# Course Start

Course Start is independent learning you need to complete as a fundamental part of your introduction to the course. It should take you approximately 5 hours to complete.

| Course Name | IB Global Politics |
|---|---|
| How this **Course Start** fits into the first term of the course | • **Activity 1:** Reading Yuval Noah Harari's chapter ***Disillusionment*** from his book ***21 Lessons for the 21st Century*** will help give you a sense of the historical background that frames this course and introduce you to some of the big themes of the course<br>• **Activity 2:** ***The Myth of Multipolarity*** will introduce you to some of the big questions that we will ask throughout this course, notably around the concept of power.<br>• **Activity 3 (optional):** Reading ***Prisoners of Geography,*** will help you get a sense of the important link between geography, power and international relations and give you an opportunity to explore one or two countries in more depth. |
| How will my **Course Start** learning be used in lessons? | • Your course will begin with an exploration of the concepts of power, sovereignty, interdependence and legitimacy and require you to use them in exam questions. |
| **Course Start** learning objectives | • To understand core concepts of international relations<br>• To recognise some of the many factors that influence the power exerted by states<br>• To begin to find areas of interest by exploring a range of syllabus related podcasts, books and documentaries |
| Study Skills | • Research skills - you will be asked to investigate topics including human rights violations, conflicts between states and terrorist organisations<br>• Synthesising information from many sources<br>• Evaluating the relevance and significance of information<br>• Presenting clear and substantiated conclusions to the rest of the class |

# Expectations for: IB Global Politics

Our specification is: International Baccalaureate

| What this course involves |
| --- |
| Learning to understand key political concepts and contemporary political issues in a range of contexts |
| Developing an understanding of the local, national, international and global dimensions of political activity |
| Learning to understand, appreciate and critically engage with a variety of perspectives and approaches in global politics |
| Appreciating the complex and interconnected nature of many political issues, and develop the capacity to interpret competing and contestable claims regarding those issues |
| The detailed study of four key topics: Power, Sovereignty and International Relations; Human Rights; Development and Peace and Conflict |
| Sitting two exam papers at the end of the course:<br>One source-based paper exploring one of the key topics above<br>One essay paper with questions based on the four topics above |
| An engagement activity, giving you an opportunity to become involved in a political issue of your choice and writing up your involvement in a report |
| The detailed study of two global political challenges from the following list: identity, borders, health, poverty, security, environment (higher only). You can use any aspect of these challenges to research. You will then share your research and reflections in a 10-minute oral presentation. |
| Completing Planned Study (independent learning) of 3 hours per week. |

# IB Global Politics

## Course Start 2025

Hello.
Firstly, congratulations on choosing to study **Global Politics** as part of your International Baccalaureate. This course will ground you in some of the key theories and ideas governing international relations and help you see conflicts such as Russia/Ukraine or issues such as migration in an entirely new light. You will get a sense of the theories that underpin how states behave in relation to each other and their own citizens as well as looking at the role that non-state actors such as pressure groups and the UN play in international events.

Global Politics explores fundamental political concepts such as power, equality, sustainability and peace. You will develop an understanding of the **local, national, regional, international and global dimensions** of political activity and processes, as well as exploring how political issues affect your own lives.

Throughout the course we will use contemporary, real-world examples and case studies to help you gain a deep and rounded understanding of these political concepts and how they impact us all day-to-day. You will have ample opportunity to follow your own interests during this course, especially if you have chosen to take Global Politics as one of your higher options.

We look forward to seeing you in September. If you have any questions prior to starting in September please email me at cbr@varndean.ac.uk.

**Cathy Bryan, Programme Leader for Politics and Avril Mackenzie-Parr, Teacher of Global Politics**

**Course overview**
**Global Politics Course Content**

**Year 1:**

- Core topics: Understanding power and global politics
- Thematic Studies
    - Rights and justice
    - Development and sustainability
    - Peace and Conflict
- Engagement Project
- ***Higher Only: Global Political Challenges***

**Year 2:**

- Engagement Project
- Depth studies: We will investigate several political issues in depth,linking them to the core units from year one
- ***Higher Only: Global Political Challenges***
- Revision

**Core concepts**
These four concepts provide the foundation of the entire course and are interwoven throughout all the other topics and all of the assessments.

- Power
- Sovereignty
- Legitimacy
- Interdependence

**Contested meanings**
The following 12 concepts weave a conceptual thread throughout the course:

- Rights
- Justice
- Liberty
- Equality
- Development
- Poverty
- Inequality
- Sustainability
- Peace
- Conflict
- Violence
- Non-violence

**Global Political Challenges: (Higher level only)**
At Higher Level students will explore a number of global political challenges through a case studies approach from the following eight topics:

- Environment
- Poverty
- Health
- Technology
- Identity
- Borders
- Security
- Inequality

For each of the topics chosen you will complete a detailed case study, undertaking research and preparing a 10- minute videoed oral presentation. Two of these will be submitted as part of your final assessment. These will be spread over the two years of the course.

**Assessment overview**

| | Weighting | |
|---|---|---|
| | **Standard** | **Higher** |
| **Paper 1**<br>*Four short-answer/structured questions based on sources from one of the four core units – 1 hour 15 mins exam* | **30%** | **20%** |
| **Paper 2**<br>*Two essays. One from Section A on one of the thematic studies and one from section B integrating two or more thematic studies. 1 hour 45 mins exam* | **40%** | **30%** |
| **Paper 3: Higher level only**<br>3 questions in response to a short stimulus and requiring detailed knowledge of case studies of two or more Global Political Challenges | **N/A** | **30%** |
| **SL/HL internal project assessment**<br>Engagement Project<br>*2000 word (2,400 word for HL) report based on engagement project undertaken and complementary research* | **30%** | **20%** |

**IB Global Politics – FAQs.**

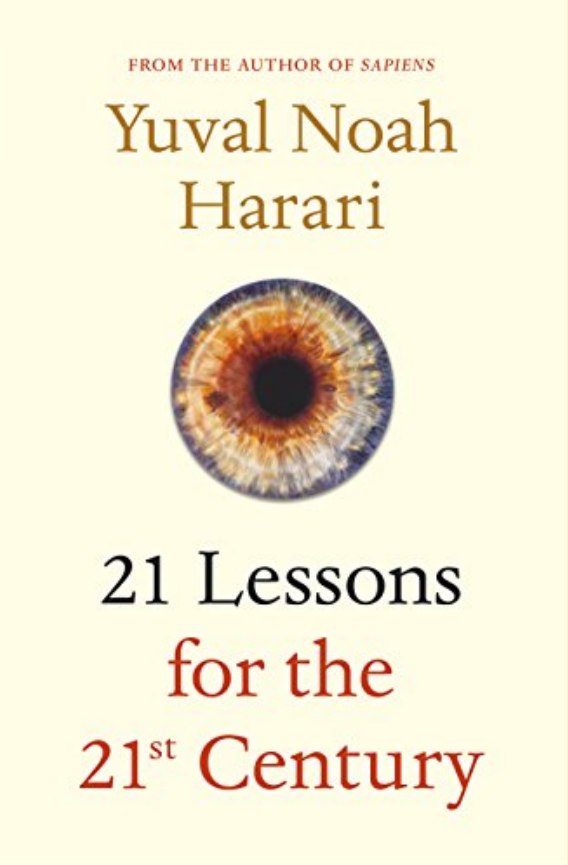
1) **Do I need to buy a textbook?**
   We use a lot of different resources in Global Politics, in order to make sure the case studies we use are as contemporary as possible. We will provide you with online / paper resources that will help you to grasp the concepts and content of Global Politics. There is an official textbook and if you want to get a copy it does contain some useful resources. However, we do not recommend you get this unless you want to. There is also a revision guide. We will share details of these books once you have started the course.

   However, we would like you to get hold of a copy of **'*Prisoners of Geography*' by Tim Marshall** (part of these Flying start activities)**.** We will use the case studies / regions in this to work through our course. You can currently get it from Amazon new for around £8 (also available as an eBook)

2) **What equipment will I need for Global Politics lessons?**
   We use Google Classroom and most of the resources you will need will be on there. If you have a laptop and are able to bring it to College that would be helpful. However, we will also give you paper handouts and you will write essays etc on paper so you will need a ring binder with dividers to store this in. Some A4 lined paper, a pen, pencil and a highlighter and coloured pens also come in handy.

**Course Start activities**

The purpose of these Course Start activities is to prepare for lessons in the first few weeks of the course in September.




**Activity 1 (must do – 2.5 hours max)**

In 2018, the historian and academic **Yuval Noah Harari** published ***21 Lessons for the 21st Century.*** The chapter on ***Disillusionment*** (scanned copy below) aims to introduce you to some of the language and ideas that you will come across as you embark upon your study of international relations. During our first term in Global Politics, we are going to be exploring the meaning of power, sovereignty, legitimacy and interdependence in international relations. This activity invites you to think about the stories that we have told and continue to tell ourselves in order to understand these concepts and to make sense of the world. These questions will help you reflect upon the text.

**Questions**

1. What are the three grand stories that Harari believes dominated the twentieth century? Summarise each of the three stories.
2. Why have people all over the world become disillusioned with the liberal story since 2008?
3. Harari argues that the collapse of these three stories has led to a sense of "disorientation and impending doom" which has been exacerbated by "the twin revolutions in infotech and biotech". Summarise what these terms mean and the challenges that Harari believes they pose to economies and societies.
4. What does the term oligarchy mean?
5. What are some of the different ways that the "liberal story" is currently being challenged and how are contemporary challenges different from those it faced in the twentieth century?
6. Harari highlights some of the benefits to humans of liberalism but what does he suggest are its limitations?
7. Harari is unsure what comes next but urges against panic. Do you think Harari is right that humans need a big story to help make sense of the world and, if so, what do you think that story is?

Harari's previous books ***Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*** and ***Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*** were international best sellers and are also well worth reading if you find the time.

# I

# DISILLUSIONMENT

## *The end of history has been postponed*

Humans think in stories rather than in facts, numbers or equations, and the simpler the story, the better. Every person, group and nation has its own tales and myths. But during the twentieth century the global elites in New York, London, Berlin and Moscow formulated three grand stories that claimed to explain the whole past and to predict the future of the entire world: the fascist story, the communist story, and the liberal story. The Second World War knocked out the fascist story, and from the late 1940s to the late 1980s the world became a battleground between just two stories: communism and liberalism. Then the communist story collapsed, and the liberal story remained the dominant guide to the human past and the indispensable manual for the future of the world – or so it seemed to the global elite.

The liberal story celebrates the value and power of liberty. It says that for thousands of years humankind lived under oppressive regimes which allowed people few political rights, economic opportunities or personal liberties, and which heavily restricted the movements of individuals, ideas and goods. But people fought for their freedom, and step by step, liberty gained ground. Democratic regimes took the place of brutal dictatorships. Free enterprise overcame economic restrictions. People learned to think for themselves and follow their hearts, instead of blindly obeying bigoted priests and hidebound traditions. Open roads, stout

bridges and bustling airports replaced walls, moats and barbed-wire fences.

The liberal story acknowledges that not all is well in the world, and that there are still many hurdles to overcome. Much of our planet is dominated by tyrants, and even in the most liberal countries many citizens suffer from poverty, violence and oppression. But at least we know what we need to do in order to overcome these problems: give people more liberty. We need to protect human rights, to grant everybody the vote, to establish free markets, and to let individuals, ideas and goods move throughout the world as easily as possible. According to this liberal panacea – accepted, in slight variations, by George W. Bush and Barack Obama alike – if we just continue to liberalise and globalise our political and economic systems, we will produce peace and prosperity for all.[1]

Countries that join this unstoppable march of progress will be rewarded with peace and prosperity sooner. Countries that try to resist the inevitable will suffer the consequences, until they too see the light, open their borders and liberalise their societies, their politics and their markets. It may take time, but eventually even North Korea, Iraq and El Salvador will look like Denmark or Iowa.

In the 1990s and 2000s this story became a global mantra. Many governments from Brazil to India adopted liberal recipes in an attempt to join the inexorable march of history. Those failing to do so seemed like fossils from a bygone era. In 1997 the US president Bill Clinton confidently rebuked the Chinese government that its refusal to liberalise Chinese politics puts it 'on the wrong side of history'.[2]

However, since the global financial crisis of 2008 people all over the world have become increasingly disillusioned with the liberal story. Walls and firewalls are back in vogue. Resistance to immigration and to trade agreements is mounting. Ostensibly democratic governments undermine the independence of the judiciary system, restrict the freedom of the press, and portray

any opposition as treason. Strongmen in countries such as Turkey and Russia experiment with new types of illiberal democracies and downright dictatorships. Today, few would confidently declare that the Chinese Communist Party is on the wrong side of history.

The year 2016 – marked by the Brexit vote in Britain and the rise of Donald Trump in the United States – signified the moment when this tidal wave of disillusionment reached the core liberal states of western Europe and North America. Whereas a few years ago Americans and Europeans were still trying to liberalise Iraq and Libya at the point of the gun, many people in Kentucky and Yorkshire have now come to see the liberal vision as either undesirable or unattainable. Some discovered a liking for the old hierarchical world, and they just don't want to give up their racial, national or gendered privileges. Others have concluded (rightly or wrongly) that liberalisation and globalisation are a huge racket empowering a tiny elite at the expense of the masses.

In 1938 humans were offered three global stories to choose from, in 1968 just two, in 1998 a single story seemed to prevail; in 2018 we are down to zero. No wonder that the liberal elites, who dominated much of the world in recent decades, have entered a state of shock and disorientation. To have one story is the most reassuring situation of all. Everything is perfectly clear. To be suddenly left without any story is terrifying. Nothing makes any sense. A bit like the Soviet elite in the 1980s, liberals don't understand how history deviated from its preordained course, and they lack an alternative prism to interpret reality. Disorientation causes them to think in apocalyptic terms, as if the failure of history to come to its envisioned happy ending can only mean that it is hurtling towards Armageddon. Unable to conduct a reality check, the mind latches on to catastrophic scenarios. Like a person imagining that a bad headache signifies a terminal brain tumor, many liberals fear that Brexit and the rise of Donald Trump portend the end of human civilisation.

# From killing mosquitoes to killing thoughts

The sense of disorientation and impending doom is exacerbated by the accelerating pace of technological disruption. The liberal political system has been shaped during the industrial era to manage a world of steam engines, oil refineries and television sets. It finds it difficult to deal with the ongoing revolutions in information technology and biotechnology.

Both politicians and voters are barely able to comprehend the new technologies, let alone regulate their explosive potential. Since the 1990s the Internet has changed the world probably more than any other factor, yet the Internet revolution was directed by engineers more than by political parties. Did you ever vote about the Internet? The democratic system is still struggling to understand what hit it, and is hardly equipped to deal with the next shocks, such as the rise of AI and the blockchain revolution.

Already today, computers have made the financial system so complicated that few humans can understand it. As AI improves, we might soon reach a point when no human can make sense of finance any more. What will that do to the political process? Can you imagine a government that waits humbly for an algorithm to approve its budget or its new tax reform? Meanwhile peer-to-peer blockchain networks and cryptocurrencies like bitcoin might completely revamp the monetary system, so that radical tax reforms will be inevitable. For example, it might become impossible or irrelevant to tax dollars, because most transactions will not involve a clear-cut exchange of national currency, or any currency at all. Governments might therefore need to invent entirely new taxes – perhaps a tax on information (which will be both the most important asset in the economy, and the only thing exchanged in numerous transactions). Will the political system manage to deal with the crisis before it runs out of money?

Even more importantly, the twin revolutions in infotech and biotech could restructure not just economies and societies but our very bodies and minds. In the past, we humans have learned to control the world outside us, but we had very little control over the world inside us. We knew how to build a dam and stop a river from flowing, but we did not know how to stop the body from ageing. We knew how to design an irrigation system, but we had no idea how to design a brain. If mosquitoes buzzed in our ears and disturbed our sleep, we knew how to kill the mosquitoes; but if a thought buzzed in our mind and kept us awake at night, most of us did not know how to kill the thought.

The revolutions in biotech and infotech will give us control of the world inside us, and will enable us to engineer and manufacture life. We will learn how to design brains, extend lives, and kill thoughts at our discretion. Nobody knows what the consequences will be. Humans were always far better at inventing tools than using them wisely. It is easier to manipulate a river by building a dam across it than it is to predict all the complex consequences this will have for the wider ecological system. Similarly, it will be easier to redirect the flow of our minds than to divine what it will do to our personal psychology or to our social systems.

In the past, we have gained the power to manipulate the world around us and to reshape the entire planet, but because we didn't understand the complexity of the global ecology, the changes we made inadvertently disrupted the entire ecological system and now we face an ecological collapse. In the coming century biotech and infotech will give us the power to manipulate the world inside us and reshape ourselves, but because we don't understand the complexity of our own minds, the changes we will make might upset our mental system to such an extent that it too might break down.

The revolutions in biotech and infotech are made by engineers, entrepreneurs and scientists who are hardly aware of the political implications of their decisions, and who certainly don't represent anyone. Can parliaments and parties take matters into their own

hands? At present, it does not seem so. Technological disruption is not even a leading item on the political agenda. Thus during the 2016 US presidential race, the main reference to disruptive technology concerned Hillary Clinton's email debacle,[3] and despite all the talk about job losses, neither candidate addressed the potential impact of automation. Donald Trump warned voters that the Mexicans and Chinese will take their jobs, and that they should therefore build a wall on the Mexican border.[4] He never warned voters that the algorithms will take their jobs, nor did he suggest building a firewall on the border with California.

This might be one of the reasons (though not the only one) why even voters in the heartlands of the liberal West are losing faith in the liberal story and in the democratic process. Ordinary people may not understand artificial intelligence and biotechnology, but they can sense that the future is passing them by. In 1938 the condition of the common person in the USSR, Germany or the USA may have been grim, but he was constantly told that he was the most important thing in the world, and that he was the future (provided, of course, that he was an 'ordinary person' rather than a Jew or an African). He looked at the propaganda posters – which typically depicted coal miners, steelworkers and housewives in heroic poses – and saw himself there: 'I am in that poster! I am the hero of the future!'[5]

In 2018 the common person feels increasingly irrelevant. Lots of mysterious words are bandied around excitedly in TED talks, government think tanks and hi-tech conferences – globalisation, blockchain, genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, machine learning – and common people may well suspect that none of these words are about them. The liberal story was the story of ordinary people. How can it remain relevant to a world of cyborgs and networked algorithms?

In the twentieth century, the masses revolted against exploitation, and sought to translate their vital role in the economy into political power. Now the masses fear irrelevance, and they are frantic to use their remaining political power before it is too late.

Brexit and the rise of Trump might thus demonstrate an opposite trajectory to that of traditional socialist revolutions. The Russian, Chinese and Cuban revolutions were made by people who were vital for the economy, but who lacked political power; in 2016, Trump and Brexit were supported by many people who still enjoyed political power, but who feared that they were losing their economic worth. Perhaps in the twenty-first century populist revolts will be staged not against an economic elite that exploits people, but against an economic elite that does not need them any more.[6] This may well be a losing battle. It is much harder to struggle against irrelevance than against exploitation.

## The liberal phoenix

This is not the first time the liberal story has faced a crisis of confidence. Ever since this story gained global influence, in the second half of the nineteenth century, it has endured periodic crises. The first era of globalisation and liberalisation ended in the bloodbath of the First World War, when imperial power politics cut short the global march of progress. In the days following the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo it turned out that the great powers believed in imperialism far more than in liberalism, and instead of uniting the world through free and peaceful commerce they focused on conquering a bigger slice of the globe by brute force. Yet liberalism survived this Franz Ferdinand moment and emerged from the maelstrom stronger than before, promising that this was 'the war to end all wars'. Allegedly, the unprecedented butchery had taught humankind the terrible price of imperialism, and now humanity was finally ready to create a new world order based on the principles of freedom and peace.

Then came the Hitler moment, when, in the 1930s and early 1940s, fascism seemed for a while irresistible. Victory over this threat merely ushered in the next. During the Che Guevara moment, between the 1950s and the 1970s, it again seemed that

liberalism was on its last legs, and that the future belonged to communism. In the end it was communism that collapsed. The supermarket proved to be far stronger than the Gulag. More importantly, the liberal story proved to be far more supple and dynamic than any of its opponents. It triumphed over imperialism, over fascism, and over communism by adopting some of their best ideas and practices. In particular, the liberal story learned from communism to expand the circle of empathy and to value equality alongside liberty.

In the beginning, the liberal story cared mainly about the liberties and privileges of middle-class European men, and seemed blind to the plight of working-class people, women, minorities and non-Westerners. When in 1918 victorious Britain and France talked excitedly about liberty, they were not thinking about the subjects of their worldwide empires. For example, Indian demands for self-determination were answered by the Amritsar massacre of 1919, in which the British army killed hundreds of unarmed demonstrators.

Even in the wake of the Second World War, Western liberals still had a very hard time applying their supposedly universal values to non-Western people. Thus when the Dutch emerged in 1945 from five years of brutal Nazi occupation, almost the first thing they did was raise an army and send it halfway across the world to reoccupy their former colony of Indonesia. Whereas in 1940 the Dutch gave up their own independence after little more than four days of fighting, they fought for more than four long and bitter years to suppress Indonesian independence. No wonder that many national liberation movements throughout the world placed their hopes on communist Moscow and Beijing rather than on the self-proclaimed champions of liberty in the West.

Gradually, however, the liberal story expanded its horizons, and at least in theory came to value the liberties and rights of all human beings without exception. As the circle of liberty expanded, the liberal story also came to recognise the importance of communist-style welfare programmes. Liberty is not

worth much unless it is coupled with some kind of social safety net. Social-democratic welfare states combined democracy and human rights with state-sponsored education and healthcare. Even the ultra-capitalist USA has realised that the protection of liberty requires at least some government welfare services. Starving children have no liberties.

By the early 1990s, thinkers and politicians alike hailed 'the End of History', confidently asserting that all the big political and economic questions of the past had been settled, and that the refurbished liberal package of democracy, human rights, free markets and government welfare services remained the only game in town. This package seemed destined to spread around the whole world, overcome all obstacles, erase all national borders, and turn humankind into one free global community.[7]

But history has not ended, and following the Franz Ferdinand moment, the Hitler moment, and the Che Guevara moment, we now find ourselves in the Trump moment. This time, however, the liberal story is not faced by a coherent ideological opponent like imperialism, fascism, or communism. The Trump moment is far more nihilistic.

Whereas the major movements of the twentieth century all had a vision for the entire human species – be it global domination, revolution or liberation – Donald Trump offers no such thing. Just the opposite. His main message is that it's not America's job to formulate and promote any global vision. Similarly, the British Brexiteers barely have a plan for the future of the Disunited Kingdom – the future of Europe and of the world is far beyond their horizon. Most people who voted for Trump and Brexit didn't reject the liberal package in its entirety – they lost faith mainly in its globalising part. They still believe in democracy, free markets, human rights and social responsibility, but they think these fine ideas can stop at the border. Indeed, they believe that in order to preserve liberty and prosperity in Yorkshire or Kentucky, it is best to build a wall on the border, and adopt illiberal policies towards foreigners.

The rising Chinese superpower presents an almost mirror image. It is wary of liberalising its domestic politics, but it has adopted a far more liberal approach to the rest of the world. In fact, when it comes to free trade and international cooperation, Xi Jinping looks like Obama's real successor. Having put Marxism–Leninism on the back burner, China seems rather happy with the liberal international order.

Resurgent Russia sees itself as a far more forceful rival of the global liberal order, but though it has reconstituted its military might, it is ideologically bankrupt. Vladimir Putin is certainly popular both in Russia and among various right-wing movements across the world, yet he has no global world view that might attract unemployed Spaniards, disgruntled Brazilians or starry-eyed students in Cambridge.

Russia does offer an alternative model to liberal democracy, but this model is not a coherent political ideology. Rather, it is a political practice in which a number of oligarchs monopolise most of a country's wealth and power, and then use their control of the media to hide their activities and cement their rule. Democracy is based on Abraham Lincoln's principle that 'you can fool all the people some of the time, and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time'. If a government is corrupt and fails to improve people's lives, enough citizens will eventually realise this and replace the government. But government control of the media undermines Lincoln's logic, because it prevents citizens from realising the truth. Through its monopoly over the media, the ruling oligarchy can repeatedly blame all its failures on others, and divert attention to external threats – either real or imaginary.

When you live under such an oligarchy, there is always some crisis or other that takes priority over boring stuff such as healthcare and pollution. If the nation is facing external invasion or diabolical subversion, who has time to worry about overcrowded hospitals and polluted rivers? By manufacturing a never-ending

stream of crises, a corrupt oligarchy can prolong its rule indefinitely.[8]

Yet though enduring in practice, this oligarchic model appeals to no one. Unlike other ideologies that proudly expound their vision, ruling oligarchies are not proud of their practices, and they tend to use other ideologies as a smoke screen. Thus Russia pretends to be a democracy, and its leadership proclaims allegiance to the values of Russian nationalism and Orthodox Christianity rather than to oligarchy. Right-wing extremists in France and Britain may well rely on Russian help and express admiration for Putin, but even their voters would not like to live in a country that actually copies the Russian model – a country with endemic corruption, malfunctioning services, no rule of law, and staggering inequality. According to some measures, Russia is one of the most unequal countries in the world, with 87 per cent of wealth concentrated in the hands of the richest 10 per cent of people.[9] How many working-class supporters of the Front National want to copy this wealth-distribution pattern in France?

Humans vote with their feet. In my travels around the world I have met numerous people in many countries who wish to emigrate to the USA, to Germany, to Canada or to Australia. I have met a few who want to move to China or Japan. But I am yet to meet a single person who dreams of emigrating to Russia.

As for 'global Islam', it attracts mainly those who were born in its lap. While it may appeal to some people in Syria and Iraq, and even to alienated Muslim youths in Germany and Britain, it is hard to see Greece or South Africa – not to mention Canada or South Korea – joining a global caliphate as the remedy to their problems. In this case, too, people vote with their feet. For every Muslim youth from Germany who travelled to the Middle East to live under a Muslim theocracy, probably a hundred Middle Eastern youths would have liked to make the opposite journey, and start a new life for themselves in liberal Germany.

This might imply that the present crisis of faith is less severe than its predecessors. Any liberal who is driven to despair by the

events of the last few years should just recollect how much worse things looked in 1918, 1938 or 1968. At the end of the day, humankind won't abandon the liberal story, because it doesn't have any alternative. People may give the system an angry kick in the stomach but, having nowhere else to go, they will eventually come back.

Alternatively, people may completely give up on having a global story of any kind, and instead seek shelter with local nationalist and religious tales. In the twentieth century, nationalist movements were an extremely important political player, but they lacked a coherent vision for the future of the world other than supporting the division of the globe into independent nation states. Thus Indonesian nationalists fought against Dutch domination, and Vietnamese nationalists wanted a free Vietnam, but there was no Indonesian or Vietnamese story for humanity as a whole. When it came time to explain how Indonesia, Vietnam and all the other free nations should relate to one another, and how humans should deal with global problems such as the threat of nuclear war, nationalists invariably turned to either liberal or communist ideas.

But if both liberalism and communism are now discredited, maybe humans should abandon the very idea of a single global story? After all, weren't all these global stories – even communism – the product of Western imperialism? Why should Vietnamese villagers put their faith in the brainchild of a German from Trier and a Manchester industrialist? Maybe each country should adopt a different idiosyncratic path, defined by its own ancient traditions? Perhaps even Westerners should take a break from trying to run the world, and focus on their own affairs for a change?

This is arguably what is happening all over the globe, as the vacuum left by the breakdown of liberalism is tentatively filled by nostalgic fantasies about some local golden past. Donald Trump coupled his calls for American isolationism with a promise to 'Make America Great Again' – as if the USA of the 1980s or 1950s was a perfect society that Americans should somehow recreate in

the twenty-first century. The Brexiteers dream of making Britain an independent power, as if they were still living in the days of Queen Victoria and as if 'splendid isolation' were a viable policy for the era of the Internet and global warming. Chinese elites have rediscovered their native imperial and Confucian legacies, as a supplement or even substitute for the doubtful Marxist ideology they imported from the West. In Russia, Putin's official vision is not to build a corrupt oligarchy, but rather to resurrect the old tsarist empire. A century after the Bolshevik Revolution, Putin promises a return to ancient tsarist glories with an autocratic government buoyed by Russian nationalism and Orthodox piety spreading its might from the Baltic to the Caucasus.

Similar nostalgic dreams that mix nationalist attachment with religious traditions underpin regimes in India, Poland, Turkey and numerous other countries. Nowhere are these fantasies more extreme than in the Middle East, where Islamists want to copy the system established by the Prophet Muhammad in the city of Medina 1,400 years ago, while fundamentalist Jews in Israel outdo even the Islamists, and dream of going back 2,500 years to biblical times. Members of Israel's ruling coalition government talk openly about their hope of expanding modern Israel's borders to match more closely those of biblical Israel, of reinstating biblical law, and even of rebuilding the ancient Temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem in place of the Al-Aqsa mosque.[10]

Liberal elites look in horror at these developments, and hope that humanity will return to the liberal path in time to avert disaster. In his final speech to the United Nations in September 2016, President Obama warned his listeners against retreating 'into a world sharply divided, and ultimately in conflict, along age-old lines of nation and tribe and race and religion'. Instead, he said, 'the principles of open markets and accountable governance, of democracy and human rights and international law ... remain the firmest foundation for human progress in this century'.[11]

Obama has rightly pointed out that despite the numerous shortcomings of the liberal package, it has a much better record

than any of its alternatives. Most humans never enjoyed greater peace or prosperity than they did under the aegis of the liberal order of the early twenty-first century. For the first time in history, infectious diseases kill fewer people than old age, famine kills fewer people than obesity, and violence kills fewer people than accidents.

But liberalism has no obvious answers to the biggest problems we face: ecological collapse and technological disruption. Liberalism traditionally relied on economic growth to magically solve difficult social and political conflicts. Liberalism reconciled the proletariat with the bourgeoisie, the faithful with the atheists, the natives with the immigrants, and the Europeans with the Asians by promising everybody a larger slice of the pie. With a constantly growing pie, that was possible. However, economic growth will not save the global ecosystem – just the opposite, it is the cause of the ecological crisis. And economic growth will not solve technological disruption – it is predicated on the invention of more and more disruptive technologies.

The liberal story and the logic of free-market capitalism encourage people to have grand expectations. During the latter part of the twentieth century, each generation – whether in Houston, Shanghai, Istanbul or São Paulo – enjoyed better education, superior healthcare and larger incomes than the one that came before it. In coming decades, however, owing to a combination of technological disruption and ecological meltdown, the younger generation might be lucky to just stay in place.

We are consequently left with the task of creating an updated story for the world. Just as the upheavals of the Industrial Revolution gave birth to the novel ideologies of the twentieth century, so the coming revolutions in biotechnology and information technology are likely to require fresh visions. The next decades might therefore be characterised by intense soul-searching and by formulating new social and political models. Could liberalism reinvent itself yet again, just as it did in the wake of the 1930s and 1960s crises, emerging as more attrac-

tive than ever before? Could traditional religion and nationalism provide the answers that escape the liberals, and could they use ancient wisdom to fashion an up-to-date world view? Or perhaps the time has come to make a clean break with the past, and craft a completely new story that goes beyond not just the old gods and nations, but even the core modern values of liberty and equality?

At present, humankind is far from reaching any consensus on these questions. We are still in the nihilist moment of disillusionment and anger, after people have lost faith in the old stories but before they have embraced a new one. So what next? The first step is to tone down the prophecies of doom, and switch from panic mode to bewilderment. Panic is a form of hubris. It comes from the smug feeling that I know exactly where the world is heading – down. Bewilderment is more humble, and therefore more clear-sighted. If you feel like running down the street crying 'The apocalypse is upon us!', try telling yourself 'No, it's not that. Truth is, I just don't understand what's going on in the world.'

The following chapters will try to clarify some of the bewildering new possibilities we face, and how we might proceed from here. But before exploring potential solutions to humanity's predicaments we need a better grasp of the challenge technology poses. The revolutions in information technology and biotechnology are still in their infancy, and it is debatable to what extent they are really responsible for the current crisis of liberalism. Most people in Birmingham, Istanbul, St Petersburg and Mumbai are only dimly aware, if at all, of the rise of artificial intelligence and its potential impact on their lives. It is undoubtable, however, that the technological revolutions will gather momentum in the next few decades, and will confront humankind with the hardest trials we have ever encountered. Any story that seeks to gain humanity's allegiance will be tested above all in its ability to deal with the twin revolutions in infotech and biotech. If liberalism, nationalism, Islam or some novel creed wishes to shape the world of the year 2050, it will need not only to make sense of artificial

intelligence, Big Data algorithms and bioengineering – it will also need to incorporate them into a new meaningful narrative.

To understand the nature of this technological challenge, perhaps it would be best to start with the job market. Since 2015 I have been travelling around the world talking with government officials, business people, social activists and schoolkids about the human predicament. Whenever they become impatient or bored by all the talk of artificial intelligence, Big Data algorithms and bioengineering, I usually need to mention just one magic word to snap them back to attention: jobs. The technological revolution might soon push billions of humans out of the job market, and create a massive new useless class, leading to social and political upheavals that no existing ideology knows how to handle. All the talk about technology and ideology might sound abstract and remote, but the very real prospect of mass unemployment – or personal unemployment – leaves nobody indifferent.

**Activity 2: (must do – 2.5 hours max)**
**Please read the article The Myth of *Multipolarity* from Foreign Affairs Magazine May/June 2023 (scanned copy below) and answer the following questions:**

1. What does the term multipolar mean?
2. What does the term unipolar mean?
3. What is GDP and what does it measure?
4. The article begins by saying that "*since the 1990s, American dominance can scarcely be questioned*." Why does it choose the 1990s as the starting point when talking about American dominance in global politics?
5. What challenges has the USA faced to its global dominance since the 1990s?
6. On page 81 it says "*the nature of military technology and the structure of the global economy slow the process of the aspirant overtaking the leader*." Put this into your own words and explain why it makes a multipolar world less likely.
7. The article suggests that China's GDP figures are unreliable. What does it suggest is a more accurate way of measuring China's GDP?
8. According to the article, what is the best way to measure technological capacity?
9. Summarise the reasons why China cannot be said to rival US power and thus the argument that we are not in or entering a bipolar era.
10. Why, according to the article, is Russia's invasion of Ukraine a sign of weakness rather than strength?
11. The article disputes the view of some that we are living in a multipolar world and argues that the world is still unipolar, dominated by US power. To what extent do you agree with this view? Explain your answer.

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# The Myth of Multipolarity

## American Power's Staying Power

STEPHEN G. BROOKS AND WILLIAM C. WOHLFORTH

In the 1990s and the early years of this century, the United States' global dominance could scarcely be questioned. No matter which metric of power one looked at, it showed a dramatic American lead. Never since the birth of the modern state system in the mid-seventeenth century had any country been so far ahead in the military, economic, and technological realms simultaneously. Allied with the United States, meanwhile, were the vast majority of the world's richest countries, and they were tied together by a set of international institutions that Washington had played the lead role in constructing. The United States could conduct its foreign policy under fewer external constraints than any leading state in modern history. And as dissatisfied as China, Russia, and other aspiring powers were with their status in the system, they realized they could do nothing to overturn it.

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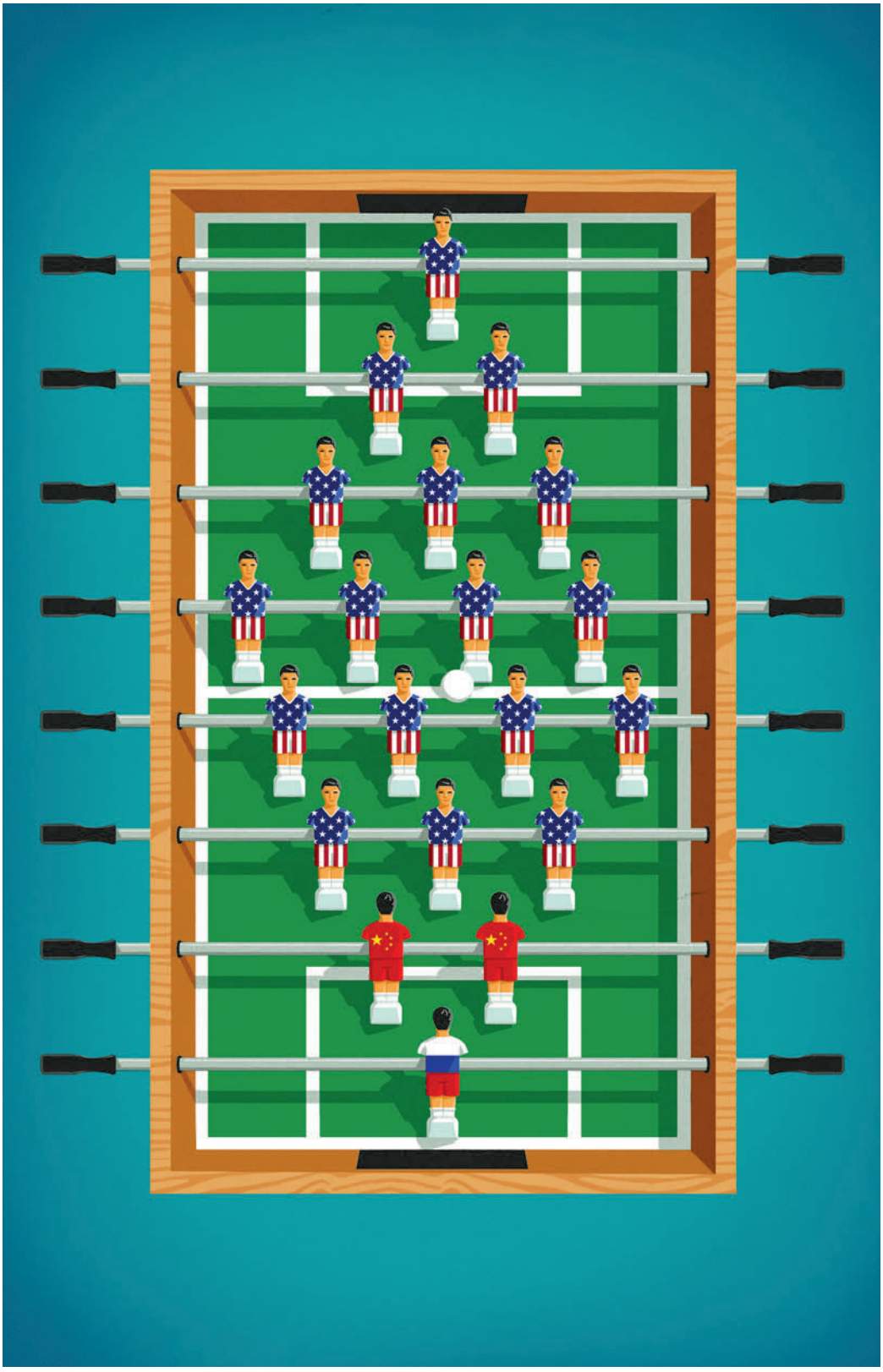


*Illustration by Pete Ryan*

That was then. Now, American power seems much diminished. In the intervening two decades, the United States has suffered costly, failed interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, a devastating financial crisis, deepening political polarization, and, in Donald Trump, four years of a president with isolationist impulses. All the while, China continued its remarkable economic ascent and grew more assertive than ever. To many, Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine sounded the death knell for U.S. primacy, a sign that the United States could no longer hold back the forces of revisionism and enforce the international order it had built.

According to most observers, the unipolar moment has come to a definitive end. Pointing to the size of China's economy, many analysts have declared the world bipolar. But most go even further, arguing that the world is on the verge of transitioning to multipolarity or has already done so. China, Iran, and Russia all endorse this view, one in which they, the leading anti-American revisionists, finally have the power to shape the system to their liking. India and many other countries in the global South have reached the same conclusion, contending that after decades of superpower dominance, they are at last free to chart their own course. Even many Americans take it for granted that the world is now multipolar. Successive reports from the U.S. National Intelligence Council have proclaimed as much, as have figures on the left and right who favor a more modest U.S. foreign policy. There is perhaps no more widely accepted truth about the world today than the idea that it is no longer unipolar.

But this view is wrong. The world is neither bipolar nor multipolar, and it is not about to become either. Yes, the United States has become less dominant over the past 20 years, but it remains at the top of the global power hierarchy—safely above China and far, far above every other country. No longer can one pick any metric to see this reality, but it becomes clear when the right ones are used. And the persistence of unipolarity becomes even more evident when one considers that the world is still largely devoid of a force that shaped great-power politics in times of multipolarity and bipolarity, from the beginning of the modern state system through the Cold War: balancing. Other countries simply cannot match the power of the United States by joining alliances or building up their militaries.

American power still casts a large shadow across the globe, but it is admittedly smaller than before. Yet this development should be put in perspective. What is at issue is only the nature of unipolarity—not its existence.

MINOR THIRD

During the Cold War, the world was undeniably bipolar, defined above all by the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the world turned unipolar, with the United States clearly standing alone at the top. Many who proclaim multipolarity seem to think of power as influence—that is, the ability to get others to do what you want. Since the United States could not pacify Afghanistan or Iraq and cannot solve many other global problems, the argument runs, the world must be multipolar. But polarity centers on a different meaning of power, one that is measurable: power as resources, especially military might and economic heft. And indeed, at the root of most multipolarity talk these days is the idea that scholarly pioneers of the concept had in mind: that international politics works differently depending on how resources are distributed among the biggest states.

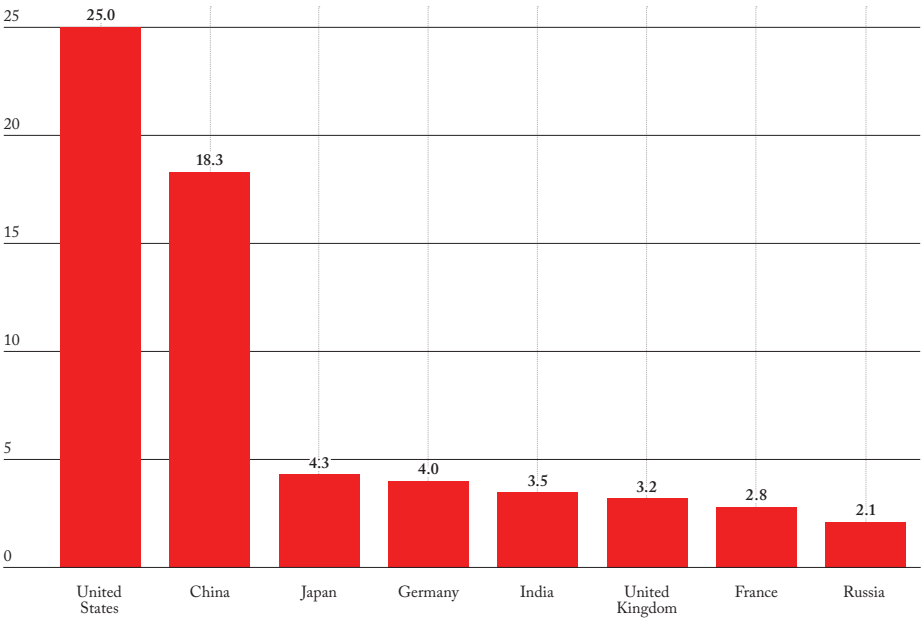
For the system to be multipolar, however, its workings must be shaped largely by the three or more roughly matched states at the top. The United States and China are undoubtedly the two most powerful countries, but at least one more country must be roughly in their league for multipolarity to exist. This is where claims of multipolarity fall apart. Every country that could plausibly rank third—France, Germany, India, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom—is in no way a rough peer of the United States or China.

That is true no matter which metric one uses. Polarity is often still measured using the indicators fashionable in the mid-twentieth century, chiefly military outlays and economic output. Even by those crude measures, however, the system is not multipolar, and it is a sure bet that it won't be for many decades. A simple tabulation makes this clear: barring an outright collapse of either the United States or China, the gap between those countries and any of the also-rans will not close anytime soon. All but India are too small in population to ever be in the same league, while India is too poor; it cannot possibly attain this status until much later in this century.

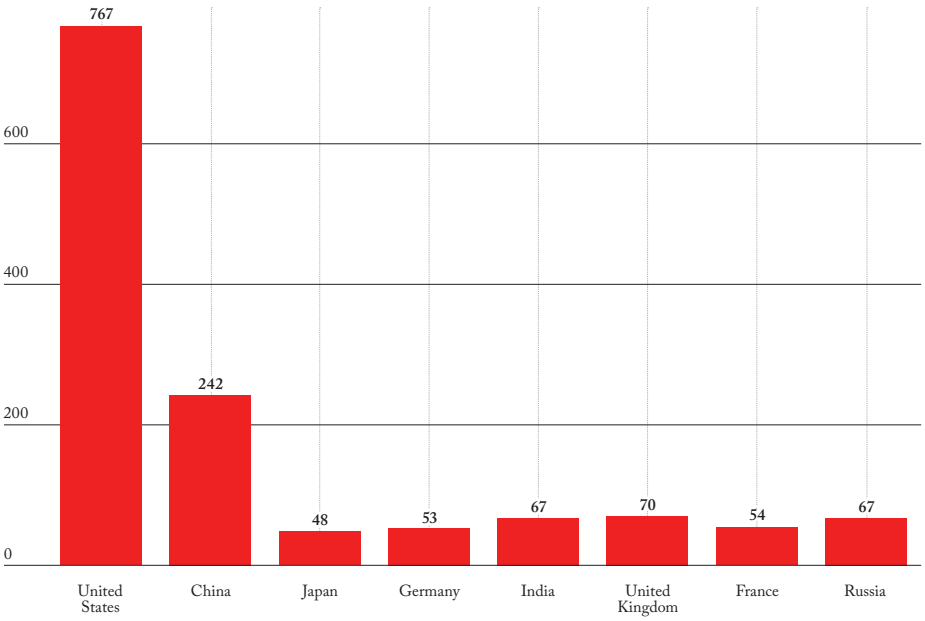
These stark differences between today's material realities and a reasonable understanding of multipolarity point to another problem with any talk of its return: the equally stark contrast between today's international politics and the workings of the multipolar systems in centuries past. Before 1945, multipolarity was the norm. International politics featured constantly shifting alliances among roughly matched

# THE GREAT-POWER GAP

## Annual GDP of major countries (in current US$trillions)




## Annual military spending of major countries (in current US$billions)




*Sources: International Monetary Fund (2022); International Institute for Strategic Studies (2022).*

great powers. The alliance game was played mainly among the great powers, not between them and lesser states. Coalition arithmetic was the lodestar of statecraft: shifts in alliances could upset the balance of power overnight, as the gain or loss of a great power in an alliance dwarfed what any one state could do internally to augment its own power in the short run. In 1801, for example, the Russian emperor Paul I seriously contemplated allying with rather than against Napoleon, heightening fears in the United Kingdom about the prospect of French hegemony in Europe—worries that may have, according to some historians, led the British to play a role in Paul's assassination that same year.

Today, almost all the world's real alliances (the ones that entail security guarantees) bind smaller states to Washington, and the main dynamic is the expansion of that alliance system. Because the United States still has the most material power and so many allies, unless it abrogates its own alliances wholesale, the fate of great-power politics does not hinge on any country's choice of partners.

In multipolar eras, the relatively equal distribution of capabilities meant that states were often surpassing one another in power, leading to long periods of transition in which many powers claimed to be number one, and it wasn't clear which deserved the title. Immediately before World War I, for example, the United Kingdom could claim to be number one on the basis of its global navy and massive colonial holdings, yet its economy and army were smaller than those of Germany, which itself had a smaller army than Russia—and all three countries' economies were dwarfed by that of the United States. The easily replicable nature of technology, meanwhile, made it possible for one great power to quickly close the gap with a superior rival by imitating its advantages. Thus, in the early twentieth century, when Germany's leaders sought to take the United Kingdom down a peg, they had little trouble rapidly building a fleet that was technologically competitive with the Royal Navy. The situation today is very different. For one thing, there is one clear leader and one clear aspirant. For another, the nature of military technology and the structure of the global economy slow the process of the aspirant overtaking the leader. The most powerful weapons today are formidably complex, and the United States and its allies control many of the technologies needed to produce them.

The multipolar world was an ugly world. Great-power wars broke out constantly—more than once a decade from 1500 to 1945.

With frightening regularity, all or most of the strongest states would fight one another in horrific, all-consuming conflicts: the Thirty Years' War, the Wars of Louis XIV, the Seven Years' War, the Napoleonic Wars, World War I, and World War II. The shifting, hugely consequential, and decidedly uncertain alliance politics of multipolarity contributed to these conflicts. So did the system's frequent power transitions and the fleeting nature of leading states' grasp on their status. Fraught though the current international environment may be compared with the halcyon days of the 1990s, it lacks these inducements to conflict and so bears no meaningful resemblance to the age of multipolarity.

## DON'T BET ON BIPOLARITY

Using GDP and military spending, some analysts might make a plausible case for an emergent bipolarity. But that argument dissolves when one uses metrics that properly account for the profound changes in the sources of state power wrought by multiple technological revolutions. More accurate measures suggest that the United States and China remain in fundamentally different categories and will stay there for a long time, especially in the military and technological realms.

No metric is invoked more frequently by the heralds of a polarity shift than GDP, but analysts in and outside China have long questioned the country's official economic data. Using satellite-collected data about the intensity of lights at night—electricity use correlates with economic activity—the economist Luis Martinez has estimated that Chinese GDP growth in recent decades has been about one-third lower than the officially reported statistics. According to leaked U.S. diplomatic cables, in 2007, Li Keqiang, a provincial official who would go on to become China's premier, told the U.S. ambassador to China that he himself did not trust his country's "man-made" GDP figures. Instead, he relied on proxies, such as electricity use. Since Xi took power, reliable data on the Chinese economy has gotten even harder to come by because the Chinese government has ceased publishing tens of thousands of economic statistics that were once used to estimate China's true GDP.

But some indicators cannot be faked. To evaluate China's economic capacity, for example, consider the proportion of worldwide profits in a given industry that one country's firms account for. Building on the work of the political economist Sean Starrs, research by one of us (Brooks) has found that of the top 2,000 corporations in the world, U.S. firms are ranked first in global profit shares in 74 percent of sectors,

whereas Chinese firms are ranked first in just 11 percent of sectors. The data on high-tech sectors is even more telling: U.S. firms now have a 53 percent profit share in these crucial industries, and every other country with a significant high-tech sector has a profit share in the single digits. (Japan comes in second at seven percent, China comes in third at six percent, and Taiwan comes in fourth at five percent.)

The best way to measure technological capacity is to look at payments for the use of intellectual property—technology so valuable that others are willing to spend money on it. This data shows that China's extensive R & D investments over the past decade are bearing fruit, with Chinese patent royalties having grown from less than $1 billion in 2014 to almost $12 billion in 2021. But even now, China still receives less than a tenth of what the United States does each year ($125 billion), and it even lags far behind Germany ($59 billion) and Japan ($47 billion).

Today, almost all the world's real alliances bind smaller states to Washington.

Militarily, meanwhile, most analysts still see China as far from being a global peer of the United States, despite the rapid modernization of Chinese forces. How significant and lasting is the U.S. advantage? Consider the capabilities that give the United States what the political scientist Barry Posen has called "command of the commons"—that is, control over the air, the open sea, and space. Command of the commons is what makes the United States a true global military power. Until China can contest the United States' dominance in this domain, it will remain merely a regional military power. We have counted 13 categories of systems as underlying this ability—everything from nuclear submarines to satellites to aircraft carriers to heavy transport planes—and China is below 20 percent of the U.S. level in all but five of these capabilities, and in only two areas (cruisers and destroyers; military satellites) does China have more than a third of the U.S. capability. The United States remains so far ahead because it has devoted immense resources to developing these systems over many decades; closing these gaps would also require decades of effort. The disparity becomes even greater when one moves beyond a raw count and factors in quality. The United States' 68 nuclear submarines, for example, are too quiet for China to track, whereas China's 12 nuclear submarines remain noisy enough for the U.S. Navy's advanced antisubmarine warfare sensors to track them in deep water.

A comparison with the Soviet Union is instructive. The Red Army was a real peer of the U.S. military during the Cold War in a way that the Chinese military is not. The Soviets enjoyed three advantages that China lacks. First was favorable geography: with the conquest of Eastern Europe in World War II, the Soviets could base massive military force in the heart of Europe, a region that comprised a huge chunk of the world's economic output. Second was a large commitment to guns over butter in a command economy geared toward the production of military power: the percentage of GDP that Moscow devoted to defense remained in the double digits throughout the Cold War, an unprecedented share for a modern great power in peacetime. Third was the relatively uncomplicated nature of military technology: for most of the Cold War, the Soviets could command their comparatively weak economy to swiftly match the United States' nuclear and missile capability and arguably outmatch its conventional forces. Only in the last decade of the Cold War did the Soviets run into the same problem that China faces today: how to produce complex weapons that are competitive with those emerging from a technologically dynamic America with a huge military R & D budget (now $140 billion a year).

Bipolarity arose from unusual circumstances. World War II left the Soviet Union in a position to dominate Eurasia, and with all the other major powers save the United States battered from World War II, only Washington had the wherewithal to assemble a balancing coalition to contain Moscow. Hence the intense rivalry of the Cold War: the arms race, the ceaseless competition in the Third World, the periodic superpower crises around the globe from Berlin to Cuba. Compared with multipolarity, it was a simpler system, with only one pair of states at the top and so only one potential power transition worth worrying about.

With the demise of the Soviet Union and the shift from bipolarity to unipolarity, the system transformed from one historically unprecedented situation to another. Now, there is one dominant power and one dominant alliance system, not two. Unlike the Soviet Union, China has not already conquered key territory crucial to the global balance. Nor has Xi shown the same willingness as Soviet leaders to trade butter for guns (with China long devoting a steady two percent of GDP to military spending). Nor can he command his economy to match U.S. military power in a matter of years, given the complexity of modern weaponry.

## PARTIALLY UNIPOLAR

To argue that today's system is not multipolar or bipolar is not to deny that power relations have changed. China has risen, especially in the economic realm, and great-power competition has returned after a post–Cold War lull. Gone are the days when the United States' across-the-board primacy was unambiguous. But the world's largest-ever power gap will take a long time to close, and not all elements of this gap will narrow at the same rate. China has indeed done a lot to shrink the gap in the economic realm, but it has done far less when it comes to military capacity and especially technology.

As a result, the distribution of power today remains closer to unipolarity than to either bipolarity or multipolarity. Because the world has never experienced unipolarity before the current spell, no terminology exists to describe changes to such a world, which is perhaps why many have inappropriately latched on to the concept of multipolarity to convey their sense of a smaller American lead. Narrowed though it is, that lead is still substantial, which is why the distribution of power today is best described as "partial unipolarity," as compared with the "total unipolarity" that existed after the Cold War.

The end of total unipolarity explains why Beijing, Moscow, and other dissatisfied powers are now more willing to act on their dissatisfaction, accepting some risk of attracting the focused enmity of the United States. But their efforts show that the world remains sufficiently unipolar that the prospect of being balanced against is a far stiffer constraint on the United States' rivals than it is on the United States itself.

Ukraine is a case in point. In going to war, Russia showed a willingness to test its revisionist potential. But the very fact that Russian President Vladimir Putin felt the need to invade is itself a sign of weakness. In the 1990s, if you had told his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, that in 2023, Russia would be fighting a war to sustain its sphere of influence over Ukraine, which Russian officials back then assumed would end up as a reliable ally, he would scarcely have believed that Moscow could sink so low. It is ironic that now, when unipolarity's end is so frequently declared, Russia is struggling to try to get something it thought it already had when U.S. primacy was at its peak. And if you had told Yeltsin that Russia would not be winning that war against a country with an economy one-tenth the size of Russia's, he would have been all the more incredulous. The misadventure in Ukraine, moreover, has greatly undermined Russia's long-term economic prospects, thanks to the massive wave of sanctions the West has unleashed.

But even if Russia had swiftly captured Kyiv and installed a pro-Russian government, as Putin expected, that would have had little bearing on the global distribution of power. There is no denying that the outcome of the war in Ukraine matters greatly for the future of that country's sovereignty and the strength of the global norm against forceful land grabs. But in the narrow, cold-hearted calculus of global material power, Ukraine's small economy—about the same size as that of Kansas—means that it ultimately matters little whether Ukraine is aligned with NATO, Russia, or neither side. Further, Ukraine is not in fact a U.S. ally. Russia would be very unlikely to dare attack one of those. Given how the United States has reacted when Russia attacked a country that is not a U.S. ally—funneling arms, aid, and intelligence to the Ukrainians and imposing stiff sanctions—the Kremlin surely knows that the Americans would do much more to protect an actual ally.

Militarily, China is far from being a peer of the United States.

China's revisionism is backed up by much more overall capability, but as with Russia, its successes are astonishingly modest in the broad sweep of history. So far, China has altered the territorial status quo only in the South China Sea, where it has built some artificial islands. But these small and exposed possessions could easily be rendered inoperative in wartime by the U.S. military. And even if China could secure all the contested portions of the South China Sea for itself, the overall economic significance of the resources there—mainly fish—is tiny. Most of the oil and gas resources in the South China Sea lie in uncontested areas close to various countries' shorelines.

Unless the U.S. Navy withdraws from Asia, China's revisionist ambitions can currently extend no farther than the first island chain—the string of Pacific archipelagoes that includes Japan, the Philippines, and Taiwan. That cannot change anytime soon: it would take decades, not years, for China to develop the full range of capabilities needed to contest the U.S. military's command of the commons. Also, China may not even bother to seek such a capacity. However aggravating Chinese policymakers find their rival's behavior, U.S. foreign policy is unlikely to engender the level of fear that motivated the costly development of Washington's global power-projection capability during the Cold War.

For now, there is effectively only one place where China could scratch its revisionist itch: in Taiwan. China's interest in the island is clearly

growing, with Xi having declared in 2022 that "the complete reunification of the motherland must be achieved." The prospect of a Chinese attack on Taiwan is indeed a real change from the heyday of total unipolarity, when China was too weak for anyone to worry about this scenario. But it is important to keep in mind that Beijing's yearnings for Taiwan are a far cry from revisionist challenges of the past, such as those mounted by Japan and Germany in the first half of the twentieth century or the Soviet Union in the second; each of those countries conquered and occupied vast territory across great distances. And if China did manage to put Taiwan in its column, even the strongest proponents of the island's strategic significance do not see it as so valuable that changing its alignment would generate a dramatic swing in the distribution of power of the kind that made multipolarity so dangerous.

What about the flourishing partnership between China and Russia? It definitely matters; it creates problems for Washington and its allies. But it holds no promise of a systemic power shift. When the aim is to balance against a superpower whose leadership and extensive alliances are deeply embedded in the status quo, the counteralliance needs to be similarly significant. On that score, Chinese-Russian relations fail the test. There is a reason the two parties do not call it a formal alliance. Apart from purchasing oil, China did little to help Russia in Ukraine during the first year of the conflict. A truly consequential partnership would involve sustained cooperation across a wide variety of areas, not shallow cooperation largely born of convenience. And even if China and Russia upgraded their relations, each is still merely a regional military power. Putting together two powers capable of regional balancing does not equate to global balancing. Achieving that would require military capabilities that Russia and China individually and collectively do not have—and cannot have anytime soon.

## ROUGH TIMES FOR REVISIONISM

All this might seem cold comfort, given that even the limited revisionist quests of China and Russia could still spark a great-power war, with its frightening potential to go nuclear. But it is important to put the system's stability in historical perspective. During the Cold War, each superpower feared that if all of Germany fell to the other, the global balance of power would shift decisively. (And with good reason: in 1970, West Germany's economy was about one-quarter the size of the United States' and two-thirds the size of the Soviet Union's.) Because each superpower was so

close to such an economically valuable object, and because the prize was literally split between them, the result was an intense security competition in which each based hundreds of thousands of troops in their half of Germany. The prospect of brinkmanship crises over Germany's fate loomed in the background and occasionally came to the foreground, as in the 1961 crisis over the status of Berlin.

Or compare the present situation to the multipolar 1930s, when, in less than a decade, Germany went from being a disarmed, constrained power to nearly conquering all of Eurasia. But Germany was able to do so thanks to two advantages that do not exist today. First, a great power could build up substantial military projection power in only a few years back then, since the weapons systems of the day were relatively uncomplicated. Second, Germany had a geographically and economically viable option to augment its power by conquering neighboring countries. In 1939, the Nazis first added the economic resources of Czechoslovakia (around ten percent the size of Germany's) and then Poland (17 percent). They used these victories as a springboard for more conquests in 1940, including Belgium (11 percent), the Netherlands (ten percent), and France (51 percent). China doesn't have anything like the same opportunity. For one thing, Taiwan's GDP is less than five percent of China's. For another, the island is separated from the mainland by a formidable expanse of water. As the MIT research scientist Owen Cote has underscored, because China lacks command of the sea surface, it simply "cannot safeguard a properly sized, seaborne invasion force and the follow-on shipping necessary to support it during multiple transits across the 100-plus mile-wide Taiwan Straits." Consider that the English Channel was a fifth of the width but still enough of a barrier to stop the Nazis from conquering the United Kingdom.

Japan and South Korea are the only other large economic prizes nearby, but Beijing is in no position to take a run at them militarily, either. And because Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have economies that are knowledge-based and highly integrated with the global economy, their wealth cannot be effectively extracted through conquest. The Nazis could, for example, commandeer the Czech arms manufacturer Skoda Works to enhance the German war machine, but China could not so easily exploit the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company. Its operation depends on employees with specialized knowledge who could flee in the event of an invasion and on a pipeline of inputs from around the globe that war would cut off.

Today's revisionists face another obstacle: while they are confined to regional balancing, the United States can hit back globally. For instance, the United States is not meeting Russia directly on the battlefield but is instead using its global position to punish the country through a set of devastating economic sanctions and a massive flow of conventional weaponry, intelligence, and other forms of military assistance to Kyiv. The United States could likewise "go global" if China tried to take Taiwan, imposing a comprehensive naval blockade far from China's shores to curtail its access to the global economy. Such a blockade would ravage the country's economy (which relies greatly on technological imports and largely plays an assembly role in global production chains) while harming the U.S. economy far less.

Because the United States has so much influence in the global economy, it can use economic levers to punish other countries without worrying much about what they might do in response. If China tried to conquer Taiwan, and the United States imposed a distant blockade on China, Beijing would certainly try to retaliate economically. But the strongest economic arrow in its quiver wouldn't do much damage. China could, as many have feared, sell some or all of its massive holdings of U.S. Treasury securities in an attempt to raise borrowing costs in the United States. Yet the U.S. Federal Reserve could just purchase all the securities. As the economist Brad Setser has put it, "The U.S. ultimately holds the high cards here: the Fed is the one actor in the world that can buy more than China can ever sell."

Today's international norms also hinder revisionists. That is no accident, since many of these standards of behavior were created by the United States and its allies after World War II. For example, Washington promulgated the proscription against the use of force to alter international boundaries not only to prevent major conflicts but also to lock in place the postwar status quo from which it benefited. Russia has experienced such strong pushback for invading Ukraine in part because it has so blatantly violated this norm. In norms as in other areas, the global landscape is favorable terrain for the United States and rough for revisionists.

## AMERICA'S CHOICE

The political scientist Kenneth Waltz distinguished between the truly systemic feature of the distribution of capabilities, on the one hand, and the alliances that states form, on the other. Although

**Activity 3: Prisoners of Geography (could do)**
This book is a fantastic introduction to our course. We'll be studying relations between and within a range of countries from across the world, including Russia, China and the USA, so having some background is going to be really useful. **Choose one or two chapters and read them (feel free to read more!).** You might find it helpful to make notes but we will not ask to see these.

**Why 'Prisoners of Geography'?**
Here's the summary of the book from the cover:
*All leaders are constrained by geography. Their choices are limited by mountains, rivers, seas and concrete. Yes, to follow world events you need to understand people, ideas and movements - but if you don't know geography, you'll never have the full picture. If you've ever wondered why Putin is so obsessed with Crimea, why the USA was destined to become a global superpower, or why China's power base continues to expand ever outwards, the answers are all here. In ten chapters (covering Russia; China; the USA; Latin America; the Middle East; Africa; India and Pakistan; Europe; Japan and Korea; and the Arctic), using maps, essays and occasionally the personal experiences of the widely travelled author, Prisoners of Geography looks at the past, present and future to offer an essential insight into one of the major factors that determines world history.*

In other words, to understand global politics, we first have to understand the world we live in and in particular the geography that influenced how we got to where we are today. If power is at some level about access to resources, then the availability of deep-water ports, fertile land, natural resources such as gas and oil etc. must have an impact on the relative power of a country or region. This book helps to explain this as well as how these have contributed to the distribution of power we see in our world today.

## Further reading/listening/viewing

These are just some of the books, podcasts and documentaries that Avril and I have enjoyed and found useful. We obviously don't expect you to listen to/read/watch them all; this list is simply some suggestions in case you are feeling inspired and want to find out more about global politics before you start the course.

**Books**
1. Amy Chua, *World on Fire*
2. Francis Fukuyama, *State Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century*
3. Henry Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History*
4. Tim Marshall, The *Power of Geography: Ten Maps that Reveal the Future of Our World – the sequel to Prisoners of Geography*
5. Yuval Noah Harari , *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*
6. Dharshini David, *The Almighty Dollar*

**Podcasts**

Daily

- The Guardian: Today in Focus
- The Fourcast (from Channel 4 news)
- Newscast (from the BBC)
- Global News Podcast (from BBC World Service)
- The NewsAgents

Weekly

- Politics Weekly America - from The Guardian
- The Rest is Politics - Rory Stewart and Alistair Campbell
- Pod Save America
- Pod Save the World

**TV**

1. Panorama - the BBC's flagship documentary series
2. Dispatches - Channel 4's flagship documentary series
3. Corridors of Power: Should the USA police the world https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episodes/m0020xmq/corridors-of-power-should-america-police-the-world
4. India: the Modi question https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p0dkb144/india-the-modi-question-series-1-episode-1
5. China: A New World Order https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m0008cc7/china-a-new-world-order-series-1-episode-3

**Netflix Documentaries on YouTube**

Knock Down The House | FULL FEATURE | Netflix
Period. End of Sentence. | FULL FEATURE | Netflix
The White Helmets | FULL FEATURE | Netflix

If you have access to Netflix, Prime and other streaming services, there are loads of great documentaries out there. Once you arrive at college, we also have a huge online library of great TV and films.