aggressed neighbouring state, as it is not able to decide how and how much should it respond. These small military actions also help to avoid international diplomatic attention and, cumulate over a while, resulting in a significant strategic advantage for the aggressive state.

Since 1494, in the global political system, there have been 6 full systemic cycles regarding the succession of global powers – each period associated with a world power – and now the global system is in a transition phase into the 7th.

THE US'S ACTIONS AND PURPOSE – AS A SUPERPOWER – ON THE WORLD STAGE

To protect its interests a state employs all the means available, including diplomatic, informational, military, and economic tools. Existing international order, based on rules, is usually represented by a group of organizations, institutions, treaties, rules, norms, and procedures or methods that are meant to organize, structure, and regulate the interactions and connections between the sovereign states. The current order is established by the US and its allies.

The traditional mission of the United States in the world, since the end of World War II is clearly defined or identified according to the period of time and is generally based on four essential components: global leadership; the defence and promotion

of the liberal international order; the defence and promotion of human freedom, democracy and rights; and preventing the occurrence of regional hegemony in Eurasia. We are living in a decisive decade, one marked by dramatic changes in geopolitics, technology, economy and environment and the world has to cope with crucial challenges in the coming years. The purpose of the US in the world has changed, but not fundamentally, depending on each administration (Congressional Research Service, 2021, pp. 1-14).

Global leadership. After the end of World War II, the US played the traditional role of global leadership, so the United States became the most relevant state in notifying, identifying, assessing, or characterising international issues, undertaking actions to deal with these difficult issues or tasks, to establish an example for other countries regarding the path to be followed, organising, coordinating and implementing agreed efforts or with the participation of several countries to tackle international issues and implementing international rules and norms. Unnecessary withdrawal from the global leadership would result in the creation of vacuums in the global leadership, in establishing and maintaining global rules and norms, in settling specific disputes and other issues, and especially in the regional power balance that China and Russia, as well as France, Turkey, Syria, Iran, or other states, would try to complete it, often to the detriment of US interests and values. (Congressional Research Service, 2021, pp. 1-9).

The defence and promotion of the liberal international order. It represents a crucial importance element for the US in the world, naturally, in close interdependence with the first key element mentioned above. The liberal term used in this context is not used in the conservative-liberal sense that describes contemporary US or other states' policies. It is a previous employment of the term that refers to order based on the rule of law, as opposed to the order based on random selection - respectively on personal whims, rather than on any argument, set of principles, procedures, framework and organised method – of the hereditary monarchs. Among the main features of the rules-based liberal international order can be mentioned the following: respecting international law, international rules and norms, and universal values, including human rights; powerful international institutions for supporting and implementing international law, international rules and norms, and universal values; respect for the territorial integrity of states, and the unacceptability of changing international borders by force or coercion; priority for peaceful settlement of disputes between states – without the use, or threat of use, of force or coercion – In a manner in accordance with international law; the use of liberal rules-based international trading and investment systems to promote

open economic engagement in order to assure development and prosperity; and, the treatment of international waters, international air space, outer space, and more recently cyberspace as domains that belong to, and affect, the entire international community to a significant extent and do not represent domains subject to national sovereignty. In the absence of these rules – as part of an ordinary procedure, rather than a special justification – more powerful states may impose their will arbitrarily on less powerful states, organisations, or individuals, without respecting any norms. Generally, it is considered to be an evolved order, even perfect but like other global orders that preceded it does not have all the necessary or appropriate elements in terms of geographical coverage and methods, approach, or way of implementation; it presents a relatively low level of ambition to put into practice; it is perfectible; sometimes it is not respected by all actors; it does not fully exclude arbitrary behaviour; it is not accepted by certain states or non-state actors; and it is predisposed to be affected by certain pressures, tensions or challenges.

The existing liberal order was established by the United States – the only state that possessed the capability and will to create a new global order – with the support of its allies in the next year after World War II. The main purpose of creating the liberal international order was the desideratum to prevent the trigger of new world wars, strengthen economic exchanges, and avoid worldwide economic dysfunctions, preventing the emergence of undemocratic social systems, increasing the standard of living, and respecting human rights. Supporters of the liberal international order state that establishing and maintaining this order required certain costs and efforts mainly provided by the US. To compensate them, the US would benefit from relevant advantages in the fields of security, politics, economics, and military, and especially in preserving an advantageous balance of power, both globally and regionally, to the detriment of other great powers and also favours the US in holding a leading role in configuring institutions, organisations, system or sets of rules globally in a firm and determined manner in the field of finance and international trade. Some criticisms of the liberal international order claim that it is mainly designed to perform duties or services for the United States and to support the global prominence or hegemony of the US (Congressional Research Service, 2021, pp. 1-9).

Defending and promoting human freedom, democracy and rights. These are universal values for the liberal order and have contributed to indicating the weaknesses of the authoritarian and illiberal forms of government in a disapproving way and resisting their consequences in certain states. This mission of the US is following Western fundamental political values but is also the result of theory,

according within, the states where there is a functional democracy the actions of governments are the result of their population will and, consequently, the risks of triggering aggression wars against other states or between them are reduced. This task of the US is also considered a soft power component by which pro-Western governments, as well as, organizations, and institutions from other states are determined, persuaded or attracted support to cooperate with the United States in correcting, adapting, and influencing the actions of authoritarian and illiberal governments so that they do not have hostile behaviour towards US interests.

Preventing the emergence of regional hegemon in Eurasia. This role was determined by two key elements: *the first – the influence of the geographical features specific to Eurasia:* the relative sizes and locations of countries or land masses, the locations of the great importance resources, the geographical barriers, and the key transport links but also of the population and economic activity on international relations would lead to a regional hegemon in Eurasia wielding enough power to pose a threat to vital US interests; *the second – it is considered that Eurasia is not able to self-regulate in a trustworthy, predictable, or reliable way,* to impede the emergence of regional hegemon, which highlights the fact that it cannot rely on the efforts of Eurasia states to obstruct the occurrence of a regional hegemon. This assumes that support from other states that do not belong to Eurasia is required to be able to get rid of this option with certainty (O'Rourke, *Defense Primer*, 2023, p. 1). Obstructing the appearance of a regional hegemon in Eurasia is occasionally described in terms that induce the idea of necessity or as an act associated with maintaining peace and security through cooperation, respectively maintaining a balance of power, a separation of power in Eurasia or impeding a great power to dominate several key regions in Eurasia or preventing the appearance of several hegemon each for a certain region belonging to Eurasia.

Assessing the instances in which the American armed forces had carried out potentially hostile military actions outside the borders and which can be associated with the mission to prevent the emergence of regional hegemon in Eurasia, the following types of actions can be identified:

a). *US participation in World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War.* Given that the goal of preventing the emergence of regional hegemon had not been explicitly formulated until World War II, US participation in World War I can be appreciated in retrospect as a previous US action that is circumscribed to this objective. The involvement of the US in the Vietnam War was argued by the provisions of the so-called domino theory, which claimed that a possible victory of North Vietnam – supported by China and the Soviet Union, led by a communist

regime over South Vietnam – supported by the US, could be accompanied by other countries in the region, as in the domino game, thus reaching under communist control. The U.S. was trying to prevent the spread of communism in the fragile countries of Asia, which had recently become independent. The conflict ended with the defeat of South Vietnam and the unification of the country under communist leadership. The contenders of the domino theory contested its validity and sustained that it was false as the victory of North Vietnam was not followed by other countries in the region. The theory lawyers claim that the theory is valid because the long support of the U.S. offered other countries in the region space to improve their political institutions and economies to discourage and defend against communist movements. The support of the US and its allies for Ukraine in the war with Russia may have as its objective, among others, the prevention of the emergence of a regional hegemon;

b). *establishment of security alliances and partnerships* in all geographical areas to attract support in the area to deter and counter the attempts of any great power to obtain a regional hegemon status: NATO Alliance – to prevent the Soviet Union (now Russia) in Europe; alliances with East Asia and Pacific states to prevent China or Soviet Union (now Russia) in East Asia; security partnerships with states from the Persian Gulf region – to prevent Iran or Soviet Union (now Russia) in the Persian Gulf region;

c). *complex, political, diplomatic, and economic, actions, and other nature* – the Marshall Plan and external assistance programs – to discourage and counter the Soviet Union's similar actions during the Cold War. To fulfil this role, the US has collaborated with or supported nondemocratic regimes that, for their rationales, treat China, Russia, or Iran as adversaries. Therefore, sometimes this objective has been in contradiction to defending and promoting human freedom, democracy, and rights. It may be considered that US relations with authoritarian and illiberal states tacitly facilitate a re-emergence of authoritarian and illiberal forms of governance. (Congressional Research Service, 2021, pp. 1-9).

China's actions – BRICS member – to create a highly multipolar global situation and to evolve as a regional hegemon and superpower

Strategic competition, large-scale instability and sudden and surprising recurrent events define our broader security environment. China is the only competitor that has established an objective but also has the economic, diplomatic, military, means, and technological power to reshape the international order (Theohary, 2023, p. 2).

The most comprehensive challenge, which requires careful analysis or a multilateral approach to US security is China's coercive behaviour, regarding the probability of using or employment force and the intensifying effort to reconfigure the Indo-Pacific region and the international system to favour the implementation of its interests and priorities. To fulfil this goal the People's Republic of China (PRC) acts to undermine US security alliances and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region coerces neighbouring states and threatens their interests by the exertion of force and deterrence, based on developing capabilities, economic influence, and conventional and nuclear military capabilities. The more and more aggressive intimidation actions towards Taiwan become destabilising for security in the region, threatening peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. All these actions are part of a large plan for China to destabilize and impose its will in the ECS, the SCS, and the Taiwan Strait. In the last period, the PRC has developed and modernized all the services of army forces, the capabilities of waging war in all domains, especially emerging technologies that influence strategic stability, pursuing the bridging capability gaps or advantages with the US in these fields or even overcoming it. The pace of development and modernisation of China's military capabilities is a challenge in itself.

The PRC has made remarkable progress in the development of its conventional forces, but also in those of the forces dedicated to the cyber, electronic, informational, space, and spatial defence warfare military actions, as well as, the joint integration of these capabilities. China tries to counteract the joint capacity of the US for force projection and the defence of its or allies' vital interests in a crisis or conflict situation. The PRC also extends the deploying area of its military forces and the necessary infrastructure for force projection in the region or other areas. In parallel, the PRC is accelerating the modernisation and expansion of its nuclear capabilities. (US Department of Defense, 2022, p. 4). In NATO documents it is mentioned that the PRC's coercive ambitions and policies are assumed, to challenge NATO interests, security, and values.

The PRC – a pacing threat – uses a wide range of political, economic and military tools to amplify its global power projection and presence and at the same time continues to act non-transparently in terms of strategy, and intentions and gradually accumulating or increasing the armed forces.

The main actions that contribute to the achievement of the PRC objectives are represented by the hybrid and cyber operations and are supported by coercive rhetoric and broader disinformation that targets to decrease the security of the US and its allies. The PRC also makes efforts to dominate and influence the key

technological and industrial sectors, critical infrastructure and strategic materials as well as the supply chains, particularly in the military field and emerging technology. It takes advantage of the economic progress to create and maintain strategic political and economic subordination and to create an environment favourable to achieving its long-term goals. It strives to undermine the power and authority of the international order based on rules, especially in the space, cyber and maritime fields.

A feature of China's actions is the lack of transparency that also manifests in terms of its policies, plans, and capabilities of nuclear weapons, extending and diversifying the nuclear arsenal, launching them from all domains, achieving the nuclear triad, respectively, increasing the number of delivery systems technologically sophisticated and warheads. It does not engage in nuclear weapons control agreements, plutonium production for military programs, or risk reduction. The strengthened strategic partnership between the PRC and Russia and their concerted attempts to undermine the existing international order, based on rules, are in contradiction with the US and its allies' interests and values and NATO. (NATO, 2023, pp. 2-5).

Tensions in the SCS have become a situation requiring quick or immediate action or attention for the US in the last period. SCS represents an area with heavy traffic and is the subject of sovereignty disputes between Brunei, the PRC, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam. Territorial disputes in SCS refer to the locations of the islands groups: Paracel Islands – reclaimed by China and Vietnam, and were seized by China, in 1974 from South Vietnam; Spratly Islands – are claimed entirely by China, Taiwan, and Vietnam, and in part by the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei, and which are occupied in part by all these countries except Brunei; and Scarborough Shoal – is claimed by China, Taiwan, and the Philippines, and controlled since 2012 by China. The respective regions contain significant undersea resources including coral. Japan has a disagreement with China and Taiwan in the ECS over the Senkaku Islands which are claimed by China, Taiwan, and Japan but are administered by Japan. Maritime territorial disputes in the SCS and ECS are not recent date but have occurred in recent years, starting with 2001, and have periodically led to diplomatic tensions, as well as confrontations and incidents at sea that have involved fishing vessels, oil exploration vessels, and oil rigs, coast guard, naval ships and military aircraft. These represent attempts to claim by using force, intimidation, or coercion but the US demanded that disputes be resolved without constraint and based on international law respecting the freedom of navigation and overflight or other lawful uses of the sea.

The United States and China have a long-term dispute on the right of the foreign military to operate in waters near China, including in the SCS. The dispute resulted in naval and air incidents between Chinese and American ships and aircraft in international waters and, respectively, airspace. Since 2013, the disagreement between the US and China on the freedom of seas for military ships and aircraft has been emphasised by China's actions to build the group of Spratly artificial islands on which military equipment has been deployed. The building of the artificial islands group can be interpreted as an intermediate stage of a plan to dominate the SCS and finally, China to become a regional hegemon that regulates the situation in the region for other regional actors. (O'Rourke, 2023, pp. 1-10, 16-20, 51-59; Kan, 2014, pp. 1, 23).

To strengthen its domination in the MCS, China also claimed the Scarborough Shoal and proclaimed an Air Defense Identification Zone over the MCS's areas. Details are presented in *Figure 1*.



Figure 1: Maritime Territorial Disputes Involving China. (O'Rourke, 2023, p. 52).

**Actions of the Russian Federation – BRICS member –
to create a highly multipolar global situation
and to evolve as a regional hegemon and superpower**

The Russian Federation through its irresponsible behaviour undermined peace in the Euro-Atlantic region and global security and violated international law, the Charter of the United Nations, OSCE commitments and principles and the norms and principles that built a stable and predictable European security environment. Russia – a major power with modern and diverse capabilities – represents for NATO the most significant and direct threat to the allies' security and peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area. It triggered an illegal, unjustifiable, and unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine. NATO will never recognise Russia's illegal and illegitimate annexations, including Crimea. Russia's war has had a profound impact on the international order and global stability, it was arguably a turning point, as they confirmed the latent concerns about an aggressive and revanchist Russia. (NATO, 2023, pp. 1-3). Russia seeks to use force to impose border changes and to reimpose an imperial sphere of influence. Russia has developed its military forces for military actions specific to all forms of battle and in all domains, has modernised its nuclear forces, including long-range stocks of weapons, and diversified its battle equipment based on emerging disruptive technologies for the employment of nuclear and conventional ammunition, increased its military activities in Europe's North, particularly by adding nuclear-capable missiles to Kaliningrad, it has amplified its military presence in the regions of the Baltic, Black, and Mediterranean Sea and maintains significant military capabilities in the Arctic region.

The regional and global security environment and the international order are affected by the increasingly aggressive and provocative attitude of Russia associated with the violation of international law, fueling tensions and instability across all regions, the concern for the build-up of military capabilities and destabilising activities, including near NATO borders and the deployment of forces and equipment in Belarus. (Bowen, 2023, pp. 16, 21, 23). It has forces stationed in Georgia and Moldova without their consent and has militarized those regions. All of Russia's hostile policies and actions are part of a posture of strategic intimidation. Russia presents serious, continuing risks in key areas: nuclear, long-range cruise missiles, cyber and information operations, counter space, chemical, and biological weapons, undersea warfare, and extensive grey zone campaigns targeted against democracies in particular. (US Department of Defense, 2022, p. 5).

In the last period, hybrid and hostile actions – interference in democratic processes, interference in US and European elections in 2016, political and economic coercion, large-scale disinformation and manipulation campaigns, cyber activities that cause serious damage, illegal and disruptive activities of intelligence services and revisionist foreign policy – against NATO allies and partners have become characteristic, all these have been combined with an energy crisis intentionally exacerbated by Russia. Russia – an acute threat – makes efforts to undermine the current international order based on rules, NATO values and interests and its partners, deepening and diversifying the strategic partnership with the PRC, North Korea and Iran. Its energy and raw materials policies are a part of this strategy. The deterioration of the international security environment is also amplified by the violations and the selective implementation of obligations and commitments regarding arms control, disarmament and implementation of non-proliferation architecture. (NATO, 2023, pp. 1-5).

Russia and the PRC deploying counter-space capabilities that can target the U.S.'s Global Positioning System and other space-based capabilities that support military power and daily civilian life. Also, could use a wide array of tools in an attempt to hinder the U.S. and its allies' military preparation and response in a conflict. Russia speculates the opportunities and risks offered by emerging and disrupting technologies for alteration, the global and regional strategic balance of power, conflict nature, as well as, accelerating the arms race, exacerbating strategic competition, and obtaining advantages from armament trade - aspects highlighted in the context of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. It also uses them in hybrid actions, to destabilise, increase ambiguity complicate the decision-making process, and slow effective response coordination, aiming at political institutions, critical infrastructure, societies as a whole, democratic systems, economies, and security of citizens to counter what Moscow considers to be conventional military superiority of the USA and NATO. (Bowen, 2023, pp. 6, 22; NATO, 2023, p. 11). The renewal of superpower status competition has led, among other things, to enhance the emphasis on nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence, all of which relate to China and/or Russia. (Dibb, 2016, pp. 5, 12-14).

Russia after the invasion of Ukraine, when the conventional assets were not sufficient to achieve the military objectives threatened several times with the use of nuclear weapons – using them as a shield –to intimidate Ukraine, NATO and international organisations. In this context, conventional aggression has the potential to escalate to the employment of nuclear weapons at any scale.

Russia remains the US rival with the most capable and diversified nuclear forces. Russia is a state, structurally militarised, with a colossal military burden, with a non-performing, non-competitive economy, its actions blur the lines between economic and national security and are based on nuclear deterrence in projecting its interests. (Rosefielde, 2004, p. 3).

The unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine signs the emergence of a more militaristic Russia that seeks to overturn the post-Cold War European security system and challenge the broader rules-based international order. It also aims to expand its control over regions of the former Soviet empire, which now belong to independent states, to claim what it considers, a correct stance on the world arena. Russia invokes multipolarity as a justification for this war. From Russia's perspective, the *Collective West* behaves as the sole hegemon of the world, without any rights, consequently, the war is justified because the conflict is catalogued as one between Russia and the West, an argument now supported by more states than at the beginning of the war. Russia and China – have a bilateral partnership “*No-Limit*” – are trying to present an alternative worldview to the one offered by the *Collective West*, attracting as many countries as possible alongside their efforts to shift the global power balance (McCarthy, 2023, pp. 1, 6).

BRICS, partnership for mutually accelerated growth, sustainable development, and inclusive multilateralism

BRICS wants to become a unique economic-financial and geopolitical block and aims to generate a large movement to revise the global economic-financial order and international order in general. This order can only be the result of a confrontation with the *Collective West*, its defeating, and the overthrow of the global political system established by the 1944 *Bretton Woods Agreement* and the 1945 *San Francisco Agreement* on the United Nations Charter. But to challenge the *Collective West*, it must become an alliance with multiple dimensions: political, military, and economic-financial. (Felea, 2023, pp. 1-2, 14-17). Obtaining a consensus for this objective is very difficult because it does not yet have clearly defined mechanisms and structures, there are no political, ideological currency, trade, or political ambitions, to bring together these nations. China and India – old political rivals – for example, rarely agree on crucial matters, and the criteria for expanding the organisation are such an example. (Matovic, 2023, pp. 12-14). Most members, including 5 out of the 6 newly admitted to Johannesburg in 2023, are not unfavourable to cooperation with the West and some of them see no reason for denouncing the democratic-liberal order (Felea, 2023, pp. 14-17).

BRICS has been a significant driving force for global growth, trade, and investments over the past few decades. The organisation aims to create a more inclusive world order that provides equal access to opportunities and resources, which is more rightful and equitable. However, BRIC is aware that global financial and payment systems are increasingly being used as instruments of geopolitical contestation. Therefore, the organisation believes that the current economic, political, social, and technological realities require a fundamental reshaping of global governance institutions to make them more representative and capable of addressing the challenges that humanity faces. (Ramaphosa, 2023, pp. 1-2). This collective growth is altering the global balance of power that was once centred on the NATO region and necessitates significant changes to global and regional security architectures. (Walsh, 2013, p. 2).

BRICS advocates for a multipolar global system that is a viable alternative for Asia, African, and Latin American countries as compared to the current system – centred on the *Collective West*. There are concerns that one or more of these emerging powers, BRICS members, may reject the status quo and, consequently, threaten international peace and stability. BRICS aims to bring about changes in the UN and international financial institutions' management structures to address the current situation in the world economy.

Recently, there has been an increasing awareness of whether the global political system will change through conflict or negotiations.

CONCLUSIONS

A superpower – in this case the US – acts to preserve its status, maintaining and amplifying its influence on a global scale, promoting its interests and its allies, knowing in detail the opponents and their potential to become a threat to disrupt the existing balance of power and to limit or deny the adversaries' possibilities to reach such a posture on the short or long term. The great powers – China and Russia – that challenge the current international order have a much more aggressive and coercive behaviour than allowed, dictatorial and belligerent, irresponsible, uses force, hybrid actions, and grey tactics, to achieve claims, destabilise and increase ambiguity, amplify and diversify military capacity, especially with capabilities that use disruptive emerging technologies and violate international norms and treaties in force.

The US acts to: avoid creating any situation that will generate areas not covered in global or regional leadership or in implementing the rules and norms

of the current international order; to prevent a global bipolar situation, as in the Cold War or multipolar situation, as existed before the two world wars, and for the emergence of any regional hegemon. Deterrence also plays a crucial role in preventing potential aggressions in certain regions, especially by exaggerating the magnitude, and ambiguity and materialising the potential response, perceived, by the current world leader, the US for any aggressors. China – a regional power – is the most powerful, multidimensional, and open challenge, for the US role as a world leader and poses military, political, and economic capabilities to become a superpower.

The global strategic intensified competition between the US, China, and the Russian Federation, and the alliances they belong to, has consequences on international order, the aspects regarding defence, nuclear weapons, nuclear deterrence, and nuclear weapons control, the capabilities for waging, so-called, high-intensity technologically sophisticated conventional war, developing and deploying new weapons systems, mobilisation capacities for sustaining a large-scale extended period conflict and on capabilities for countering so-called hybrid warfare and grey-zone tactics. Emerging technologies and multi-domain operations have changed the features of modern conflict.

Territorial disputes between China and Russia – powers seeking to obtain superpower status – with states in the neighbouring regions have intensified in the last decade, these were often accompanied by terrestrial, airspace, or naval incidents as well as political, diplomatic, and economic tensions. The claims of China and Russia not only affect the interests of the neighbouring states involved in the dispute but also affect the US's strategic, economic, political, and military interests as a global leader and also of its allies. These can use the regions claimed as a basis for the projection of force and their interests. The great powers constantly seek to gain an advantage over rivals. Obtaining and maintaining global hegemony is difficult unless a great power has a relevant nuclear superiority over its rivals.

The coercive and assertive actions of Russia and China in the last period in the neighbourhood regions, increasing systemic rivalry, the high levels of open, political, ideological, and military competition with the US and its allies as well as Russia's strategic partnership with China, North Korea and Iran are in disagreement with the international order currently led by the US, representing aspects that favour the emergence of new centres of power, a state of fact characteristic to the presence of a global multipolar situation.

Since 1494, the shift from one global political system – institutions and arrangements for the management of global problems and relations – to another, respectively, passing into a new complete systemic cycle, in the modern world – the last 500 years – has been accomplished through a global war or hegemonic war.

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