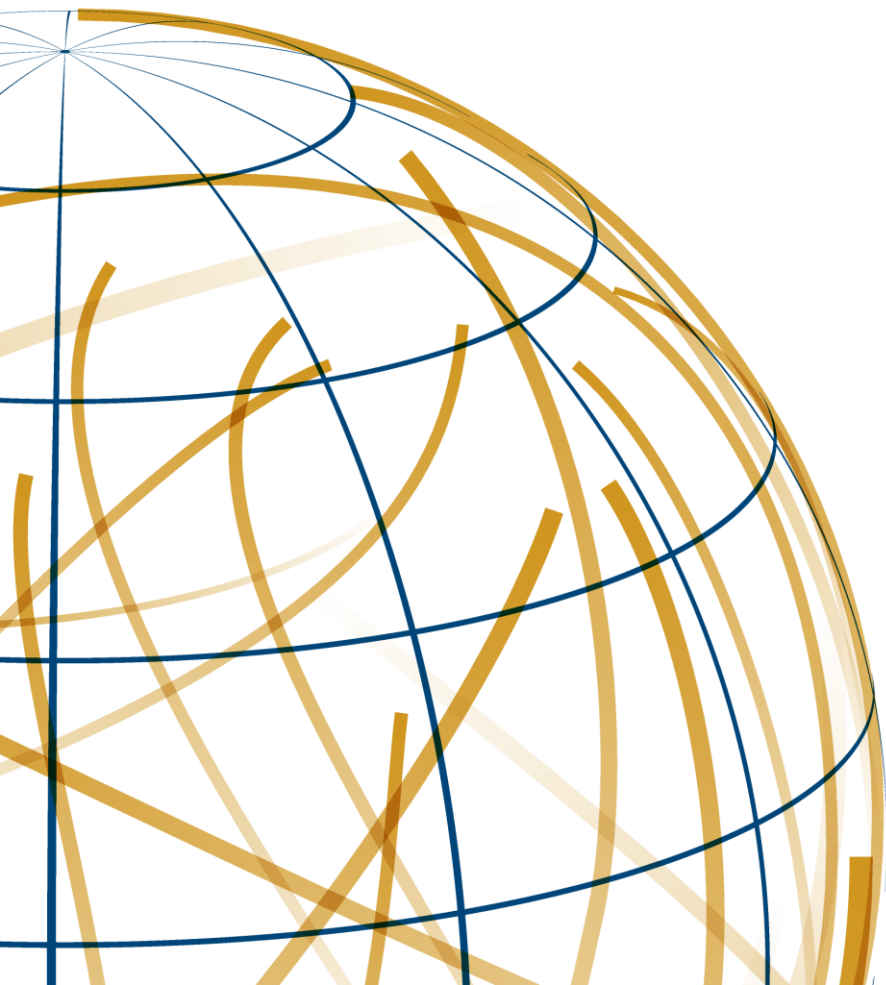


## SWP Research Paper

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*Felix Heiduk, Melanie Müller, Yaşar Aydın, Janis Kluge, Tobias Scholz,  
Angela Stanzel and Johannes Thimm*

# Multipolarities – The World- Order Visions of Others



Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
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- “Multipolarity” has become a central but, at the same time, highly ambiguous point of reference in debates about the future world order. The term is used descriptively, that is, to describe shifts in the distribution of power; and it is also used normatively, as an aspirational construct for a more just international order. However, as the following comparative analysis of seven countries shows, there is no coherent understanding of the term even in those countries that are pushing for multipolarity.
- Sharp dividing lines are evident between the United States, which has long understood the construct of multipolarity as being at odds with its strategic interests, and Russia and China, which both associate it with challenging US hegemony. However, while Russia is striving for a disruptive and violent transformation, China is aiming for an evolutionary one. Other states – above all, India and South Africa – hope that multipolarity will provide them with greater foreign-policy room for manoeuvre. And some derive their own reform proposals at the multilateral level from their understanding of the construct.
- Germany and the EU must rigorously examine the various interpretations and uses of the construct of multipolarity. They should not dismiss the term as irrelevant or inherently anti-Western as it can provide a common frame of reference on international politics. At the same time, its unreflective use carries risks, as the term is highly politicised and associated with what are at times the conflicting goals of a broad range of international actors.
- Rather than simply participating in conceptual debates, Germany and the EU should take concrete steps towards reforming the international order in policy areas such as trade, health, energy and climate. At the same time, they should regard the call for multipolarity as an indicator of the need for broad reforms of the international system and initiate negotiation processes with other states. To this end, they must first establish their own reference points with regard to the future international order so that they can identify suitable partners and institutions.

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### **Multipolarities – The World-Order Visions of Others**

In the context of the profound changes taking place in international politics, “multipolarity” has become a central reference point in political and academic debates about the future international order. The term is used in two ways in those discussions. Both at the international level and in Germany, it serves to describe the relative loss of power of the United States and the end of “unipolarity” to the benefit of new emerging power centres. At the same time, it functions as a normative construct to outline the conditions of a future international order that would be more just and fair than unipolarity. This normative understanding is often linked to political objectives. For example, some actors label and subsequently reject multipolarity as an anti-Western construct, while others endorse it for the purpose of increasing their own power and status. Thus, the term is used by different actors for different reasons. But it is often the case that it remains unclear which underlying construct of the world order are being referred to when the term “multipolarity” is used. This is partly due to the lack of research on these constructs and how they shape the international politics of the actors examined in this study.

The study’s authors seek to fill this research gap by undertaking a comparative and systematic examination of the concepts of the international order that selected countries associate with the term “multipolarity” and what conclusions they draw from them for their own foreign policies. The analysis shows that while the discourse on multipolarity is ubiquitous, there is virtually no agreement in any of the countries examined about what the term stands for. To be sure, in each of the countries examined, multipolarity is considered a normative construct linked to political objectives. However, there are differences in how the construct is interpreted – not just between the political elites and other actors in a given country but, in some cases, among the political elites themselves. Moreover, interpretations differ from country to country. Indeed, they are so diverse that, at times, it is impossible to identify commonalities even among fellow middle powers or permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. Clear dividing lines

can best be drawn between political actors in the United States, who have long sought to avoid the term altogether — although this has gradually changed during Trump’s second Presidency — and Russia and China, which both find the construct useful for contesting US hegemony. Yet, actors in some of the other countries examined use the term because they hope that a multipolar world order will increase their power and influence. At the same time, some doubt whether multipolarity can, in fact, be achieved at all.

Bearing all that in mind, the study provides a nuanced understanding of the diverse, sometimes competing constructs underlying the putative common reference to multipolarity. This, in turn, leads to the following conclusions.

*First*, German and European foreign policymakers must engage more systematically at the conceptual level with the diverse ideas that key international actors associate with the term “multipolarity”. Germany and the EU must not only become aware of what different states understand by that term; they must deal with those interpretations in practical terms — in both multilateral and bilateral contexts. Understanding the different interpretations of the term can offer valuable insights for international cooperation. For this reason, debates on multipolarity, especially those that go beyond the Chinese or Russian interpretations, should not be dismissed as unimportant or anti-Western. From a European perspective, in particular, it is essential to understand the concepts of the world order that other actors espouse so that the scope for joint action can be explored, normative misunderstandings prevented and sustainable forms of international cooperation developed in a changing global context.

*Second*, the ubiquitous nature of the discourse on multipolarity carries the risk of the unreflective use of the term. It is, above all, Russia and China that have politicised the term to a high degree and frequently use it to contest the alleged hegemony of the US or the “West”. But other actors, especially those from the Global South, associate multipolarity with the idea of transforming the current global power structures — which they perceive as unjust — into something more inclusive. Thus, the construct must always be used in a qualified and clearly defined manner at the international level.

*Third*, the conceptual discourse is, however, far less important than concrete reform initiatives in related policy areas such as trade, health, energy and climate.

After all, international debates on multipolarity should be understood as underscoring the need for such reforms. Rather than getting bogged down in debates about multipolarity, Berlin and Brussels should focus on how to conduct negotiations with others on the necessary overhaul of the international system. This would signal that the, often legitimate, concerns of other actors are being taken seriously. In addition, it would provide an opportunity to influence future international cooperation, particularly at the multilateral level, by entering into negotiations with other states. Such engagement should occur primarily via the European level since the EU carries more weight as an international actor than Germany on its own.

*Fourth*, this approach must include a debate within Europe and at the international level on the future of the international order. To this end, Germany and the EU must first agree on what they would like that order to be. Only then will it be possible to draw up a political reform agenda, find suitable partners and determine how to engage with them, and identify institutions for the implementation of such an agenda.

# Introduction

The international order is undergoing profound change. Across both the globe and ideological boundaries, “multipolarity” has become a central point of reference in debates about geopolitics and the emerging new world order. While Western capitals tend to view the rules-based international order as being in decline, many countries in the Global South emphasise the need for an end to Western dominance and the creation of a fairer, multipolar world. For more than two decades now, Moscow and Beijing have been using the term “multipolarity” to characterise their preferred alternative to the existing international order, which they believe is unjustly dominated by the United States. For their part, countries such as India, South Africa and Indonesia are uneasy about the world dominance of any major power – be it the US or China – and see greater opportunities for themselves in a multipolar international order.

**In the debates on multipolarity, the term is understood as designating either an analytical construct, a desired state or a strategic risk.**

The debates on multipolarity, which date back to the Cold War era, have also flared up once again in Germany, where the term has become an integral part of foreign- and security-policy discussions. On the one hand, it is used by German officials to describe shifts in the international balance of power.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, it is denounced as a kind of Trojan horse: while supporters of multipolarity want to create the impression that it can help achieve a more equitable distribution of international power, their real aim is nothing less than the demise of the

<sup>1</sup> Stefan Mair, “Warum Multipolarität richtig ist”, *Internationale Politik* 78, no. 6 (2023), 82–89; Marc Saxer, “Multipolarität und blinde Flecken – eine Replik auf Jörg Lau”, *Internationale Politik*, 31 August 2023, <https://internationalepolitik.de/de/multipolaritaet-und-blinde-flecken-eine-replik-auf-joerg-lau>.

“West”.<sup>2</sup> The same controversy is evident at the government level. Here too, the term is used at times to describe the shifting international balance of power, usually in relation to the argument that Germany should assume more responsibility in a changing, more complex world order.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the construct is seen as part of a systemic conflict between democracy and autocracy and within this context is attributed to the autocratic camp.<sup>4</sup> Germany’s National Security Strategy, published in 2023, states that the “global order” is currently changing not least because “new centres of power are emerging” and we [i.e., Germany] are living “in an era that is increasingly multipolar and marked by rising systemic rivalry”.<sup>5</sup> Until now, there has been much debate as to whether the term “multipolarity” should be understood as designating an analytical construct, a desired state or a strategic risk.<sup>6</sup> A systematic debate about the actors

<sup>2</sup> Jörg Lau, “Wir leben in einer multipolaren Welt”, *Internationale Politik* 78, no. 5 (2023): 15.

<sup>3</sup> “Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzler Olaf Scholz”, *Bulletin of the Federal Government*, no. 160-1 (14 December 2022), <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/newsletter-und-abos/bulletin/regierungserklaerung-von-bundestkanzler-olaf-scholz-2153850>; “Haben uns nicht genug damit auseinandergesetzt, was Wehrhaftigkeit bedeutet” (interview with former German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock), *Die Welt*, 20 March 2023, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/interview-baerbock-welt-2588732>.

<sup>4</sup> “Rede des Vorsitzenden der CDU/CSU-Bundestagsfraktion, Friedrich Merz MdB” (speech by the chairman of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group, Friedrich Merz), Berlin: Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 9 March 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/3krst73u>; Friedrich Merz, “Außenpolitische Grundsatzrede”, Berlin, 23 January 2025, <http://www.cducusu.de/themen/aussenpolitische-grundsatzrede>.

<sup>5</sup> German Foreign Office, ed., *Robust. Resilient. Sustainable. Integrated Security for Germany. National Security Strategy* (Berlin, June 2023), 5, 23, <https://www.nationalesicherheitsstrategie.de/National-Security-Strategy-EN.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> This assertion applies not only to the political debate. In political science, too, many of the discussions about the international order are both analytical and normative in nature. For an overview of the state of research, see Mathias

who refer to multipolarity and their respective conceptualisations of the world order has yet to be undertaken in Germany.

While many countries use the term “multipolarity”, it is often unclear to which concepts they are referring. This is partly because there has been little research to date either on those concepts or on the associated conclusions that countries draw for their behaviour in the international arena. This research gap is one reason why, in recent years, several renowned think tanks have begun to address various aspects of this complex topic. Of particular note is the Munich Security Conference (MSC) report of February 2025 on multipolarisation,<sup>7</sup> an analysis by Chatham House on competing visions of the world order<sup>8</sup> and a study by the Carnegie Endowment on the expansion of the BRICS group<sup>9</sup> and its impact on the international order. The Chatham House and Carnegie Endowment studies, both published in March 2025, have one key thing in common: both seek to address overarching questions about the future shape of the international order by drawing comparisons across single case studies. While the MSC report similarly contains individual-country studies, it also includes a dataset that provides quantitative, survey-based evidence on geopolitical change as well as a ranking of major powers (“poles”) based on a broad range of data points. Besides indicators such as military spending and the number of nuclear warheads, those data points include gender equality and average life expectancy.

Albert, Nicole Deitelhoff and Gunther Hellmann, *Ordnung und Regieren in der Weltgesellschaft. Ein Problemaufriss* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2023), 3, doi: 10.1007/978-3-658-19780-3.

<sup>7</sup> Tobias Bunde, Sophie Eisentraut and Leonard Schütte, eds, *Multipolarisation. Munich Security Report 2025* (Munich: Munich Security Conference, February 2025), <https://securityconference.org/publikationen/munich-security-report-2025/>.

<sup>8</sup> Leslie Vinjamuri, ed., *Competing Visions of International Order*, Research Paper (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House, 2025), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/03/competing-visions-international-order>.

<sup>9</sup> Stewart Patrick, ed., *BRICS Expansion and the Future of World Order: Perspectives from Member States, Partners, and Aspirants* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025), <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/03/brics-expansion-and-the-future-of-world-order-perspectives-from-member-states-partners-and-aspirants?lang=en>.

Thus, while some analyses already exist, there are no systematic, cross-national comparisons that focus on the different national concepts of the world order. Such comparisons would provide an insight into whether multipolarity is seen and endorsed in accordance with those concepts. The authors of this study by the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) build on the research carried out to date. However, in terms of research interests and analysis, they take a different approach by questioning some of the core assumptions about polarity in international relations (see the information box “Polarity in international relations”).

The authors of this study do not subscribe to the traditional understanding of polarity in international relations. They understand the term “multipolarity” as designating not a fixed material structure of the world order but rather a construct of that order (that is, a set of ideas on the workings of the world order and the structures underlying it).<sup>10</sup> They understand such a construct to be derived from the observable perceptions, interpretations and political objectives of foreign-policy elites.<sup>11</sup> Further, they assume that the practical use of the term “multipolarity” in international politics is of a dual nature. On the one hand, it aims to capture or explain observable changes in the international order. On the other hand, the very nature of its use is political in that multipolarity is propagated in the context of power politics. For this reason, it is of primary analytical importance to establish what political elites in the countries examined below think and say about multipolarity and the changing international order. Accordingly, this study focuses on the various constructs of the world order and the resulting interpretations as well as on the associated political objectives of the countries examined. It aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the diverse, sometimes competing constructs underlying the putative common reference to multipolarity. The analysis is based on sources ranging from official documents, speeches and media interviews with gov-

<sup>10</sup> Other political scientists, too, understand multipolarity as designating, above all, an ideational construct. Volker Perthes, for example, describes multipolarity as a “metaphor”. See Volker Perthes, *Die Multipolarisierung der Welt. Ein geopolitischer Wegweiser* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2026).

<sup>11</sup> This study is based on a broad understanding of the term “foreign policy actors”. Depending on the country, it can include not only state elites (heads of government, ministers, military personnel, diplomats) but also media, business and academia.

## Information Box: Polarity in International Relations

The term “polarity”, which is frequently used in international relations, assumes that the world order is best characterised through the identification of its centres of power. Depending on the number of centres identified, the distinction can be made between a unipolar, bipolar and multipolar international order. According to this view which has its origins in the Cold War, the bloc confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union was unquestionably bipolar. Through the Non-Aligned Movement, many states sought to evade that structure. Following the collapse of the USSR, there was a unipolar moment in which the US was the only remaining superpower.

According to this interpretation, polarity – whether unipolar, bipolar or multipolar – is the result of the structural effects of power in the politics of building the international order. Those who think in terms of polarities view the international order as structured in line with the distribution of material power between the most powerful international actors.<sup>a</sup> However, the construct of polarity is based on an understanding of the international order that is by no means uncontroversial. The central actors are nation states which, represented by their executive branches, have an unambiguous, unified agenda. Their foreign-policy options are derived from their material power resources, whereby military power assumes first place. Other forms of power, such as economic power or so-called soft power (i.e., cultural or diplomatic power), are of secondary importance. Further, international institutions do not play a significant role in shaping the structure. Which state holds the status of pole is determined, above all, by the amount of military resources. Thus, the international order is established in a top-down manner and, as a result, reflects the preferences and interests of the major powers.<sup>b</sup>

ernment representatives to media reports and think-tank publications.

The study undertakes a systematic and comparative examination of the constructs of the world order that are prevalent in seven countries – the United States, China, Russia, India, Indonesia, Turkey and South Africa – with a view to addressing three analytical complexes. The *first part* explores how two fundamental issues – the status quo of the current international order and multipolarity as an alternative construct of the world order – are understood and discussed in the respective countries. The *second part* focuses on how current transformations in the international order are perceived. In particular, it examines the extent to which those changes are interpreted as a form of multipolarisation of the global order in the countries examined. Building on the findings of the first two parts, the third provides a detailed analysis of the strategic implications that foreign-

Even if one accepts the construct of polarity and its propositions, the question arises as to which states, apart from the US, can be considered further poles of a multipolar order. China, certainly, but beyond that? The economically weakened nuclear power Russia? India, as a nuclear power and the most populous country in the world? South Africa? Brazil? If, in line with the construct of polarity, military power is considered the decisive criterion, it is likely that the world is heading less towards a multipolar order than towards a new bipolarity, with the US and China as antagonistic poles. If other criteria such as economic power or population size are taken into account, the group of major powers expands. Another analytical problem becomes apparent when looking at the distribution of material power in order to make assertions about the structure of the international order – understood as being unipolar, bipolar or multipolar – as those assertions tell us very little about its constitution. The construct of polarities assumes a static and fixed distribution of power without considering the way in which states exercise power. For instance, it ignores whether they rely on coercion and force or persuasion and cooperation. Furthermore, the ways in which states make use of their power, which goals they pursue and how they interact with one another are not sufficiently taken into account.

**a** David A. Lake, Lisa L. Martin and Thomas Risse, “Challenges to the Liberal Order: Reflections on *International Organization*”, *International Organization* 75, no. 2 (2021), 225–57, doi: 10.1017/S0020818320000636.

**b** Kyle M. Lascurettes, *Orders of Exclusion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

policy elites derive from their understanding of multipolarity and the conclusions they draw, or consider drawing, from those implications for their own behaviour in the international arena. The study does not examine whether the world order is structured in a multipolar way and whether there is any indication or evidence that it could be in future. Nor does the study provide any insights into whether multipolarity is more democratic, more just, more multilateral or less violent than the current international order.

The selection of the seven countries examined in this study is not representative of the majority of countries in the world. Rather, it reflects a range of countries that relate to the construct of multipolarity in different ways: while five of those countries view it positively, two do not. Furthermore, there are disparities between the selected countries with regard to their respective political system, economic performance, geopolitical and geographical location,

foreign-policy orientation as well as their historical experience with colonialism, bloc formation or non-alignment. It is precisely this heterogeneity that makes the comparison particularly revealing: if, despite all the disparities, shared ideas of the world order emerge or various differences persist, then reliable conclusions can be drawn about nascent similarities across the different constructs of multipolarity. At the same time, the comparison draws attention to divergences over ideas of the world order that otherwise tend to be concealed by recourse to the putative common reference to multipolarity.

# Status Quo: Multipolarity and the International Order

## The status quo of the international order

Based on a large body of public statements, speeches and interviews, policymakers seem to agree that the current international order is undergoing rapid change. However, they disagree over the future direction and dynamics of the current changes observed in the international order. (In the case of the United States, government officials rarely make comments in public about multipolarity; but it is nonetheless possible to draw inferences from the debates that are nonetheless taking place in academic journals and at think tanks.) Some states already view the current global order as multipolar, while others assume it is becoming more so. Still others interpret the ongoing changes as an open-ended transitional phase or interregnum. There is also disagreement over whether the observable changes should be viewed positively or negatively.

For their part, Russia and China use the term “multipolarity” to challenge the global dominance of the United States. Chinese political elites see the current world order as transitioning away from a US-dominated unilateral world towards a “multipolar world” (*duojihua*). “The world is experiencing profound changes unseen in a century” (*bainian weiyou zhi da bianju*) is a frequently quoted phrase that has been an integral part of official political rhetoric since the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2017. Considered the guiding principle of “Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy”, which forms the ideological framework for China’s rise to world power status, it is associated with the decline of the United States as a global power and the resulting dangers and opportunities. For example, Minister of State Security Chen Yixin criticises some countries for “clinging to unipolar hegemony” regardless of the shifts in global power structures stemming from technological developments and the rise of emerging and developing

countries.<sup>12</sup> From China’s perspective, it is because of this “clinging to unipolar hegemony” that the transformation of the international system is not being allowed to take place in an orderly manner.

Russia, too, sees the structure of the international system as undergoing radical change. However, unlike in China, the term “multipolarity” is used to describe not only a departure from the US-led unipolar system but also the collapse of the entire Western complex. Moscow sees that process as having begun with the end of the Cold War and the rise of China and India, which has increasingly weakened the US and is now inevitably leading to a state of multipolarity. According to the Russian interpretation, the West’s refusal to relinquish its dominant position has resulted in armed conflicts and disputes.<sup>13</sup>

In the US, it is rare for high-ranking individuals to make explicit statements about multipolarity. The country’s global role tends to be characterised in terms of leadership or primacy (rather than unipolarity), while the term “multipolarity” appears only sporadically in the official discourse and is rarely reflected upon systematically. Although both President Bill Clinton and (later) Secretary of State Hillary Clinton acknowledged that the world order is becoming

<sup>12</sup> Chen Yixin, *Jianding bu yi guan che zong ti guo jia an quan guan yi gao shui ping an quan hu hang zhong guo shi xiandai hua* [Consistently implementing the comprehensive national security concept and ensuring China’s modernisation through a high level of security], *Qishi*, 15 April 2025, [http://www.qstheory.cn/20250415/e527332b9a104b219767be61af510a86/c.html?utm\\_source=substack&utm\\_medium=email](http://www.qstheory.cn/20250415/e527332b9a104b219767be61af510a86/c.html?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email).

<sup>13</sup> More specifically, Russia argues that it is the West’s refusal to acknowledge its failures — what it calls “teenage rejectionism with regard to the natural course of history” — that has led to crises and wars around the world. See Alexey Drobinin, “The Vision of a Multipolar World. The Civilisational Factor and Russia’s Place in the Emerging World Order”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, 20 February 2023, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/the-vision-of-a-multipolar-world/>.

more multipolar, they did not analyse or problematise that development in depth.<sup>14</sup>

India's elites see the world as undergoing a transformation from a more or less unipolar and Western-dominated order to a multipolar one. According to the Indian perspective, this process is irreversible, as international power relations are shifting permanently. The term "multipolarity" is already seen in India as an appropriate but, at the same time, not yet fully evolved description of the international order.<sup>15</sup> For India, its own rise in the international order and the growing importance of the Global South in general provide evidence of the transformation currently under way.

The South African government, which has been led without interruption by the African National Congress (ANC) since the end of apartheid and the first democratic elections in 1994, sees the world in a state of upheaval, too. While, for a long time, it regarded the structure of the international system as unipolar and viewed the global leadership role of the US critically, members of the government now largely agree about the uncertainty of developments going forward. South African Foreign Minister Ronald Lamola even uses the term "interregnum", coined by Italian politician and philosopher Antonio Gramsci to describe a transitional state that can also be understood as a moment of crisis. Lamola refers to the state of the world in October 2024 as follows:

"Turbulence, anarchy and combustion are the order of the day. Geopolitical rivalries between great powers that obsess with realpolitik and aggressive economic competitiveness, together with adversarial foreign policies and combative diplo-

**14** The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Interview of the President by Rolling Stone Magazine", Washington, D.C., 7 December 2000, [https://clintonwhitehouse4.archives.gov/textonly/library/hot\\_releases/December\\_7\\_2000\\_4.html](https://clintonwhitehouse4.archives.gov/textonly/library/hot_releases/December_7_2000_4.html); US Department of State, "Remarks on the Obama Administration's National Security Strategy", remarks by Hillary R. Clinton at the Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., 27 May 2010, <https://tinyurl.com/ycxsk2mu>.

**15** Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi's Remarks at the Extended Format Meeting of the SCO Council of Heads of States", New Delhi, 24 July 2024, [https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-State%20ments.htm?dtl/37926/Prime\\_Minister\\_Shri\\_Narendra\\_Modis\\_remarks\\_at\\_the\\_extended\\_format\\_Meeting\\_of\\_the\\_SCO\\_Council\\_of\\_Heads\\_of\\_States](https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-State%20ments.htm?dtl/37926/Prime_Minister_Shri_Narendra_Modis_remarks_at_the_extended_format_Meeting_of_the_SCO_Council_of_Heads_of_States).

macy, are factors driving this global crisis moment."<sup>16</sup>

Various statements by other South African political elites suggest that while they tend to see a trend towards a multipolar system, they do not think that trend has yet stabilised.

For their part, Turkish decision-makers increasingly describe the international order as multipolar — by which they do not mean a constellation that is emerging but one that has already been established. In an interview in 2021, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated that global power relations were shifting. He emphasised that there were several centres of power and criticised the United Nations (UN) Security Council for not adequately reflecting this new reality — what he called a world with a "diversity of powers".<sup>17</sup>

In the Indonesian discourse, the term "multipolarity" has so far played no role with regard to the country's foreign policy. It is mentioned neither in official papers nor in important speeches by officials.<sup>18</sup> This does not mean that multipolarity is not an issue; but when it is discussed, reference is made either to the constructs propagated by other states such as China or to general shifts of power both in Asia and within the international system.<sup>19</sup> Most members of the Indonesian government still see that system as bipolar, with the US and China confronting each other as the two major powers that determine the system's structure. However, there are a few members of the government who are convinced that a multipolar system

**16** Department of International Relations and Cooperation, Republic of South Africa, "Address by Minister Ronald Lamola, during the Thucydides Trap — Challenges and Opportunities for Africa", Pretoria, 11 October 2024, <https://dirco.gov.za/address-by-minister-ronald-lamola-during-the-thucydides-trap-challenges-and-opportunities-for-africa-held-at-the-mistra-head-office-on-11-october-2024/>.

**17** Burhanettin Duran, "Dünya Değişiyor, BM Sistemi de Değişmeli" [The world is changing, the United Nations system must change, too], interview with Erdoğan, *Kriter* 6, no. 61 (2021) (online), <https://kriterdergi.com/file/639/soylesi-cumhurbaskani-recep-tayyip-erdogan>.

**18** See, for example, Kementerian Luar Negeri [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia], "Renstra Kemlu 2020 — 2024" [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Strategic Plan 2020 — 2024] (Jakarta, 2020), <https://kemlu.go.id/akip/kementerian-luar-negeri/rencana-strategis-kemlu/bf424cb7b0dea050a42b9739eb261a3a?type=repository>.

**19** "Remarks by General (Retd) Prabowo Subianto", The Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, 11 June 2022.

already exists. They believe that Indonesia must assume a greater leadership role so that it can help shape the new world order.<sup>20</sup>

## Perceptions of multipolarity

Multipolarity in the context of the changing international order is assessed differently by the seven countries examined in this survey. Some of those countries see a multipolar order as normatively desirable and politically more stable compared with the status quo. Others share the positive normative assessment but see the transition to such an order as inherently unstable. While the term has largely negative connotations in the US, both China and Russia regard a multipolar world order as an unreservedly positive and desirable state of affairs, not least because they believe they would benefit from the end of US hegemony. Back in 1997, Moscow and Beijing committed themselves in a joint declaration to promoting the “multipolarisation of the world”.<sup>21</sup> More recent statements by the Russian and Chinese leadership (under Presidents Putin and Xi) are in line with that document. Above all, the 1997 declaration on a multipolar and new international order – which Russian officials continue to cite as groundbreaking<sup>22</sup> – should be seen in the context of the improvement in Sino-Russian relations that began after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It expresses the ambition of the two states to use their (strategic) partnership as a counterweight to the United States and the Western liberal order.

### In Russia, the transition to multipolarity is perceived as a radical break with the old order.

From the Russian perspective, the emergence of multipolarity is an inevitable and utterly desirable

<sup>20</sup> European Parliament, “Indonesian Friendship Group: EU-Indonesian Relations and the Outcome of the G20 Meeting in Bali”, Strasbourg, 23 November 2022, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/streaming/?event=20221123-1000-SPECIAL-OTHER>.

<sup>21</sup> “China-Russia: Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order”, *International Legal Materials* 36, no. 4 (1997), 986–89, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20698707>.

<sup>22</sup> For example, “Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova”, Moscow, 14 February 2025, [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1997514/](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1997514/).

development that should be accelerated. Multipolarity is particularly attractive to Russia because of its association not only with the decline and fall of US hegemony<sup>23</sup> but also with the fragmentation of the West. Shortly after Putin came to power, the Russian leadership began promoting developments that underpinned that view. When, in 2003, Germany and France joined Russia in speaking out against the US-led invasion of Iraq, Putin welcomed their distancing themselves from the United States with the following comment: “This is the first step towards the establishment of a multipolar world.”<sup>24</sup> Russian officials view the term “rules-based order” as a synonym or dishonest euphemism for neo-colonial US hegemony and reject it on those grounds.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the term is to have no place in a multipolar system. At the same time, Russian officials regularly make explicit reference to international law or other universally recognised rules such as the UN Charter as the basis for a multipolar order. According to the interpretation of Russian foreign-policy elites, multipolarity does not only stand for an end to (Western) liberalism in international relations; the transformation associated with it extends to the domestic politics of Western states. In other words, Moscow is hoping that during the course of multipolarisation, the transatlantic elites of European states will disappear and other forces will come to power – for example, the AfD in Germany, the Rassemblement National under Marine Le Pen in France, Fidesz under Viktor Orbán in Hungary or what the Kremlin regards as the “genuine, traditional West”.<sup>26</sup> Multipolarity is “the only chance for Europe

<sup>23</sup> Ivan Timofeev, “Asynchronous Multipolarity: Control Parameters and Development Vectors,” *ValdaiClub.com*, 31 May 2023, <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/asinkhronnaya-mnogopolyarnost/>.

<sup>24</sup> Vladimir Putin, “Putin: my sdelali pervyi shag k sozdaniyu mnogopolyarnogo mira” [We have taken the first step towards multipolarity], *Lenta.ru*, 12 February 2003, <https://lenta.ru/news/2003/02/12/multipl/>.

<sup>25</sup> Sergei Lavrov, “The UN Charter Should Become the Legal Foundation of a Multipolar World”, *Russia in Global Affairs* (online), 4 February 2025, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/un-charter-lavrov/>; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s Video Address to Participants in the 5th Global Forum of Young Diplomats”, Moscow, 27 August 2022, [https://www.mid.ru/en/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/1827539/](https://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/1827539/).

<sup>26</sup> President of Russia, “Valdai International Discussion Club Meeting”, Moscow, 27 October 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69695>.

to regain its political and economic identity”, according to Putin.<sup>27</sup>

**China is counting on a gradual transformation and, owing to its economic and technological potential, is confident about its leadership role.**

China, too, regards a multipolar world order as inevitable and is explicitly pursuing it. That is because the leadership in Beijing assumes China will be an important pole in such an international order. The country’s elites talk about creating an “orderly and equitable multipolar world”.<sup>28</sup> As Chinese President Xi Jinping has made clear:

“An equal and orderly multipolar world means every country can find its place in a multipolar system and play its due role pursuant to international law, so that the process of multipolarization is stable and constructive on the whole.”<sup>29</sup>

More so than their counterparts in Russia, the political elites in China underscore the importance of the multilateral system and the United Nations. They point to the urgent need to reform the UN system so that the countries of the Global South can enjoy more equality. At the Munich Security Conference in February 2025, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi emphasised that need:

“It must be ensured that all countries, regardless of their size and strength, are able to take part in decision-making, enjoy their rights, and play their role as equals in the process toward a multipolar world. An orderly multipolar world means all should observe the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, and uphold the universally recognised basic norms governing international relations. Multipolarity does not mean multiple blocs, or fragmentation, or disarray. All countries must act

27 Ibid.

28 See Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, “Wang Yi Elaborates on an Equal and Orderly Multipolar World and a Universally Beneficial and Inclusive Economic Globalisation”, Beijing, 7 March 2024, [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjzbzhd/202403/t20240308\\_11256418.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjzbzhd/202403/t20240308_11256418.html).

29 “Address by Chinese President Xi Jinping at Conference Marking 70th Anniversary of Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence”, *Belt and Road Portal*, 28 June 2024, <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/0GFF6M73.html>.

within the UN-centred international system and pursue cooperation under global governance.”<sup>30</sup>

Since 2021, Xi Jinping and other members of his government have been speaking in this context about the “true multilateralism” that China represents, as opposed to the “false multilateralism” or “pseudomultilateralism” implicitly attributed to the United States. Here, too, the Chinese narrative puts great value on the multilateral system with the UN at its centre.<sup>31</sup>

In practice, however, China has not yet pushed for any far-reaching reform or restructuring of existing multilateral organisations. On the contrary, it has opposed, among other things, the reform of the UN Security Council by blocking applications for permanent membership from countries such as Brazil, Germany, India and Japan and by creating alternative multilateral institutions.

In the Indian elite discourse, multipolarity is considered a desirable state and is therefore viewed positively. India’s political elites are keen to point out that, unlike what some Western theories of international relations contend, multipolarity is not to be equated with disorder and chaos; rather, it reflects the natural diversity of peoples and civilisations.<sup>32</sup>

30 “A multipolar world is not only a historical inevitability; it is also becoming a reality.” See Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, “A Steadfast Constructive Force in a Changing World”, Keynote Speech by H.E. Wang Yi at the 61st Munich Security Conference”, Beijing, 14 February 2025, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjzbzhd/202502/t20250215\\_11555665.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjzbzhd/202502/t20250215_11555665.html).

31 “To uphold true multilateralism, all parties should resolutely uphold the authority and standing of the United Nations, promote global governance based on extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits, advance greater democracy in international relations, and oppose unilateralism and all forms of ‘fake multilateralism’. China actively advocates, and more importantly, faithfully pursues the concept of true multilateralism.” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, “Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy Studies Centre and China Institute of International Studies Release the Report on the True Multilateralism: Conceptual Development, Core Essence and China’s Practice”, Beijing, 13 November 2024, [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbjzzjg\\_663340/zcyjs\\_663346/xgxw\\_663348/202412/t20241218\\_11498229.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbjzzjg_663340/zcyjs_663346/xgxw_663348/202412/t20241218_11498229.html).

32 Abhinav Pandya, “Why India Accepts Multipolar World with Dignity”, *Usanas Foundation*, 11 June 2024, <https://usanasfoundation.com/why-india-accepts-multipolar-world-with-dignity>.

Genuine,<sup>33</sup> full-fledged multipolarity is characterised both as more functional than the current system and as desirable. In contrast with unipolarity and bipolarity, multipolarity creates conditions for more inclusive and thus more democratic international relations, according to the Indian view.<sup>34</sup>

For both China and India, the commitment to multipolarity goes hand in hand with ideas of reshaping the global order and ensuring equal rights for the different regions of the world. That coupling can be understood as an overture to other countries in the Global South that are critical of, or at least ambivalent about, the changing world order.

China sees itself as a “natural member” of the Global South while India even lays claim to a leading role within that group. Both countries position themselves as representatives of the interests of the Global South by promoting foreign-policy narratives about solidarity and anti-colonialism.<sup>35</sup> China’s traditional reference to itself as a developing country<sup>36</sup> should be seen as affirmation of its solidarity with other developing countries. But it is also a self-serving narrative to obtain preferential treatment in development cooperation or environmental standards, for example. And it is at odds with China’s status as an economic superpower and, to a greater extent still, its aspiration of achieving major power status. Ultimately, however, the main aim of such foreign-policy narratives is to (continue to) bind the countries of the Global South to China, including middle powers like Indonesia, South Africa and Turkey. This endeavour is not motivated by altruism; rather, it reflects the claim of both

China and India to act as guardians of the Global South. Moreover, it fosters a degree of competition between the two countries — something does not go unnoticed by those affected.

Indonesia’s stance on multipolarity is ambivalent and characterised by different, sometimes contradictory interpretations. While some members of the political elite see multipolarity as providing an opportunity for Indonesia, the prevailing general view is more critical. The majority of policymakers are sceptical about the shift towards a multipolar international system. They fear that such an order could lead to the emergence of spheres of influence and zero-sum thinking among major powers and thus to growing regional and global instability.<sup>37</sup> The danger of the renewed formation of blocs is considered particularly problematic, not least because such a development would run counter to the interests of Indonesia as a non-aligned country that values its strategic sovereignty.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, there is a minority that believes multipolarity offers opportunities to establish a more just and inclusive world order.<sup>39</sup> Rizal Sukma, a prominent scholar at the Indonesian Centre for Strategic and International Studies, argues that a multipolar system in which all countries contribute to security and prosperity is preferable to a bipolar one dominated by the US and China.<sup>40</sup> Based on this argument, the rise of new centres of power could result in the expansion of the political and economic room for manoeuvre of the Global South.<sup>41</sup> And that, in turn, could lead to Indonesia’s economic advance-

33 Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi’s Remarks” (see note 15).

34 Pandya, “Why India Accepts Multipolar World with Dignity” (see note 32).

35 “China is naturally a member of the Global South, because we have fought colonialism and hegemonism together in history and we are committed to the common goal of development and revitalisation.” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, “Wang Yi on the Prominent, Growing Strength of the Global South: The Dynamism of the Changes Originates from the South”, Beijing, 7 March 2025, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjzbhd/202503/t20250307\\_11570138.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjzbhd/202503/t20250307_11570138.html); Harsh V. Pant and Sameer Patil, eds., *The Making of a Global Bharat* (New Delhi: Observer Research Foundation, 2024), <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-making-of-a-global-bharat>.

36 China International Development Cooperation Agency, “Wang Yi: China Naturally Member of Global South”, 12 July 2023, [http://en.cidca.gov.cn/2023-07/12/c\\_902381.htm](http://en.cidca.gov.cn/2023-07/12/c_902381.htm).

37 Oktaheroe Ramsi, “Kebijakan Pertahanan Negara Dalam Menghadapi Perkembangan Lingkungan Strategis” [National Defence Policy in a Changing Strategic Environment], *Wira* 2 (2022), 19–25.

38 “Discourse: Asia, Africa Need Political Will to Move Forward”, interview with Retno L. P. Marsudi, *The Jakarta Post*, 20 April 2015.

39 Fajar Hirawan, “Toward a Multipolar World Order”, *China Daily*, 17 March 2025, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/al/202503/17/WS67d76628a310c240449db0f4.html>.

40 Rizal Sukma, “If ASEAN Is to Remain Central to the Region It Must Deal with Its Institutional Weaknesses”, *East Asia Forum*, 29 September 2024, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/09/29/if-asean-is-to-remain-central-to-the-region-it-must-deal-with-its-institutional-weaknesses/>.

41 “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and Indonesia’s Indo-Pacific Strategy: What’s Next?”, interview with Siswo Pramono (Jakarta: Foreign Policy Community Indonesia, 2021), <https://www.fpcindonesia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/FPCI-Policy-to-Watch-Dr-Siswo-Indo-Pacific-Updated.pdf>.

ment and a greater say in shaping the new international order.<sup>42</sup>

Perceptions in South Africa are similarly ambivalent. The country's political elites advocate the establishment of more equitable structures at the multilateral level. This is a process that would entail different regions of the world – above all, the often-ignored African continent – being involved on a more equal footing. Even if they do not say so explicitly, it can be inferred that South African elites are in favour of a multipolar system, which they associate with the hope of playing a bigger role in world affairs.

In the same speech in which he described the changing world order as an interregnum, South African Foreign Minister Lamola outlined a positive vision of the future:

“There comes a time when it is not absolute power that defines us but our collective ability to resolve our challenges and build a foundation of new frontiers for future generations.”<sup>43</sup>

With that statement, Lamola justifies South Africa's firm commitment to relevant reforms at the multilateral level, such as those pertaining to the UN Security Council or the world trade regime (see also the part of this study titled “Multipolarisation: The International Order of Transformation”). The longstanding dominant role of the US is viewed critically among South Africa's decision-making circles, especially within the ANC. At the same time, South Africa's deputy minister of foreign affairs, Alvin Botes, has pointed out that the path to multipolarity is bound to be risky and difficult. In a speech delivered at the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) in March 2025, he emphasised:

“[M]ultipolarity is also not without risk. As power fragments, conflicts become more complex and more difficult to resolve.”<sup>44</sup>

42 Dato Sri Tahir, “Indonesia and the New Multipolar World Order”, *The Jakarta Post*, 18 January 2021, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2021/01/17/indonesia-and-the-new-multipolar-world-order.html>.

43 Department of International Relations and Cooperation, Republic of South Africa, “Address by Minister Ronald Lamola, during the Thucydides Trap” (see note 16).

44 South African Government, “Deputy Minister Alvin Botes: South Africa's Diplomacy in a Turbulent Geopolitical Era”, Pretoria, 24 March 2025, <https://www.gov.za/news/>

South Africa and Indonesia agree that a more just and multipolar order requires an end to armed violence and the containment of crises. If the shape of the new world order is not negotiated multilaterally and peacefully, multipolarity will not lead to a stable order, according to those two countries.

In the Turkish discourse, multipolarity is understood as an order in which Russia – a long-established international power – and an emerging China can serve as strategic counterweights to the US and Europe. Political elites see the shift towards a multipolar world order as providing a strategic opportunity to expand Turkey's foreign-policy room for manoeuvre. From the Turkish perspective, this new power constellation offers a form of foreign-policy reassurance. Moreover, the hope is that it will allow Turkey to reduce its dependence on the West, secure its foreign-policy autonomy and make full use of its potential to engage in economic and technological cooperation.

Turkish criticism is directed primarily against the unipolar order, which is associated with the “dominance of the West”, especially the US and the EU. On the other hand, a return to bipolarity is considered unlikely and thus barely features as part of the criticism. Multipolarity is assessed positively, at least in parts of the Turkish discourse, as it is seen as providing for a more balanced and equitable distribution of power. At the same time, the attitude towards polarity as a structural element of the international system is ambivalent. Although the prospect of multiple poles of power is welcomed as a corrective to unipolar dominance, there are also fundamental reservations about a polarised system. Such ambivalence is also evident among members of the government.<sup>45</sup>

In his 2021 interview cited above, Turkish President Erdoğan commented on the current structure of the international system but avoided speaking out in favour of any particular form of international polarity. In-

speeches/deputy-minister-alvin-botes-south-africa%E2%80%99s-diplomacy-turbulent-geopolitical-era-24.

45 Contradictions in relation to multipolarity are also expressed in an interview with Erdoğan. See Duran, “Dünya Değişiyor, BM Sistemi de Değişmeli” (see note 17). See also Sümeyye Dilara Dinçer, Can Efesoy and Muhammet Tarhan, “Bakan Fidan ‘Türkiye Yüzyılı’nda Türkiye’ nin dış politika vizyonunu kaleme aldı” [Minister Fidan wrote about Turkey's foreign policy vision in “The Century of Turkey”], *Anadolu Ajansı*, 6 October 2023; Hakan Fidan, “Turkish Foreign Policy at the Turn of the ‘Century of Türkiye’: Challenges, Vision, Objectives, and Transformation”, *Insight Turkey* 25, no. 5 (2023), 11 – 25, <https://tinyurl.com/3ybbtw7m>.

stead, he emphasised the shift in global power relations and the emergence of several centres of power:

“The world has changed; we no longer live in a bipolar or unipolar world. There are various centres of power in the world. First of all, there are countries that are raising their voices. They say we do not accept this system as it stands, we do not accept the decisions you make on your own. The UN Security Council does not reflect the diversity of powers.”<sup>46</sup>

Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan has taken a more nuanced position. While he appears to share Erdoğan’s view that the international system is unfair and limits the participation of certain countries, Fidan explicitly criticises the trend towards multipolarity and the resulting tensions between the major powers. According to the foreign minister, Turkey is striving for an international system that goes beyond traditional concepts of the unipolar, bipolar or multipolar order. The goal is a more inclusive, effective, just and secure system that takes into account the global and regional challenges of the present – a “system based not on polarity but on solidarity”.<sup>47</sup>

The US government rarely mentions the term “multipolarity”; in fact, there are indications that Washington deliberately avoids any reference to it. The term has long had negative connotations in the official political discourse of the United States. Before Trump became president for the first time, it was understood as signifying implicit or explicit criticism of American leadership – as a call for limiting, containing or even counterbalancing the unipolar dominance of the United States. It was also understood as a Russian construct. Pre-Trump, there was broad bipartisan consensus among the official US foreign-policy establishment about what to make of “multipolarity”. President George W. Bush put it this way: “I understand there was kind of this notion of multipolarity, which means that somehow the values of America need to be offset. But we’re for peace, we’re for freedom.”<sup>48</sup> His vice president, Dick Cheney,

expressed it as follows: “Our choice is not between a unipolar world and a multipolar world. Our choice is for a just, free and democratic world.”<sup>49</sup> President Obama’s secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, drew a marked contrast, too, between a “multi-polar world” and what she called a “multi-partner world”.<sup>50</sup> From the viewpoint of the former US government officials quoted here, there is a clear distinction between multipolarity – often associated with geopolitical competition and fragmentation – on the one hand and partnership, cooperation or multilateralism on the other. These three alternatives to multipolarity reflect a liberal self-image according to which American values are universally valid and the Western-influenced order is fundamentally open to all. However, they make no predictions about how the international system will evolve in the future.

In the United States under Donald Trump, perceptions of the international system have changed. The Trump administration’s departure from the liberal narrative and the view of the US as the leading power and pillar of a liberal world order has led to a re-assessment of polarity. Indeed, the US president’s policy of possible deals being struck between major powers, including about the possible delineation of spheres of influence, can in itself be interpreted as tacit acceptance of multipolarity. In an interview in early 2025, his secretary of state, Marco Rubio, described unipolarity as a “historical anomaly” and argued that it was only natural that the era of unipolarity should end (statement quoted in full on p. 20).<sup>51</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Duran, “Dünya Değişiyor, BM Sistemi de Değişmeli” (see note 17).

<sup>47</sup> Dinçer, Efesoy and Tarhan, “Bakan Fidan ‘Türkiye Yüzyılı’nda Türkiye’nin dış politika vizyonunu kaleme aldı” (see note 45).

<sup>48</sup> “Interview of the President by Sir David Frost of BBCTV” (George W. Bush White House Archives, Washington, D.C., 12 November 2003), <https://tinyurl.com/48462h65>.

<sup>49</sup> Richard Cheney, “Remarks by the Vice President to the World Economic Forum” (George W. Bush White House Archives, Washington, D.C., 24 January 2004), <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2004/01/text/20040124-1.html>.

<sup>50</sup> US Department of State, “Remarks on the Obama Administration’s National Security Strategy” (see note 14).

<sup>51</sup> US Department of State, “Secretary Marco Rubio with Megyn Kelly of the Megyn Kelly Show”, interview, Washington, D.C., 30 January 2025, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-marco-rubio-with-megyn-kelly-of-the-megyn-kelly-show/>; Trita Parsi, “What Rubio Said about Multipolarity Should Get More Attention”, *Responsible Statecraft* (blog post), 3 February 2025, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/marco-rubio/>.

Table 1

### Status Quo of the International Order and Multipolarity

	<i>Is multipolarity part of the official discourse?</i>	<i>Description of the status quo of the international order</i>	<i>Perception of multipolarity</i>	<i>Assessment of multipolarity</i>
China	Yes	Multipolar	Consistently positive	Anti-US, more just, fairer
India	Yes	Multipolar	Consistently positive	More just, fairer
Indonesia	No	Bipolar	Predominantly negative	Unstable, crisis-ridden
Russia	Yes	Multipolar	Consistently positive	Anti-liberal, more just, fairer
South Africa	Yes	Multipolar	Consistently positive	More just, fairer
Turkey	Yes	Multipolar	Predominantly positive	More just, fairer
US	No	Unipolar	Predominantly negative	Anti-US

### Interim conclusion

Most of the countries examined in this study believe that a multipolar order is emerging. However, there are differing and sometimes contradictory views on its consequences. China, India and Russia all have an entirely positive view of multipolarity, which they see as providing opportunities to gain international political influence. Russia envisages that process as leading to a clear demarcation between itself and the so-called West. China believes it will have more political clout in the international arena as a result of the relative loss of power of the United States. India, for its part, regards multipolarity as an opportunity to become a major power in its own right. Turkey, too, views multipolarity as allowing it to expand its foreign-policy room for manoeuvre and play a more active part as a stabilising force in its own region. And even the United States under Donald Trump does not outright dismiss signs of a shift in the international distribution of power associated with multipolarisation. That is a notable break with the positions of former leading US politicians and their relevant discourse, in which multipolarity was often seen as a threat to the

(US-led) rules-based international order and associated with instability and fragmentation.

Indonesia and South Africa, on the other hand, are more ambivalent about the trend towards multipolarity. While they acknowledge that it is under way, they do not consider it to be irreversible. Similar to India and Turkey, Indonesia and South Africa see an opportunity to exercise more global influence in a multipolar order. However, both are concerned that the current geopolitical upheavals could bring about considerable risks and turbulence. They fear economic disruption, the erosion of international law, instability or even the emergence of a world order in which they do not have a seat at the table at which key decisions are made.

Finally, what stands out is that all the countries examined here – with the exception of Russia – emphasise the importance of multilateral institutions and a rules-based world order. But opinions vary as to how inclusive and fair the current order is. Five of the seven countries point to shortcomings and the need for reform, while two – Russia and the US – do not. The next part of the study therefore focuses on specific aspects of the transformation of the global system towards a multipolar world.

# Multipolarisation: The International Order in Transformation

## The transition to a multipolar order

How do the countries examined in this study interpret the transformation towards a multipolar order? Do they see it as evolutionary (i.e., gradual and reform-driven) or disruptive (i.e., crisis-led and potentially accompanied by coercion or military force)? What are the constituent elements of multipolarity? What spatial dimension is attributed to a multipolar order? Who are the leading actors? And which policy areas or suborders are considered important?

First of all, both Russia and China argue that the US refusal to accept a multipolar world order is to blame for crisis-like developments and upheavals related to the international order. Nonetheless, China views the underlying shifting distribution of power primarily as an evolutionary process. From its perspective, economic globalisation is the main driver of the transformation towards a multipolar world order, as it has enabled the economic rise of countries in other regions of the world, especially in the Global South. This is particularly true in the case of China. Its rapidly growing economy has allowed it to steadily expand its power and global influence and thereby challenge the United States. The Chinese leadership believes the transformation of the international system towards a multipolar order cannot be halted. And while its progress is zigzag rather than linear, a return to unipolarity appears out of the question.<sup>52</sup>

The Russian perspective differs significantly from the Chinese one. Russia views the transformation as

revolutionary and potentially accompanied by crisis-like events. It follows that Russia and its partners must drive the transformation process forward by weakening Western institutions and structures. Thus, based on this logic, the transition to multipolarity necessitates the decline of those international organisations that are integral to the unipolar US hegemony – and that means, above all, NATO. Russia’s attitude towards international economic organisations is ambivalent. Some actors have referred to the Bretton Woods institutions Western as “neo-colonial” instruments and have called for alternatives to be established from which the West is excluded.<sup>53</sup> Pro-regime political scientists such as Sergei Karaganov argue that crises and conflicts – including the war in Ukraine – are inevitable on the path to the downfall of the US and the West. According to this way of thinking, war is creative destruction:

“The war in Ukraine, like many events of the past decade, is not just the collapse of the old world; it is also the creation of a new, freer, more just, politically and culturally pluralistic and diverse world.”<sup>54</sup>

As discussed above (in “Status Quo: Multipolarity and the International Order”), Washington’s attitude towards changes in the international order is shifting. Previous US administrations viewed those developments with concern, fearing the decline of the US as

<sup>53</sup> Drobinin, “The Vision of a Multipolar World” (see note 13).

<sup>54</sup> “Sergei Karaganov: My nablyudaem poyavlenie novogo mira v moment ego sozdaniya” [We are witnessing the emergence of a new world at the moment of its creation], *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 26 October 2022, <https://rg.ru/2022/10/26/ospavshijsia-mir-uroki-na-budushchee.html>.

<sup>52</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, “Important Speech by Xi Jinping at the Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference in Beijing” (in Chinese), 28 December 2025, [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/zyxw/202312/t20231228\\_11214409.shtml](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/zyxw/202312/t20231228_11214409.shtml).

a leading power. Statements by the current US administration, on the other hand, suggest that it acknowledges such changes are already under way. This points to an understanding of the transformation being evolutionary rather than revolutionary or disruptive. Nevertheless, there are actors within the administration who see risks to global stability arising from the shift towards multipolarity, as evidenced by the following statement made by Foreign Secretary Rubio:

“So, it’s not normal for the world to simply have a unipolar power That [...] was an anomaly. It was a product of the end of the Cold War, but eventually you were going to reach back to a point where you had a multipolar world, multi-great powers in different parts of the planet. We face that now with China and to some extent Russia, and then you have rogue states like Iran and North Korea you have to deal with.”<sup>55</sup>

In India, the transformation towards a multipolar order is perceived mainly as a gradual, evolutionary development. Critical international events such as the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Russia’s war of aggression in Ukraine are seen as expediting that development or being symptomatic of it.<sup>56</sup> At first glance, Indian elites appear to be sending contradictory signals: some claim that a multipolar order already exists, while others are convinced that it is still emerging. To resolve this apparent contradiction, “multipolarisation” is invoked. Thus, Indian elites see the current international order as “rather multipolar”; that is, it is undergoing multipolarisation at an increasing pace.<sup>57</sup> According to Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, today’s multi-

polar order can be described as unfinished because it is still “unbalanced” (i.e., there is no balance of power).<sup>58</sup> Based on Jaishankar’s logic, India’s understanding of multipolarisation corresponds closely to its self-image as a rising power. Thus, Indian elites do not see their country as representing a firm category such as that of “middle power”; rather they view it as an emerging great power. And because India regards its international rise as a peaceful process, it is only logical that it views the ongoing process of multipolarisation in the same light.

South African elites are aware, too, of the risks and potential crises of a world in transition. Nevertheless, they are able to conceive and formulate a positive vision of a multipolar world and even describe the path to achieving that order: reducing inequalities between the Global North and the Global South through reforms of multilateral institutions, creating a more inclusive international order based on solidarity and justice and thereby promoting sustainable development. These three pillars reflect the priorities of the South African G20 Presidency, which adopted the motto “Solidarity, Equality, Sustainability”.<sup>59</sup> Compared with India, there is less focus among South Africa’s elites on achieving the status of major power; that is also because of the negative connotations associated with the apartheid regime. Nevertheless, the priorities mentioned above clearly express the desire to create an equitable world order — one in which the African continent plays a more important role than it does in the current international system.

Turkey takes a similar view and emphasises the importance of international law and multilateral cooperation in the transformation towards a multipolar order. Ankara believes the transformation will be a long-term process. At the same time, it foresees that process being accompanied by increasing fragmentation and competition; and, in such an environment, it perceives an opportunity to improve its position within the international system.<sup>60</sup> This stance is reflected

55 US Department of State, “Secretary Marco Rubio with Megyn Kelly of the Megyn Kelly Show” (see note 51).

56 “US ‘Is Adjusting to a Multipolar World’, Says Jaishankar”, *The Economic Times*, 28 September 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/us-is-adjusting-to-a-multipolar-world-says-jaishankar/articleshow/103994300.cms>. Jaishankar talks here about multipolarity being a consequence of US military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

57 What Jaishankar said is that the emerging world order is a “more multipolar world”. See Manisha Roy, “Heading towards Much More Multipolar World: Jaishankar’s Big Statement on UN, Alliances”, *News18*, 23 May 2025, <https://www.news18.com/india/heading-towards-much-more-multipolar-world-jaishankars-big-statement-on-un-alliances-ws-l-9349541.html>.

58 “‘Multi-polarity is still in its early stages.’ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, ‘Remarks by EAM, Dr. S. Jaishankar at the Jasjit Singh Memorial Lecture at CAPS’”, New Delhi, 2 August 2024, [https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/38092/Remarks\\_by\\_EAM\\_Dr\\_S\\_Jaishankar\\_at\\_the\\_Jasjit\\_Singh\\_Memorial\\_Lecture\\_at\\_CAPS](https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/38092/Remarks_by_EAM_Dr_S_Jaishankar_at_the_Jasjit_Singh_Memorial_Lecture_at_CAPS).

59 See “G20 Presidency”, G20 South Africa 2025, <https://www.g20.org.za/g20-south-africa/g20-presidency/>.

60 Veyis Uluçyurt, “BRICS ve Türkiye’nin Yaklaşımı: Yeni arayışlar mı meydan okuma mı?” [The BRICS and Turkey’s Approach: New Searches or Challenges?], *İnsemer*, 28 October

in Turkish foreign policy's efforts to position the country strategically between the competing centres of power. The goal is to achieve and maintain strategic autonomy and expand foreign-policy options under the conditions of a multipolar international order.<sup>61</sup> This is evident in Turkey's foreign-policy course of cooperation with Russia and China, which it is pursuing in areas such as energy and industrial policy as well as infrastructure projects. At the same time, Ankara is seeking to move the country closer to the BRICS group. Turkey already has BRICS partner-country status and has applied for full membership, in what can be seen as a bid to bolster its strategic orientation towards alternative geopolitical centres of power outside the transatlantic framework.

Unlike their counterparts in India, Turkey and South Africa, Indonesia's elites fear that the trend towards multipolarity will lead, above all, to crisis situations and violent upheavals. It is not only crises in multilateral cooperation that are conceivable but also the erosion of the normative foundations of the world order and the escalation of regional conflicts such as that in Ukraine.<sup>62</sup> From an Indonesian perspective, even nuclear war cannot be ruled out. Thus, the shift towards a multipolar order is associated by many in Jakarta with instability and uncertainty.<sup>63</sup>

2024, <https://tinyurl.com/32ak2w8z>; "Türkiye alternatifsiz olmadığını gösterdi" [Turkey has shown that it is not without alternatives], *Timeturk*, 6 August 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/3wkh5zkk>; Abdülkadir Aksöz, "Türkiye'nin BRICS hamlesi: Modern denge siyaseti" [Turkey's BRICS move: Modern balance of power policy], *Yeni Şafak*, 16 September 2024, <https://www.yenisafak.com/dusunce-gunlugu/turkiyenin-brics-hamlesi-modern-denge-siyaseti-4645156>; Consulate General of the People's Republic of China, "Xi Jinping Holds Talks with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey", New York, 2 July 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/mrwd9mmu>.

**61** See, for example, Hüseyin Korkmaz, "Türkiye, BRICS ve çok kutupluluk: Jeopolitik bir dengeleme" [Turkey, the BRICS and Multipolarity: A Geopolitical Balancing Act], *Anadolu Ajansı*, 12 June 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz/analiz-turkiye-brics-ve-cok-kutupluluk-jeopolitik-bir-dengeleme/3247499>.

**62** "Annual Press Statement of the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia 2025", Jakarta, 10 January 2025, <https://kemlu.go.id/publikasi/pidato/pidato-menteri/transkrip-pernyataan-pers-tahunan-menteri-luar-negeri-ri-tahun-2025?type=publication>.

**63** Shohib Masykur, "Indonesia Di Tengah Dunia Multipolar" [Indonesia in a Multipolar World], *Kompas*, 22 July 2023, <https://www.kompas.id/baca/opini/2023/07/21/indonesia-di-tengah-dunia-multipolar>; Ministry of Foreign

## Constituent elements of a changing world order

As regards what is considered crucial for establishing a multipolar world order, a range of constituent elements can be identified in almost all of the countries examined. Those elements include not only the reform of global norms, rules and institutions but also the violent exercise of power and coercion.

The Russian perspective is a good example here. In their statements, Russian officials refer to existing institutions and norms, especially the UN Charter.<sup>64</sup> Sovereignty, territorial integrity and equal rights are repeatedly cited as fundamental principles of the multipolar order. However, those assertions are in stark contrast with Russia's own actions, especially its war of aggression against Ukraine. Russian officials and think-tank academics argue that Ukraine has forfeited its sovereignty or transferred it to a foreign power and is thus no longer a state in its own right but rather an instrument of the West.<sup>65</sup> Ukrainian sovereignty is seen as existing on paper only.<sup>66</sup> With reference to the (sham) referendums held by Russia, it is further postulated that Ukraine's territorial integrity no longer applies to the regions annexed by Russia.<sup>67</sup> Russian officials tend to use the term "sovereignty" to designate a great power privilege in a hierarchical world rather than an equal right of all states. Thus, it can be argued that the exercise of power and coercion play a decisive role in Russia's understanding of multipolarity.

Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, "Agenda Prioritas Keke-tuaan Indonesia Pada MIKTA 2023" [Priority Agenda of the Indonesian Presidency at MIKTA, 2023] (Jakarta, 2022), [https://perpustakaan.kemlu.go.id/index.php?p=show\\_detail&id=2509&keywords=](https://perpustakaan.kemlu.go.id/index.php?p=show_detail&id=2509&keywords=).

**64** Lavrov, "The UN Charter Should Become the Legal Foundation of a Multipolar World" (see note 25).

**65** Andrey Sushentsov, "The Ukrainian Crisis as a Testing Ground for American Strategy", *ValdaiClub.com*, 17 January 2025, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/the-ukrainian-crisis-as-a-testing-ground/>.

**66** Timofei Bordachev, "Chego na samom dele khochet Evropa?" [What does Europe really want?], *Russia in Global Affairs*, 9 November 2021, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/chego-hochet-evropa/>.

**67** Lavrov, "The UN Charter Should Become the Legal Foundation of a Multipolar World" (see note 25).

**Even those states that violate international law refer to it positively at a normative level.**

China, too, at least in its official rhetoric, consistently asserts that the United Nations must be at the centre of an “orderly and equitable” multipolar order and that all states should adhere to the principles of the UN Charter. In this way, it is committing itself to the reform of the multilateral system, as Xi Jinping’s following statement makes clear:

“We should actively participate in reforming and developing the global governance system, expand the common interests of all sides, and make the global governance architecture more balanced and effective.”<sup>68</sup>

From the Chinese perspective, the principles of the UN Charter are in line with the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” (the guidelines for China’s foreign policy), which were formulated in 1954.<sup>69</sup> The latter are based on the Westphalian principles of sovereignty, equality and non-interference, which date back to the principles established after the Peace of Westphalia of 1648. Xi Jinping’s more recent foreign-policy concept of building a “community with a shared future for mankind” (*renlei mingyun gongtongti*), which is often used in connection with the term “multipolarity”, reflects the Westphalian principles, too.<sup>70</sup> In addition, China emphasises the equality and sov-

ereignty of states as the most important premise of global governance (for example, in connection with its Global Governance Initiative of September 2025). That is, all states, regardless of size or power, are equal and have the right to full control over their internal affairs without external interference. Here, too, China signals that it is striving for a multipolar, state-centred world order in which major powers – above all, itself – have more leeway to resist Western political and normative influence. Thus, China emphasises the sovereignty and equality of all states under international law, on the one hand, but claims privileges as a major power, on the other. The People’s Republic is promoting a world order in which it can play a central role and both legitimise and enforce its own values and interests. But implicitly, it accepts that for countries to be able to assert their own interests, it is inevitable that multipolarity will involve coercion and the use of force.<sup>71</sup>

Turkey takes the view that the establishment of a multipolar world order should be based, first and foremost, on the principles of international law, mutual respect and non-interference in internal affairs.<sup>72</sup> From the Turkish government’s perspective, such a position is consistent with increased multilateralism and the goal of promoting a rules-based international order. Institutions such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization (WTO) are seen as central pillars for stabilising global relations and preventing crises and conflicts. In this context, it should be emphasised, however, that Turkish decision-makers are prone to make selective and strategic use of both international law and the principle of non-interference in internal affairs. For example, Ankara uses the former as the basis for its sharp criticism of Israel’s actions in the Gaza Strip, Lebanon and Iran but firmly rejects international accusations regarding its own military intervention in Syria. At the same time, it wields the principle of non-interference as a political tool, primarily to ward off external criticism of restrictions on fundamental rights and the rule of law at home.<sup>73</sup>

**68** Ministry of Water Resources, “Address by Chinese President Xi Jinping at Conference Marking 70th Anniversary of Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence”, Beijing, 7 January 2024, [http://www.mwr.gov.cn/english/News/NationalNews/202407/t20240701\\_1714729.html](http://www.mwr.gov.cn/english/News/NationalNews/202407/t20240701_1714729.html).

**69** “(1) Mutual respect for each other’s territorial integrity and sovereignty, (2) mutual non-aggression, (3) mutual non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, (4) equality and co-operation for mutual benefit, and (5) peaceful co-existence.” See Wu Ken, “Essay des Botschafters,” in *70 Jahre Fünf Prinzipien der friedlichen Koexistenz*, China H, newsletter of the Chinese Embassy in Germany, special edition (Berlin, July 2024), 4, <http://de.china-embassy.gov.cn/det/zt/Newsletter/202407/P020240713014636302873.pdf>.

**70** “Speech by President Xi Jinping at the United Nations Office at Geneva: Work Together to Build a Community of Shared Future for Mankind”, Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Iraq, Baghdad, 23 January 2017, [http://iq.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zygx/201701/t20170123\\_2309166.htm](http://iq.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zygx/201701/t20170123_2309166.htm).

**71** In the eyes of the Chinese leadership, Taiwan – unlike Ukraine – is not an independent state – it enjoys neither sovereignty nor territorial integrity. The Taiwan issue is considered an internal Chinese matter.

**72** Consulate General of the People’s Republic of China, “Xi Jinping Holds Talks with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan” (see note 60).

**73** See İletişim Başkanlığı [Communications Directorate of the Republic of Turkey], “Erdoğan: Attack on Iran shows

India sees multipolarisation as a natural international process that cannot be stopped and thus must be shaped to meet one's own interests. Its main concern is to come up with the most suitable proposals in the competition of ideas. In the Indian discourse, the emerging multipolar order is associated with a growing number of international centres of power that will engender an increased international pluralism of values, norms and institutions.<sup>74</sup> For its part, the Indian government believes that a multipolar world order will give rise to a reformed multilateralism;<sup>75</sup> but apart from calling for a restructuring of the UN Security Council, it has made only rather vague statements about concrete policies. Further, it opines that entering into interest-driven and fluid partnerships is the most important foreign-policy virtue.<sup>76</sup> From this, it can be concluded that Indian actors tend to consider it unrealistic – or at least not pressing – to strive for a single robust set of international rules and institutions.

Indonesia's official position, on the other hand, is strongly normative. It consistently refers to the importance of a rules-based world order that adheres to international law. Jakarta believes that international law should always form the normative basis of global governance, even if the structure of the global order changes owing to shifts in the distribution of power.<sup>77</sup>

Israel's disregard for international law", Ankara, 13 June 2025, [https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/turkce/dis\\_basinda\\_turkiye/detay/erdogan-irana-yonelik-saldiri-israilin-uluslararası-hukuku-hice-saydigini-gosteriyor-iran](https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/turkce/dis_basinda_turkiye/detay/erdogan-irana-yonelik-saldiri-israilin-uluslararası-hukuku-hice-saydigini-gosteriyor-iran); Ministry of Justice – Press and Public Relations Department, "Minister Bozdağ: This is a clear attempt to interfere in Turkey's internal affairs", Ankara, 30 April 2022, <https://basin.adalet.gov.tr/bakan-bozdog-turkiye-nin-icislerine-acik-bir-mudahale-girisimidir>.

**74** Pandya, "Why India Accepts Multipolar World with Dignity" (see note 32).

**75** See, for example, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Remarks by EAM, Dr. S. Jaishankar at the Nikkei Asia 2024 Future of Asia Forum", New Delhi, 24 May 2024, [https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/37824/Remarks\\_by\\_EAM\\_Dr\\_S\\_Jaishankar\\_at\\_the\\_Nikkei\\_Asia\\_2024\\_Future\\_of\\_Asia\\_Forum](https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/37824/Remarks_by_EAM_Dr_S_Jaishankar_at_the_Nikkei_Asia_2024_Future_of_Asia_Forum).

**76** Roy, "Heading towards Much More Multipolar World" (see note 57).

**77** Ministry of Foreign Affairs [of the Republic of Indonesia], "Press Briefing Menlu RI Kunjungan Ke Beijing" [press conference by the minister of foreign affairs of the Republic of Indonesia on his visit to Beijing], Jakarta, 23 August 2024, <https://kemlu.go.id/publikasi/siaran-pers/press-briefing-menlu-ri-kunjungan-ke-beijing,-rrt,-23-agustus-2024?type=>

Building on this, Indonesian elites argue that issues of global governance should, ideally, be negotiated at the multilateral level. At the same time, political statements and official documents suggest that Indonesian elites are concerned about current developments in the international order – particularly the shift towards unilateral power politics and coercion – and tend to assess those developments critically.<sup>78</sup>

In the context of how the transition to multipolarity is perceived, the starkest contrasts are to be drawn between South Africa and the United States. The South African government emphasises, above all, that the establishment of an equal and rules-based multipolar world order must be based on norms, rules and institutions. From the statements made by political elites, it can be inferred that the South African government believes power politics and coercion cannot create a truly just global order; rather, they would leave the world in a state of interregnum, as South African Foreign Minister Lamola put it.<sup>79</sup> However, South Africa goes further than the other countries examined in this study: principles such as multilateralism and human rights are explicitly highlighted as the soft power of South African foreign policy.<sup>80</sup> That stance is deeply rooted in the self-image of democratic South Africa – that is, its self-image since the end of apartheid. In March 2025, Mxolisi Nkosi, South Africa's permanent representative to the United Nations in Geneva, stated:

"The values that Nelson Mandela espoused under his presidency influenced South Africa's foreign policy objectives of peace, human rights and people-centred development, in pursuit of a better life for all. The foreign policy principles that democratic South Africa continues to advance on the global stage include, among others, human rights, democ-

publication; Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, "Indonesia Ready to Be Motor for Peaceful, Prosperous Asia, President Jokowi Says", Jakarta, 27 May 2016, <https://setkab.go.id/en/indonesia-ready-to-be-motor-for-peaceful-and-prosperous-asia-president-jokowi-says/>.

**78** "Annual Press Statement of the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia 2025" (see note 62).

**79** Department of International Relations and Cooperation, Republic of South Africa, "Address by Minister Ronald Lamola, during the Thucydides Trap" (see note 16).

**80** "South Africa's Foreign Policy Defined by Commitment to Human Rights", *Voices of the Global South*, 29 March 2025, <https://vocesdelsur.prensa-latina.cu/south-africas-foreign-policy-defined-by-commitment-to-human-rights/>.

racy and a multilateral system based on international norms and law.”<sup>81</sup>

This is in stark contrast with the position of the United States until recently (that is, pre-Trump). In the past, decision-makers in Washington always claimed that everyone benefits from a US-led world order based on liberal universal values and avoided using the term “multipolarity”. Hence, initiatives of others aimed at achieving multipolarity were always perceived as a challenge to American leadership and American ideas of the world order. Under Trump, the liberal leadership role has been abandoned and the US itself is now openly pursuing power politics without making any universal normative claims. As a result, there is a stronger, albeit selective acceptance of the power politics of other major powers. However, a coherent vision of the future world order has not yet been formulated.

### Spatial dimension and key players

With the exception of India and Indonesia, the countries examined in this study see multipolarity primarily as a global construct. In other words, it is not limited to a specific region. While regional aspects such as spheres of influence or the strengthening of regional leadership play a role at times, they are embedded in an overarching global understanding of multipolarity – even if differences about the precise meaning of the term persist. The US discourse on multipolarity is an outlier case, as the spatial dimension of the construct is hardly discussed.

Russia understands multipolarity as designating a clearly structured global order in which concentric circles (or what it calls “peripheral belts”) form around the centres of power. This understanding reflects Russia’s geopolitical self-image in Eastern Europe: the first circle comprises former Soviet republics and the second former Warsaw Pact states. In this way, Russia combines global ambitions with regional power claims that are rooted in history.<sup>82</sup> By contrast, the Chinese approach to shaping a multipolar world order is based on developing diverse relationships. With the help of numerous diplomatic, economic

and security-policy initiatives – including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), targeted cooperation with the Global South and the promotion of South-South cooperation – Beijing is aiming to create a comprehensive international network that will serve as the basis for a global multipolar order.<sup>83</sup> That approach is reflected in, among other things, Xi Jinping’s foreign-policy concept of a “global community of shared future”, the main focus of which is interconnectivity between states. “Shared future”, “destinies being interconnected” and “countries are more interconnected and interdependent” are among the key phrases used in that document.<sup>84</sup>

South Africa, too, views multipolarity from a global spatial perspective; but it combines the construct with the goal of ensuring the African continent plays a bigger role in multilateral decision-making processes. To this end, it promotes intra-African cooperation within the framework of the African Union (AU) and seeks to make sure the voice of the Global South is heard at the multilateral level and in international organisations. As regards the AU, South Africa plays a somewhat contradictory role. On the one hand, it refuses to position itself as a force for order on the African continent because that could lead to parallels being drawn with the South African apartheid state. On the other hand, it wants to bring African positions together – something that is becoming increasingly difficult owing to political developments in African subregions and differences between African states about what the new world order should look like. Indeed, the elusiveness of African unity can be seen from the discussion on reforming the UN Security Council: so far, there is no consensus among the African states on how African seats should be distributed.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>81</sup> Anyuli Mercedes Gonzalez-Oliver, “The Pursuit of Social Change”, *UNtoday*, 1 March 2025, <https://untoday.org/the-pursuit-of-social-change/>.

<sup>82</sup> Drobinin, “The Vision of a Multipolar World” (see note 13).

<sup>83</sup> Jenny Clegg, *China’s Global Strategy. Towards a Multipolar World* (New York: Pluto Press, 2009), 89.

<sup>84</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *A Global Community of Shared Future: China’s Proposals and Actions* (Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, Beijing, September 2023), <http://www.beltandroadforum.org/english/n101/2023/1010/c127-916.html>.

<sup>85</sup> Olukayode Bakare, “The Quest for UN Reform and Permanent Africa Security Council Seat: What This Means to AfricaNew”, blog (London: London School of Economics, Department of International Relations, 21 January 2025), <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/internationalrelations/2025/01/21/the-quest-for-un-reform-and-permanent-africa-security-council-seat-what-this-means-to-africa/>.

Turkey is another country pursuing multipolarity as a global construct with the aim of positioning itself beyond its immediate neighbourhood as an active co-creator of the multipolar world order. Ankara wants to play an influential role in political and economic issues at both the regional and global level. And it also wants to serve as the voice of the Global South or the Islamic world – depending on the situation.

For their part, India and Indonesia have traditionally seen themselves as regional rather than global powers and, accordingly, attach primary importance to pursuing their own regional foreign- and security-policy priorities. For India, it is the regional dimension of multipolarity that is the most important. Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar has emphasised: “A multi-polar world must necessarily have a multi-polar Asia at its centre.”<sup>86</sup> Hence, on the one hand, India recognises that China – its rival – is a leading power in Asia. On the other hand, it is precisely for this reason that it is striving for a regional order in which China’s military, economic and political power is contained within a larger concert of Asian powers.

Indonesia, which pursues a foreign-policy approach of concentric circles, is therefore strongly focused on its political and military relations with the countries closest to its own borders. These are primarily the other states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), followed by the major and middle powers of East and South Asia.<sup>87</sup> However, under the current Indonesian president, Prabowo Subianto, there are signs of a gradual shift away from predominantly regional engagement towards a stronger focus at the global level. It remains to be seen whether that shift will lead to an expansion of the concentric circles into the Indian Ocean and the Gulf region or whether, at some point, it could even prompt Indonesia to stake its own claim to being a major power.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>86</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “Pandit Hriday Nath Kunzru Memorial Lecture 2024 Delivered by EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi”, New Delhi, 26 February 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/yn5zeyw3>.

<sup>87</sup> Baiq Wardhani and Vinsensio Dugis, “Indonesian Foreign Policy under the Jokowi Administration: Variations on Traditional Ideas”, *Issues and Studies* 59, no. 3 (2023), doi: 10.1142/S1013251123500054.

<sup>88</sup> Xue Song, “Indonesia’s New Diplomatic Playbook: ASEAN on Hold, NAM in Limbo, Giants Ahead”, *The Diplomat*, 16 January 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/01/indonesias-new-diplomatic-playbook-asean-on-hold-nam-in-limbo-giants-ahead/>.

## The poles – that is, all the main players in any form of multipolar order – are rarely explicitly named.

The countries analysed have different views on which states will play a leading role in a multipolar world. But none has any doubt that China and the US will be among the prominent players while most also include Russia in that category. For their part, all three states identify themselves as poles or leading international players.

However, none of the countries examined has drawn up an exhaustive list of all potential poles. Turkey seems to have the clearest idea about which actors will play a central role in a multipolar world order – namely, the US, China and Russia. The most detailed, albeit not exhaustive lists of possible poles are to be found in Russia and China. Both lists include countries from almost all regions of the world. South Africa identifies some poles but, again, not exhaustively. The United States, India and Indonesia are more cautious and remain vague on the matter. Meanwhile, the perceptions of individual countries about the potential role of regional or international organisations and groupings such as the EU, ASEAN, the AU and the BRICS are extremely diverse. Table 2 shows, among other things, which states are perceived as central actors in a changing world order.

## Key policy areas and suborders

In order to conduct the analysis, it was also necessary to determine whether the countries examined in this study perceive multipolarity as an overarching construct that encompasses multiple policy areas or if their understanding of multipolarity is largely limited to a single policy area, such as the economy, technology or security. This raised the question of which power resources determine a country’s status in the international order. States such as China, Russia and South Africa advocate a broad understanding of multipolarity according to which multipolarity should encompass a large number of policy areas.

Beijing presents itself both as *primus inter pares* in Asia and as a central pole in a new multipolar world order. Its main power resources are economic strength (e.g., through the BRI) and the military. In addition, the “Chinese dream” – evidently propagated as a counter-construct to the American dream – serves as ideological basis for underpinning technological leader-

Table 2

**Multipolarisation: The Transformation of the International Order**

	<i>Perception of the transition to multipolarity</i>	<i>Constituent main element of the changing international order</i>	<i>Spatial dimension of multipolarity</i>	<i>Key actors (poles)</i>	<i>Key policy areas</i>
China	Evolutionary	Power	Global	US, China, Russia	Across various policy areas
India	Evolutionary	Power	Predominantly Asian	US, China, Russia, India	Economy, technology
Indonesia	Disruptive	Interdependence	Asian	US, China	Economy, technology
Russia	Disruptive	Power	Global	US, China, Russia	Military, economy
South Africa	Evolutionary	Interdependence	Global	US, China, Russia	Economy, technology
Turkey	Evolutionary	Interdependence	Global	US, China, Russia	Economy, technology
US	Evolutionary	Power	Global	US, China	Military, technology

ship claims and building cultural soft power in order to globally anchor Chinese norms and values. In China, there is a tendency for multipolarity to encompass almost all policy areas.<sup>89</sup>

In the Russian discourse, too, the construct is understood as affecting all policy areas, albeit to varying degrees. In security and military policy, the world is regarded as being already multipolar: no single country is able to easily achieve military domination of all the others. The situation is different with regard to the financial system, which remains unipolar owing to the dominance of the US dollar. In the digital sphere, Russia sees Western tech giants as being in the lead; but, like China, it is trying to establish its own sov-

<sup>89</sup> “Cong ying shi li lai kan, ‘zhongguo meng’ ziran bao-hanzhe qianda de zonghe guoli, qianda de jingji, junshi shili. Dan cong ruan shili jiaodu kan, ‘zhongguo meng’ de xiyan li biao-xian zai qi juyou xiyan li de wenhua he jiazhi.” [From the perspective of hard power, the ‘Chinese dream’ naturally encompasses robust and comprehensive national strength, a strong economy and military power. However, from the perspective of soft power, the appeal of the ‘Chinese dream’ lies in its attractive culture and values.] See Ai Shilin, *Zhongguo meng: tong xiang minzu fuxing de shanyao mingpian lai-yuan* [The Chinese Dream: A Shining Banner for National Renewal] (Beijing: Tsinghua University, 23 April 2025), <https://www.tsinghua.edu.cn/info/1662/58246.htm>.

eighty in this area. As regards soft power, Western influence remains relatively strong – even within Russia itself – according to Russian assessments.<sup>90</sup>

South Africa similarly sees multipolarity as extending across policy areas. It is committed, in particular, to correcting asymmetrical power relations – whether in the United Nations Security Council, the WTO or international financial institutions. Multipolarity is understood as a lever for creating a more just – that is, more inclusive – system.

By contrast, both India and Indonesia and, to a certain extent, the US see multipolarity’s reach being limited to just a few policy areas. The discussion in Indonesia is centred mainly on multipolarity in the context of international economic policy, with emphasis on a more equitable multipolar financial and economic architecture. There is also a wider focus on economic, financial and regulatory levers in Jakarta. An example is its policy of resource nationalism. In 2020, Indonesia imposed an export ban on unprocessed nickel in order to attract foreign investment for the purpose of developing a domestic electric mobility industry. The country currently accounts for almost 60 per cent of global nickel production and more

<sup>90</sup> Timofeev, “Asymmetric Multipolarity: Control Parameters and Development Vectors” (see note 23).

than one third of the nickel used in electric vehicle batteries comes from Indonesian mines. Thus, Indonesia has become a key player in the supply chains for such batteries.<sup>91</sup>

India's leaning towards multipolarity stems, above all, from the security challenges that arise from its rivalry with China and Pakistan. For this reason, New Delhi is strongly focused on security and defence policy and is making a special effort to diversify its arms and defence partnerships. Not least, it cultivates relations with both Russia and the United States in the area of security policy. More broadly, India's multipolar policy also extends to economic and technological cooperation.<sup>92</sup>

In Turkey, there has been no differentiated political discussion to date about which specific policy areas – for example, trade, technology or security – the multipolar order applies to. However, it can be cautiously inferred from the statements and comments cited in this study that Ankara sees the construct of multipolarity as applying, first and foremost, to potential power resources such as the size of the population, economic performance and military strength and, accordingly, to the corresponding policy areas.<sup>93</sup>

Because the US discussion on multipolarity has been limited so far, it is difficult to draw inferences here. Previous US administrations tended to focus on specific contexts. While President George W. Bush asserted international leadership claims in areas such as global health, for example in the fight against HIV/AIDS, President Barack Obama spoke of shared leadership

and a cooperative world order when referring to initiatives such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). President Trump, for his part, has renounced any claim to multilateral leadership and has overseen the US withdrawal from international organisations and global governance activities. Currently, the United States is drastically reducing its global engagement in many areas, including disaster relief, development aid and global health initiatives. This development highlights the key role that, until recently, the US played in providing global public goods across a broad range of policy areas.

## Interim conclusion

The discourses on the transformation of the international order towards multipolarity are diverse and complex. Common ground between all the countries examined in this study is to be found only with regard to the question of who will be the key players in the new world order: all seven clearly assign leading roles to China and the US while most also identify Russia in this context. Only India explicitly names other possible poles of a future multipolar order beyond those three countries (that is, by naming itself as a future pole). Otherwise, it is striking that five of the seven countries analysed view the transformation towards a multipolar order as an evolutionary process while the other two – Indonesia and Russia – see it as disruptive. From the perspective of the five “evolutionaries”, the process is essentially determined by power shifts in favour of the Global South. Russia, on the other hand, sees the shift in the international order towards multipolarity as disruptive. It is purposefully seeking to drive forward many of the resulting disruptions in order to reshape the international order by weakening the West and breaking its dominance. Indonesia emphasises, above all, the risks and conflict potential of the transformation and does not assign itself an active role in that process.

The identification of the constituent elements of a future multipolar order is similarly complex. With the exception of the US, all the countries examined regard the reform of multilateral institutions – in particular, the UN system – as an indispensable step towards a future multipolar order. On a normative level, all the countries – again with the exception of the US – refer to international law in this context. However, in the case of Russia and China, there are also references to the interlinkage of power resources

<sup>91</sup> Eve Warburton, *Resource Nationalism in Indonesia. Booms, Big Business, and the State* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023).

<sup>92</sup> Trisha Ray, “India’s Technology Engagement Strategy: Beyond the Quad”, *The Diplomat*, 23 September 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/09/indias-technology-engagement-strategy-beyond-the-quad/>.

<sup>93</sup> This is evident, for example, in the interview with Turkish President Erdoğan discussed in the first part of this study. See Duran, “Dünya Değişiyor, BM Sistemi de Değişmeli” (see note 17). In that interview, Erdoğan criticizes the unequal distribution of power in the context of the UN General Assembly and permanent membership of the Security Council. He supports his criticism with a demographic argument: “The entire European population accounts for just 5 per cent of the world’s population. The five permanent members today represent only a quarter of the world’s population. The remaining three-quarters are not even mentioned; they are not represented in any way. How can one continue to speak of a representative system?”

and international status as constituent elements of the global order. From this interlinkage, certain powers (including themselves) are seen as deriving privileges or special rights while others are not.

It should also be pointed out here that there is no consensus on which policy areas are central to the transformation to multipolarity and whether multipolarity should be understood as a global or regional construct. Some states identify economic and trade policy as the main drivers of the transformation, while others focus on technology or security policy. Five of the seven countries understand multipolarity, above all, as a global construct, while two – India and Indonesia – tend to view its spatial dimension in terms of their regional context (namely, Asia). From these diverging perspectives, the seven countries draw different conclusions for their respective foreign policies, as the following part illustrates.

# Multipolarities in Action

## Aspirations, interests and strategic imperatives

Among the countries examined in this study, there are significant differences in both their aspirations to shape the global order and their strategic imperatives. The US, China, India and Russia explicitly identify as poles in any future international order. The other three countries do not.<sup>94</sup> Their power positions and power resources – if they have any – are more regional in nature: Indonesia, for example, focuses on the Indo-Pacific and Turkey on the Middle East and the Balkans. Furthermore, their leadership ambitions are limited to specific policy areas: South Africa, for example, is focused on global health policy.

### China sees itself as a global power and wants to fill the gaps left by the withdrawal of the US.

China sees itself as a global power and wants to fill the gaps left by the withdrawal of the US. Both China and Russia link a number of strategic imperatives to their respective power position and, in this way, derive a number of specific interests from what they see as the positive and necessary transformation to a multipolar order. The primary aim is to promote and strengthen the drivers of that transformation with a view to expanding their own power and global influence relative to the US (China)<sup>95</sup> and the West as a whole (Russia).<sup>96</sup> In this way, multipolarity is advocated

as an alternative to the dominance of the US and the West over other non-Western states.<sup>97</sup>

In terms of official discourse, however, Russia differs from China – as well as from the other countries examined – in that it is the only one of the seven that wants to explicitly weaken the West through military means. From Russia's point of view, victory in the war against Ukraine would contribute significantly to achieving that goal.<sup>98</sup> China, on the other hand, is much more strongly in favour of deploying non-military elements, including soft power. Among other things, the Chinese state funds the Confucius

by the US and other unfriendly states in global affairs.” The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*, Moscow, 31 March 2023, [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/fundamental\\_documents/1860586](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586).

<sup>97</sup> President of Russia, “International Parliamentary Conference Russia – Africa in a Multipolar World”, Moscow, 20 March 2023, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/catalog/keywords/82/events/70745>; Vuk Vuksanović, “Kremlin Looks Southward: The Logic of Global South in Russian Foreign Policy”, *South African Journal of International Affairs* 32, no. 1–2 (2025), 133–54, doi: 10.1080/10220461.2025.2519982.

<sup>98</sup> Nikolai Patrushev, who was secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation until 2024, commented as follows: “Only Russia's victory over Ukrainian Nazism will provide for Russia's security, the return of stability to Europe and the emergence of a multipolar world.” See “Tol'ko pobeda Rossii vernet stabil'nost' v Evropu, zayavil Patrushev” [Only Russia's victory will bring stability back to Europe, Patrushev declared], *RIA Novosti*, 13 April 2023, <https://ria.ru/20230413/rossiya-1865044581.html>. “The Ukraine conflict illustrates something else: not the smooth disintegration of institutions but a battle for the world order. The West is fighting to preserve what was established after 1991, while Russia is seeking to change it.” See Fyodor A. Lukyanov, “Downward”, *Russia in Global Affairs* 23, no. 1 (2025), 5–8, doi: 10.31278/1810-6374-2025-23-1-5-8. “The war in Ukraine ... not only signifies the collapse of the old world, it also marks the creation of a new, freer, fairer, politically and culturally pluralistic and multicoloured world.” See “Sergei Karaganov: My nablyudaem poyavlenie novogo mira v moment ego sozdaniya” (see note 54).

<sup>94</sup> Establishing the reasons for this were not part of the analysis. Therefore, this study can point to the lack of any claim to influence on the part of Indonesia but cannot explain it.

<sup>95</sup> Suisheng Zhao, “The Collapse of the US-led World Order: China Gains Ground But Not Ready to Replace It”, *The Asan Forum*, 12 May 2025, <https://theasanforum.org/the-collapse-of-the-us-led-world-order-china-gains-ground-but-not-ready-to-replace-it/>.

<sup>96</sup> “In order to help adapt the world order to the realities of a multipolar world, the Russian Federation intends to make it a priority to ... eliminate the vestiges of domination

Institutes, which promote the Chinese language and Chinese culture around the world, and also offers scholarship programmes, development aid and commercial loans. Another prominent non-military element is the BRI, which aims to expand connectivity between China and the rest of the globe at various levels and thereby improve China's image. Unlike Moscow, Beijing sees itself as playing a constructive role. It wants to use what it calls the "four major initiatives" (*si da changyi*) to respond to the current "phase of turbulence and change"<sup>99</sup> and provide "solutions to global problems".<sup>100</sup> The aim here is twofold: to bring the emerging structures of the new multipolar order into line with China's national interests and goals and to legitimise and strengthen its global leadership aspirations.<sup>101</sup>

India's positive understanding of a multipolar world order goes hand in hand with its multi-alignment approach, the aim of which is to forge deeper partnership relations with as many powerful states as possible in order to enhance its own regional role. India sees plurilateral connectivity initiatives – such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) and I2U2<sup>102</sup> – as instruments with which it can make an own contribution towards establishing a new economic order in the Indo-Pacific. Of increasing importance for New Delhi is the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with the US, Australia and Japan (Quad),

**99** Global Governance Initiative, Global Development Initiative, Global Civilisation Initiative and Global Security Initiative. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, "Important Speech by Xi Jinping at the Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference in Beijing" (in Chinese), Beijing, 28 December 2025, [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/zyxw/202312/t20231228\\_11214409.shtml](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/zyxw/202312/t20231228_11214409.shtml).

**100** Wang Yi, "Deeply Understanding the Major Historical Significance of the Global Governance Initiative and Galvanizing Strong Synergy for Building a Community with a Shared Future for Humanity", Beijing, 16 October 2025, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjw/wjwb/jh/202511/t20251104\\_11746475.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjw/wjwb/jh/202511/t20251104_11746475.html).

**101** See John S. Van Oudenaren, "How to Respond to China's Global Security Initiative", *War on the Rocks*, 1 March 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/03/how-to-respond-to-chinas-global-security-initiative/>; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, "Xi Jinping Delivers a Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2022", Beijing, 21 April 2022, [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/2020zt/kjgzbdffyq/202204/t20220421\\_10671083.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/2020zt/kjgzbdffyq/202204/t20220421_10671083.html).

**102** A plurilateral platform formed by India, Israel, the United States and the United Arab Emirates.

an informal platform that serves to maintain a rules-based security order in the Indo-Pacific. Such platforms play a significant role in India's foreign policy.<sup>103</sup> Above all, India is seeking to advance its global partnerships in order to assert its regional interests.

### Turkey sees itself primarily as an interface between Europe, Asia and Africa.

Turkey, too, claims an active role in shaping the region.<sup>104</sup> However, the country is focused primarily on serving as an interface between Europe, Asia and Africa, not least by emphasising its historical and cultural links. Another important factor in Turkey's aspirations and interests is its proximity to numerous armed conflicts or wars – for example, in Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan, Yemen and the Balkan region. While Ankara associates the emerging multipolar order with abstract global-power aspirations, it is the control over strategically important sea routes and access to the Black Sea and the Mediterranean – which is made possible by, among other things, the 1936 Montreux Convention – that defines its concrete interests.<sup>105</sup>

In the case of South Africa, it is mainly normative interests that are derived from multipolarisation and inform the country's actions in the international arena. They include the fight against neocolonialism, against unilateralism and against the policy of "might makes right". Pretoria is strongly committed to the pursuit of international justice in its foreign policy. For example, it has brought a genocide case against Israel before the International Court of Justice (ICJ),<sup>106</sup> it has supported Palestine, and it has advocated the

**103** See, for example, Eerishika Pankaj, "Minilaterals as Norm Entrepreneurs: The Case of the Quad", *The Diplomat*, 16 December 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/12/minilaterals-as-norm-entrepreneurs-the-case-of-the-quad/>.

**104** Duran, "Dünya Değişiyor, BM Sistemi de Değişmeli" (see note 17); Fidan, "Turkish Foreign Policy" (see note 45).

**105** See, for example, Antonia Colibasanu, *Turkey's Evolving Geopolitical Strategy in the Black Sea* (Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, December 2024), <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/turkeys-evolving-geopolitical-strategy2.pdf>.

**106** Rashmin Sagoo, *South Africa's Genocide Case against Israel: The International Court of Justice Explained* (London: Chatham House, 26 January 2024), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/01/south-africas-genocide-case-against-israel-international-court-justice-explained>.

reform of the WTO and global health policy.<sup>107</sup> South Africa also promotes peaceful conflict resolution, above all on the African continent but also beyond — as evidenced by the country increasingly distancing itself from Russia.<sup>108</sup> Nevertheless, the BRICS format remains important for South Africa, and its government cooperates with states that do not share its human rights-based approach or are outright autocracies.<sup>109</sup> However, the South African government is opposed to bloc formation and is pursuing cooperation within the IBSA format with India and Brazil. Further, Pretoria has stated unequivocally that in a multipolar world order, it will remain a non-aligned state that puts its own interests first. To communicate that stance, it has coined the term “active non-alignment”.<sup>110</sup>

In the Indonesian discourse, there are few references to Jakarta playing an active role in the formation of any future multipolar order. Indonesia shows neither any apparent interest in providing global or regional public goods nor any willingness to actively contribute to any transformation towards multipolar-

ity.<sup>111</sup> Rather, it has given top priority over the past 10 years to its national economic development, with any interests or goals related to regional and international governance taking a back seat.<sup>112</sup> International partnerships and initiatives must serve, first and foremost, Indonesia’s own economic interests.<sup>113</sup> Otherwise, Indonesia has continued to pursue long-standing foreign- and security-policy goals, such as the rejection of military alliances and spheres of influence of major powers, the maintenance of national sovereignty and the foreign-policy maxim “A million friends and zero enemies”.<sup>114</sup>

The findings on the United States show that there has been abrupt change in its position. With the exception of the two Trump administrations, the US government has always sought to maintain the country’s unrestricted global supremacy and leadership role vis-à-vis emerging powers — above all, China — and thus prevent the emergence of a multipolar order.<sup>115</sup> Now, one year into Trump’s second term, it is no longer clear whether this remains a fundamental goal. Influential forces within the government openly criticise the cost of US global dominance and advocate reaching agreements with Russia and China, even at the expense of traditional allies. At the same time, they have more emphatically articulated the

**107** Bawa Sing, Vijay Kumar Chattu and Balinder Singh, “COVID-19 and Global Distributive Justice: ‘Health Diplomacy’ of India and South Africa for the TRIPS Waiver”, *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 58, no. 5 (2023), 747–65, doi: 10.1177/00219096211069652.

**108** For example, South Africa supported a February 2025 UN resolution on the territorial integrity of Ukraine. See Peter Fabricius, “UN Resolution Highlights Diplomatic Shift as South Africa Votes for Ukraine amid US Retreat”, *Daily Maverick*, 25 February 2025, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2025-02-25-un-resolution-highlights-diplomatic-shift-as-south-africa-votes-for-ukraine-amid-us-retreat/>. Moreover, South Africa extended an invitation to Ukrainian President Zelensky in March 2025 to visit Kyiv. See Melissa Chemam, “Did Zelensky’s South Africa Visit Signal a Diplomatic Pivot by Pretoria?”, *RFI*, 25 April 2025, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/international/20250425-did-zelensky-s-south-africa-visit-signal-a-diplomatic-pivot-by-pretoria>.

**109** Chris Alden and Maxi Schoeman, “Being Africa’s BRIC(S): South Africa’s Foreign Policy Turn from ‘Neo-Liberalism’ to the ‘New Era’”, *South African Journal of International Affairs* 32, no. 1–2 (2025), 71–90, doi: 10.1080/10220461.2025.2503212.

**110** South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA), “Address by DIRCO Minister Ronald Lamola on SA’s Foreign Policy”, 12 July 2024, <https://saiia.org.za/research/address-by-dirco-minister-ronald-lamola-on-sas-foreign-policy/>.

**111** Sugiono, “Prabowo: 100 Days of a Presidency That Delivers”, *Asia Times*, 29 January 2025, <http://asiatimes.com/2025/01/prabowo-100-days-of-a-presidency-that-delivers/>.

**112** Ahmad Rizky Mardhatillah Umar, “The Rise of the Asian Middle Powers: Indonesia’s Conceptions of International Order”, *International Affairs* 99, no. 4 (2023), 1459–76, doi: 10.1093/ia/iaad167.

**113** Sugiono, “Prabowo: 100 Days of a Presidency That Delivers” (see note 111).

**114** Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, “Remarks of President Prabowo Subianto before the Plenary Session of the People’s Consultative Assembly of the Republic of Indonesia on the Occasion of the Inauguration of the President-Elect and Vice President-Elect of 2024–2029 Term of Office”, Jakarta, 20 October 2024, <https://setkab.go.id/en/remarks-of-president-prabowo-subianto-before-the-plenary-session-of-the-peoples-consultative-assembly-of-the-republic-of-indonesia-on-the-occasion-of-the-inauguration-of-the-president-elect-a/>; “Annual Press Statement of the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia 2025” (see note 62).

**115** See Hanns W. Maull, Angela Stanzel and Johannes Thimm, *United States and China on a Collision Course. The Importance of Domestic Politics for the Bilateral Relationship*, SWP Research Paper 5/2023 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, March 2023), doi: 10.18449/2023RP05.

claim to having a say in the Western hemisphere. As a result, they are implicitly reinforcing Russian ideas of dividing the world into spheres of influence, while steering clear of using either that term or any reference to multipolarity (see also the next section).<sup>116</sup>

## Alliances and partnerships

From their respective debates on multipolarity, it is evident that with the exception of the United States, all the countries examined in this study prefer loose, flexible, pragmatic relationships with other countries to rigid, formal and thus exclusive alliances. Even for the United States, traditional alliances currently play a smaller role than previously. Owing to the military alliance it concluded with North Korea in 2024, Russia appears to be a special case – but only at first glance. While it also has formal alliances with a number of significantly weaker states, including those belonging to the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), Moscow does not consider itself bound by them. For example, it failed to support Armenia in its war against Azerbaijan, whereupon Yerevan froze its CSTO membership.<sup>117</sup> And it is likely that Russia will downgrade its alliance with Pyongyang once the immediate need for North Korean support is over.<sup>118</sup> For all the countries examined, flexible partnerships are based, first and foremost, on common interests and the assumption of mutual benefit (win-win) rather than unanimously postulated norms and values. Even their shared ideas of the world order barely go beyond generalities – such as that of “a more just international order” – except in the case of the Chinese-Russian partnership.<sup>119</sup>

**116** See Stacie E. Goddard, “The Rise and Fall of Great-Power Competition. Trump’s New Spheres of Influence”, *Foreign Affairs*, 22 April 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/rise-and-fall-great-power-competition>.

**117** Thomas de Waal, *Armenia Navigates a Path Away from Russia* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 11 July 2024), <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/07/armenia-navigates-a-path-away-from-russia?lang=en>.

**118** Choong-Koo Lee, “Putting the Screws on the Partnership between North Korea and Russia”, *War on the Rocks*, 1 April 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/2025/04/putting-the-screws-on-the-partnership-between-north-korea-and-russia/>.

**119** “Partnership over Alliance”, in Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States of America, “Outlook on China’s Foreign Policy on Its Neighbourhood in the New

Another overarching finding is that with the exception of the United States, all the countries examined see the perceived decline of the “West” as an opportunity to further diversify their international partnerships. This is particularly evident in the case of Indonesia and India. Jakarta emphasises its own neutrality by pursuing a policy that is wholly in keeping with the maxim “A million friends and zero enemies” and by firmly rejecting military alliances.<sup>120</sup> New Delhi has adopted a similar approach, as demonstrated by the motto for its G20 Presidency, “The world is one family”.<sup>121</sup> Indonesia wants to deepen its partnership relations with the United States and China so that it does not have to choose between the two major powers. At the same time, it is seeking to diversify its relationships with as many partner countries as possible, especially in Asia.<sup>122</sup>

By cooperating with both Russia and the United States, India is taking a similar approach. But unlike Indonesia, India regards China as a strategic rival. Thus, there are two scenarios involving China as superpower – a world divided into American and Chinese zones of influence (G2 world order) and a world dominated by an alliance of the three nuclear powers China, Pakistan and Russia – that India is seeking to avoid at all costs.<sup>123</sup>

Turkish President Erdoğan uses multipolarisation to claim a larger role and greater responsibility for the “Islamic world” at the United Nations. At the 51st Foreign Ministers’ Conference of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Istanbul, he emphasised that “in a multipolar world, it is essential that the 2

Era”, Washington, D.C., 24 October 2023, [http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202310/t20231024\\_11167100.htm](http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202310/t20231024_11167100.htm).

**120** Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, “Remarks of President Prabowo Subianto” (see note 114).

**121** Original: *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (Sanskrit).

**122** “Keynote Speech by H.E. Sugiono at CIFP [Conference on Indonesian Foreign Policy] 2024”, *YouTube*, 30 November 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJjdia8KrYw>; Arrizal Jaknanihan and Lukas Singarimbun, “US Tariffs Are a Wake-up Call for Indonesia to Diversify and Reform”, *East Asia Forum*, 3 May 2025, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2025/05/03/us-tariffs-is-a-wake-up-call-for-indonesia-to-diversify-and-reform/>.

**123** On the G2 world, see, e.g., Abhinav Kumar, “Bharat and the Rise of G2: Leveraging Ancient Legacies in a Modern Bipolar World”, *Times Now*, 27 January 2025, <https://www.timesnownews.com/opinion/bharat-and-the-rise-of-g2-leveraging-ancient-legacies-in-a-modern-bipolar-world-article-117606457>.

billion-strong Muslim community become a pole in its own right”.<sup>124</sup> In doing so, he called for the Islamic world to be recognised as a political actor in the international arena and to have a say in the transformation of the global order.

For Russia and China, their respective relationships with other key players are determined to a large extent by their rivalry with Washington as well as by their attempts to differentiate themselves from the US. This has not changed in the context of the ongoing changes in US foreign policy under Trump. Beijing sees the US as a rival primarily because the latter is trying to contain China. At the level of multilateral cooperation, China regards the UN and BRICS as the main counterweight to the G7; however, in the context of its rivalry with the US, it is actively seeking support – or even allegiance – from close US allies, particularly the EU and its member states, for its vision of a multipolar world order.<sup>125</sup> For their part, South Africa<sup>126</sup>, Turkey,<sup>127</sup> India and Indonesia<sup>128</sup> are

**124** See Kaan Bozdoğan, Koray Taşdemir, Gökçe Karaköse and İrem Demi, “President Erdoğan: In a multipolar world, it is essential that the 2 billion-strong Islamic world become a pole in its own right” (in Turkish), *Anadolu Ajansı*, 21 June 2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/politika/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-2-milyarlik-islam-aleminin-tek-basina-bir-kutup-haline-gelmesi-sart/3606709>. Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, Directorate of Communications, “We Work to Establish Global Solidarity in Combating Islamophobia”, Ankara, 21 October 2022, <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/Haberler/detay/we-work-to-establish-global-solidarity-in-combating-islamophobia>.

**125** Zhang Jian, “Xiang zuo meiguo fuyong er bude de ouzhou, qishi hai you ling yitiao lu ke zou” [Europe, which wants to be a ‘vassal of the United States’ but cannot], *CFISNET*, 5 March 2025, [http://comment.cfisnet.com/2025/0305/1331458.html?utm\\_source=substack&utm\\_medium=email](http://comment.cfisnet.com/2025/0305/1331458.html?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email).

**126** Department of International Relations and Cooperation, Republic of South Africa, “A Foreign Policy Agenda to Address the Needs of our People”, speech by Foreign Minister Ronald Lamola, 11 July 2024, <https://dirco.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/DIRCO-6th-Administration-Budget-Vote-Speech-Minister-Ronald-Lamola-.pdf>.

**127** Against the backdrop of French President Emmanuel Macron’s plea for EU strategic autonomy, Turkish Defence Minister Yaşar Güler commented that Turkey should become part of a European army if one were to be established. See Değer Akal, “No place for Turkey in Macron’s Europe?” (Turkish), *Deutsche Welle*, 9 May 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/24wcy7am>.

all looking to expand their cooperative relations with the EU.

Russia, on the other hand, regards the “West” – or, more specifically, the European allies of the United States and, above all, the European pillar of NATO – as its main rival in the international system. Even though Moscow sees those countries as having only limited sovereignty owing to their alliance with the US, it perceives its relations with them as antagonistic.<sup>129</sup> Since Trump returned to office, Russian official rhetoric has changed in that Europe has been declared to be the country’s new main rival. It is likely that Moscow’s main motivation here is to drive a wedge between Washington and the European states and accelerate the decline of the liberal “West”.

Multilateral organisations in which Russia does not play a dominant role or has no right of veto should, according to Moscow, have no influence over Russia or the states on Russia’s periphery. In multilateral cooperation with important states that can be described as poles, Russia – like India – prefers non-binding platforms such as BRICS. With individual important states such as China, India and South Africa, the Russian leadership strives for cooperative relations while attempting to maintain pragmatic ties with as many states as possible, even those that are hostile towards one another.<sup>130</sup>

### South Africa is also seeking cooperative relations with states that have partly divergent interests.

In contrast with China and Russia, the other countries examined in this study are endeavouring to maintain cooperative, or at least pragmatic, relations

**128** Heru Andriyanto, “Indonesia Seeks Stronger Trade Ties with EU, Australia to Offset Potential US Export Losses”, *Jakarta Globe*, 19 April 2025, <https://jakartaglobe.id/business/indonesia-seeks-stronger-trade-ties-with-eu-australia-to-offset-potential-us-export-losses>.

**129** “Most European states pursue an aggressive policy toward Russia aimed at creating threats to the security and sovereignty of the Russian Federation, gaining unilateral economic advantages, undermining domestic political stability and eroding traditional Russian spiritual and moral values, and creating obstacles to Russia’s cooperation with allies and partners.” See the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *The Concept of the Foreign Policy* (see note 96).

**130** Lavrov, “The UN Charter Should Become the Legal Foundation of a Multipolar World” (see note 25).

with all countries classified as poles. Take, for example, South Africa, where ANC-led governments have always emphasised the importance of a cooperative partnership with Washington, despite differing interests. And Pretoria continues to seek to improve relations with the US today, even though US President Trump falsely claimed that genocide was being committed against white people in South Africa.<sup>131</sup>

Ankara and Jakarta, too, emphasise the importance of cooperative relations with the US, despite the trade dispute with that country and Washington's growing unreliability as a partner. At the same time, they are seeking to reduce their dependence on the US through partnership diversification. For India, the United States is a key energy, trade and security partner, albeit a difficult one. On the one hand, New Delhi would like to present itself to the US as an attractive alternative to China. On the other hand, Trump's unpredictable behaviour poses new risks for Indian foreign policy.

In Washington under Trump's second Presidency, a change of strategy is evident when it comes to dealing with allies and partners. For decades, maintaining close relations with allied countries in Europe and Asia was key to the preservation of US global hegemony. Moreover, the network of military alliances was to be made even tighter through close cooperation with so-called like-minded partners. And for a long time, Washington also pursued a largely liberal, multilateral and free trade-oriented economic policy towards allies and partners. Over time, however, relations with China and Russia have become increasingly antagonistic – even across party lines. Today, the US government is taking a very different approach to shaping its relations with its allies and like-minded partners: allied countries are pilloried as free riders because, according to Washington, their military spending is too low. And in economic policy, the US is pursuing a unilateral and much more protectionist course.<sup>132</sup>

**131** “President Ramaphosa Says South Africa and US Have ‘Everything to Gain’ from Closer Relations”, *Eurasia Review*, 27 May 2025, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/27052025-president-ramaphosa-says-south-africa-and-us-have-everything-to-gain-from-closer-relations/>

**132** See Stewart Patrick, “What Happened to ‘the West’?”, *Foreign Affairs*, 18 September 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/what-happened-west>.

## Norms and international institutions

With the exception of the US, all the countries examined emphasise the importance of international law in their official rhetoric – particularly national sovereignty, territorial integrity and the principle of non-interference. And, again with the exception of the US, all the countries examined continue to attach decisive importance to those norms despite the changes in the international system. Mainly owing to their experience of colonial rule, South Africa, Indonesia and India underscore most emphatically that those norms should be preserved in a changing international order.<sup>133</sup> Normative references can be found in Turkey, too. For example, President Erdoğan has commented on the inviolability of national sovereignty<sup>134</sup> and Foreign Minister Fidan on the importance of international law.<sup>135</sup> However, this is in stark contrast with the refusal of all four countries to unequivocally condemn Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and to name Russia as the aggressor, although, for its part, South Africa has recently adopted a more critical stance towards Russia.<sup>136</sup>

Normative ambivalence and contradiction are also evident in other countries examined in this study. China is a member of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) but refuses to implement the applicable provisions of UNCLOS arbitration decisions. At the same time, Beijing wants to present

**133** Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, “Remarks of President Prabowo Subianto” (see note 114).

**134** Cumhurbaşkanlığı İletişim Başkanlığı [Presidential Communications Directorate], “Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Bizim niyetimiz asla kriz çıkarmak değil, ülkemizin hakkını, hukukunu, onurunu, çıkarlarını ve egemenlik haklarını korumaktır” [President Erdoğan: Our intention is by no means to provoke a crisis but to defend the rights, laws, honour, interests and sovereignty of our country], Ankara, 25 October 2021, <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/turkce/haberler/detay/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-bizim-niyetimiz-asla-kriz-cikarmak-degil-ulkemizin-hakini-hukukunu-onurunu-cikarlarini-ve-egemenlik-haklarini-korumaktir?utm>.

**135** Sinan Tavukçu, *NATO Bildirisi aslında çok kutupluluğa meydan okuma* [The NATO declaration is, in fact, a challenge to multipolarity], 13 July 2024, <https://sinantavukcu.com/2024/07/13/nato-bildirisi-aslinda-cok-kutupluluga-meydan-okuma/?utm>.

**136** Carien du Plessis, “South Africa Sides with Europe on Ukraine Resolution While US Exits”, *The Africa Report*, 27 February 2025, <https://www.theafricareport.com/377847/south-africa-sides-with-europe-on-ukraine-resolution-while-us-exits/>.

itself as a guardian of international law.<sup>137</sup> Even Russia affirms the paramount importance of international law while showing disregard for its core norms through its war of aggression against Ukraine (as well as in its behaviour towards Georgia and Moldova). Moscow always puts forward a legalistic argument but on crucial points construes the legality of its own actions through relatively obvious manipulation. Most telling is its reinterpretation of which states are allegedly subjects of international law and which are not. For example, Russia has summarily rejected the sovereignty of Ukraine but recognised parts of Ukraine under Russian military control as sovereign states so that they could ask Moscow for military assistance and provide a pretext for the Russian invasion. In February 2022, Putin declared that Russia's attack on Ukraine was carried out under Article 51 (self-defence) of the UN Charter.<sup>138</sup>

The United States is a special case when it comes to the international norms that successive US governments considered to be of paramount importance. For many years, Washington advocated the promotion of liberal norms. This meant pursuing a foreign policy driven by universal values under the banner of democracy and human rights and the maxim of the "responsibility to protect" — that is, preventing, as far as possible, governments resorting to violence against their own populations. Many other states believe that by pursuing such a policy, the US has contributed to the erosion of the principle of non-interference. A series of military interventions, some of which took place without a UN Security Council mandate (for example, NATO's intervention in Kosovo in 1999 and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq in 2003), were contrary to the prohibition of violence and the principle of non-interference.<sup>139</sup> Before returning to the White House, Trump himself claimed that US foreign policy was guided by liberal values.

**137** See the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *A Global Community of Shared Future* (see note 84).

**138** President of Russia, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation", Moscow, 24 February 2022, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/67843>.

**139** See Ivo H. Daalder and Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly. NATO's War to Save Kosovo* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2000); Jeremy Moses, Babak Bahador and Tessa Wright, "The Iraq War and the Responsibility to Protect: Uses, Abuses and Consequences for the Future of Humanitarian Intervention", *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 5, no. 4 (2011), 347–67.

Today, under his second Presidency, it has ceased to be informed by those values and is being driven solely by self-interest.<sup>140</sup>

A certain double standard can be observed in all the countries examined — albeit to varying degrees — with regard to their stance on international law. That is, countries invoke international law, above all the UN Charter, when it suits them; but at times they are inclined to apply less strict standards when it comes to assessing their own behaviour.

All the countries examined advocate the reform of the United Nations and increased multilateral cooperation. South Africa and Indonesia consistently emphasise the importance of such cooperation for maintaining world peace and international stability.<sup>141</sup> For its part, China is positioning itself as an actor that — in its own words — "leads the reform of the global governance system".<sup>142</sup> Among other things, China criticises the UN Security Council as an expanded "club of large or rich powers" and advocates greater representation of developing countries, especially those in Africa.<sup>143</sup> That demand is shared by South Africa, which is campaigning for more weight to be given to African concerns in the UN Security Council and, to that end, is demanding a permanent seat on that body. India, meanwhile, is working within the context of the G4 (whose other members are Brazil, Germany and Japan) to expand the Council and obtain a permanent seat of its own.<sup>144</sup> However, the

**140** Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, "Trump's Anti-liberal Order. How America First Undercuts America's Advantage", *Foreign Affairs*, 7 January 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/trumps-antiliberal-order-cooley-nexon>.

**141** As South African Foreign Minister Lamola noted in October 2024: "Multilateral cooperation and adherence to international law will move us away from the Hobbesian-like world and its zero-sum politics." Department of International Relations and Cooperation of South Africa, "Address by Minister Ronald Lamola" (see note 16).

**142** "China actively participates in and leads the reform of the global governance system." The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *A Global Community of Shared Future* (see note 84).

**143** Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, "Proposal of the People's Republic of China on the Reform and Development of Global Governance", Beijing, 13 September 2023, [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531\\_11367498.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367498.html).

**144** Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "G4 Ministerial Joint Statement", New Delhi, 25 September 2025,

latter effort has so far been blocked by China. Turkey, too, is seeking a comprehensive reform of the UN Security Council. Above all, it wants to increase the number of permanent members to achieve a more balanced representation of all regions of the world. Under the catchphrase “The world is bigger than five”, coined by President Erdoğan, Turkey is challenging the dominance of the five permanent members of the Security Council.<sup>145</sup>

Like the other countries examined, Russia sees the UN Security Council as a core institution of a changing world order. It strictly rejects Western states such as Japan or Germany becoming permanent members of the Council but says it is open to the ambitions of India or Brazil in this regard.<sup>146</sup> China is the only one of the countries examined that has systematically sought to increase its influence within the UN – for example, by pursuing a policy of strategically positioning its representatives within both the organisation itself and its suborganisations.<sup>147</sup>

Apart from the US, all the countries examined are either founding members of the BRICS (India, Russia, China), became members shortly after the group was founded (South Africa in 2010) or more recently (Indonesia in 2025), or are candidates for membership (Turkey). Five of the seven countries – the US and India are the outliers – see the BRICS group as a counterweight to both the G7 and an international order too strongly dominated by Western interests. They also regard it as an instrument for reforming the global financial system and achieving a more equitable distribution of international power. At the same time, the South African, Chinese<sup>148</sup> and Indian governments all view the BRICS group as non-Western

but not anti-Western. And Indonesia and South Africa regard their membership of the regional multilateral organisations ASEAN and AU, respectively, as essential.

## Spaces and spheres of influence

The US under Trump, Russia, China and, to a lesser extent, India have a very different view of the spatial aspects of a changing international order from that of Indonesia, Turkey and South Africa. For China, India and Russia, the spatial dimension is determined mainly by the formation and safeguarding of regional spheres of influence. Increasingly, this is also true of the US, which for a long time during the pre-Trump era defined itself as a global hegemon and pursued a foreign policy that was global by nature. Under the current administration, however, there is a growing tendency in Washington to think in terms of spheres of influence, as is evident from Trump’s claims in the Western Hemisphere – not least with regard to Canada, the Panama Canal and Greenland.<sup>149</sup> Trump himself refers to the Monroe Doctrine, named after a US president in the early 19th century. According to this doctrine, the US has the right to play an exclusive and dominant role in its own “backyard” on the American continent.<sup>150</sup> At the same time, Washington is becoming less interested in Europe, Central Asia and Africa while continuing to see a sphere of influence in Asia and the Indo-Pacific, which is in keeping with its self-image as a Pacific power.

### China, Russia, the US and India all want to establish spheres of influence – something that South Africa, Turkey and Indonesia are trying to prevent.

Both China<sup>151</sup> and Russia regard the global hegemony of the US as their greatest strategic challenge; and

<https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/40167/g4+ministerial+joint+statement+september+25+2025>.

**145** “Turkish Diplomat Argues Reform Must Start with UN Security Council”, *Daily Sabah*, 14 February 2025, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/turkish-diplomat-argues-reform-must-start-with-un-security-council/news>.

**146** Lavrov, “The UN Charter Should Become the Legal Foundation of a Multipolar World” (see note 25).

**147** Foreign Affairs Committee (United Kingdom), *In the Room: The UK’s Role in Multilateral Diplomacy*, London, 17 June 2021, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5802/cmselect/cmfa/199/19902.htm>.

**148** Zhao Long et al., *Decoding Greater BRICS Cooperation: A Non-Western Path to a Shared Development Community*, Shanghai: Shanghai Institute for International Studies (SIIS), March 2025 (SIIS Report, vol. 43), 5, <https://www.siis.org.cn/updates/cms/cms/202503/12165827ixcc.pdf>.

**149** Steve Contorno, “Trump Is Teasing US Expansion into Panama, Greenland and Canada”, *CNN*, 23 December 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/12/23/politics/trump-us-expansion-panama-canada-greenland>.

**150** See Tom Long and Carsten-Andreas Schulz, “The Return of the Monroe Doctrine”, *Foreign Policy*, 16 December 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/12/16/monroe-doctrine-united-states-latin-america-foreign-policy-interventionism-china-gop/>.

**151** Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, “Wang Yi Attends the 31st ASEAN Regional Forum Foreign

it is from this challenge that they derive some of their key strategic goals. China wants to expand its regional sphere of influence, while Russia wants to safeguard what it perceives as its own sphere of influence. This means displacing “foreign” actors (poles) — above all, the US — from those spheres of influence. China is pursuing a policy of binding other states — mainly South Asian, Southeast Asian and Central Asia ones — more closely to itself. On the one hand, it is deploying economic incentives to achieve that goal; on the other hand, it is seeking to more aggressively assert its claims to power, not least in the South China Sea. At the same time, Beijing wants to further increase its influence over African, European and Latin American countries.

Russia, too, is striving to strengthen its influence over neighbouring countries and drive other important players out of its neighbourhood. The Russian model requires peripheral states to align themselves with Russia. If they refuse to do so, Moscow accuses them of being influenced by external forces and, if necessary, resorts to military means to “defend” its dominance over the periphery. Above all, the model applies to Eastern Europe; but to some extent, it also applies to Central and Western Europe. Further, Russia seeks to put down democratic movements in its neighbourhood because it is afraid they could undermine its status as a pole in the multipolar world order. And it wants to deter other states from following Ukraine’s lead in making a bid for autonomy and disengagement from Russia’s sphere of influence. In this respect, Russia differs from China, which has so far remained agnostic about regime type. Another difference between Russia and China is that the former considers its own hegemonic claims — namely, in Eastern Europe — to be legitimate. However, it is opposed to other key players having any regional spheres of influence, for example, the US in Latin America. Thus, the Russian version of multipolarity also serves as a vehicle for anti-US convictions and is characterised by many internal contradictions.<sup>152</sup>

Ministers’ Meeting”, Beijing, 27 July 2024, [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjzbhd/202407/t20240729\\_11462529.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjzbhd/202407/t20240729_11462529.html).

**152** Moscow has condemned the US embargo against Cuba as an expression of Washington’s hegemonic ambitions. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov’s Statement during a Joint News Conference with Foreign Minister of the Republic of Cuba Bruno Rodríguez Parrilla”, Moscow, 12 June 2024, [https://www.mid.ru/ru/press\\_service/video/view/1956213/?lang=en](https://www.mid.ru/ru/press_service/video/view/1956213/?lang=en).

India, too, sees itself as a regional power; but unlike China and Russia, it has no imperialist tradition in foreign policy. Precisely because it wants to ward off Chinese expansion in its region, New Delhi regards its neighbours’ dependence on China as problematic and is proactively seeking to get them more firmly on its side. The desire to contain Chinese influence also explains why India fundamentally welcomes the increased presence in the Indo-Pacific of strategic partners such as France, the US and Germany.

Similarly, Indonesia, South Africa and Turkey tend to focus on their “own” region or neighbourhood. All are critical of the attempts by major powers to create regional spheres of influence and are striving to prevent those efforts from succeeding, mainly by forming, or at least engaging with, regional communities.

As regards Turkey, President Erdoğan is campaigning at the international level for the greater participation of the “Islamic world” and the Global South in the international system. Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan has spoken out in favour of a world based on inclusion, effectiveness, justice and security. He explicitly criticised the current rivalries between major powers as obstacles to regional and global cooperation.<sup>153</sup> At the same time, the Turkish leadership is defining its own spheres of influence in its immediate neighbourhood. Since the fall of the Assad regime, Ankara has sought to play a leading part in the political and territorial reorganisation of Syria, despite potential conflicts of interest with Israel and ongoing differences with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).<sup>154</sup> Similarly, it is attempting to engage in Sudan, claiming a role as political mediator between the parties to that conflict.<sup>155</sup> While Turkey advocates a multipolar world, it faces asymmetrical power relations in its own region. In the wake of Russia’s loss of influence in Syria and the defeat of Iran and its proxies in the Middle East in 2025, the US has been the only remaining major power in the region. For this reason, Turkish opposition to the US presence there has become

**153** See, for example, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, *Daha Adil Bir Dünya Mümkün* [A More Just World Is Possible], Istanbul: Turkuvaz Publishing House, 2021.

**154** See Yaşar Aydın, “Syria: What Role do Turkey and Germany Play?”, Point of View (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 7 February 2025), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/syria-what-role-do-turkey-and-germany-play>.

**155** See Nosmot Gbadamosi, “How Turkey Became Africa’s Mediator”, *Foreign Policy*, 15 January 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/01/15/turkey-africa-mediator-sudan-ethiopia-somalia/>.

much less vehement and Ankara has been adapting to the new circumstances.

For their part, South Africa and Indonesia reject the formation of spheres of influence and advocate a greater say for the Global South in the international system.<sup>156</sup> In contrast with Turkey, they purposefully support regional integration processes and regional organisations (the AU and ASEAN, respectively) as well as the G20. South Africa, for example, is keen for the AU to be actively involved in the G20 process – the African Union has little experience in this area as it did not become a permanent member of the G20 until 2023.<sup>157</sup> Pretoria also supports the expansion of the African Free Trade Area, with a view to expanding and benefiting from intra-African trade. Another goal is to strengthen the African continent economically and raise its international profile.<sup>158</sup> Indonesia, for its part, sees the geopolitical rivalry between the US and China not only as a challenge but also as an opportunity to persuade the two major powers to make, above all, economic concessions.<sup>159</sup>

### Foreign-policy priorities and policy-specific initiatives

For China, India and Russia, the transformation towards multipolarity engenders the need to achieve the largest possible degree of autonomy or strategic sovereignty in as many policy areas as possible. China and Russia want to assert themselves, above all, against the United States and India against China. New Delhi is pursuing a policy of de-risking vis-à-vis China, mainly in the raw material and electronic sectors. For their part, Beijing and Moscow provide very similar

justifications for their respective efforts in the areas of military, economic and technological policy: they want to become more independent and competitive vis-à-vis the US as quickly as possible. China is implementing its “dual circulation” strategy, which is intended to help the country achieve technological and economic independence and superiority, and the “Made in China 2025” plan, aimed at upgrading Chinese industry.

At the same time, China is seeking to decouple itself, at least to some extent, from the international financial and economic system, which it perceives as dominated by the United States. In Russia, that decoupling process is inevitably further advanced because large parts of the Russian financial system have been cut off from the West by sanctions. Moscow is also pursuing import substitution – for example, in the food industry, the IT sector and the pharmaceutical industry – and wants to dispense with as many foreign technologies, especially Western ones, as possible.

All such pursuits go hand in hand with the “securitisation” of a wide range of policy areas in accordance with defined “national interests”. That process is evident from the various methods used to counter the influence of foreign – above all, Western – actors. Of great importance for China and Russia is the military and defence sector, with priority being given to armament, both conventional and nuclear.<sup>160</sup> Unlike China, Russia is convinced that the transition to multipolarity can be achieved only through the decline of the West. Thus, besides strengthening its autonomy and sovereignty, Russia is using propaganda and hybrid warfare against Western societies to underscore its leading role in a multipolar world.<sup>161</sup> And it is also

**156** Cyril Ramaphosa, “State of the Nation Address 2025”, Cape Town, 6 February 2025, <https://www.gov.za/SONA2025>.

**157** Department of International Relations and Cooperation, Republic of South Africa, “South Africa and the AU Commission to Hold Consultative Meeting on the G20”, Pretoria, 8 October 2024, <https://dirco.gov.za/south-africa-and-the-au-commission-to-hold-consultative-meeting-on-the-g20/>.

**158** Ramaphosa, “State of the Nation Address 2025” (see note 156); South African Revenue Service, “African Continental Free Trade Area”, <https://www.sars.gov.za/customs-and-excise/about-customs/african-continental-free-trade-area/>.

**159** Dewi Fortuna Anwar, “Indonesia’s Hedging Plus Policy in the Face of China’s Rise and the US-China Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific Region”, *The Pacific Review* 36, no. 2(2023), 351 – 77, doi: 10.1080/09512748.2022.2160794.

**160** Back in February 2012, Putin announced a massive arms build-up to enable Russia to assert its sovereignty in the changing world order. Vladimir Putin, “Byt’ sil’nyimi: garantii natsional’noi bezopasnosti dlya Rossii” [Be strong: Guarantees for Russia’s national security], 20 February 2012, [https://ruvek.mid.ru/publications/vladimir\\_putin\\_byt\\_silnyimi\\_garantii\\_natsionalnoy\\_bezopasnosti\\_dlya\\_rossii\\_6564/](https://ruvek.mid.ru/publications/vladimir_putin_byt_silnyimi_garantii_natsionalnoy_bezopasnosti_dlya_rossii_6564/); see also “Xi Focus: PLA Striving to Build World-Class Military under Xi’s Leadership”, *Xinhua*, 2 August 2022, <https://english.news.cn/20220802/a1990d2381244c06899751bab3ce739d/c.html>.

**161** Jonathan Morley-Davies, Jem Thomas and Graham Baines, *Russian Information Operations Outside of the Western Information Environment* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, May 2024), <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/download/Russian-info-operations-DIGITAL.pdf>.

using its position as the world's largest wheat exporter to promote itself as an important partner for countries in the Global South in Africa, Asia and the Middle East — while at the same time carrying out military attacks on Ukraine's production and export capacities.<sup>162</sup> Furthermore, Russian mercenaries have undermined European missions in African countries, including Mali.<sup>163</sup>

Another role (increasingly) played by China is that of provider of global public goods in various policy areas, such as infrastructure, health and sustainable development. Within the framework of the BRI, it offers loans and builds infrastructure. During the Covid-19 pandemic, it supplied the world with masks and vaccines. And in development cooperation, it is advancing from a recipient to a donor country. China is determined to fill the financial and power vacuum left by the United States under Trump in development aid and climate diplomacy. Where it sees an advantage, it aims to replace the United States as a soft power in third countries and international organisations.<sup>164</sup> At the same time, the Chinese elite has declared that the country is neither willing nor capable of replacing the US as the main provider of global public goods.<sup>165</sup> Its own economic development still takes priority.

### **By withdrawing from international institutions, the US has opened up space for China.**

In the past, the US provided global public goods in many policy areas through multilateral cooperation within international institutions such as the World Health Organization (WHO). But under Trump, it has cancelled its bilateral development cooperation measures and withdrawn from a number of inter-

national organisations.<sup>166</sup> In doing so, it has left the field clear for other actors — above all, China — in a number of policy areas, including not only global health policy but also technology policy. This can be interpreted as a shift towards multipolarity; however, US policy remains contradictory. On the one hand, Washington is taking measures to contain China's technological and military development. On the other hand, it is providing the Gulf states with access to modern technologies — for example, by selling them modern weapons systems and cooperating with them in the area of artificial intelligence. As a result, Washington is running the risk that the Gulf states will share those technologies with China. Successive US administrations have concluded from the changes under way in international politics — especially those associated with China's rise — that the trade and industrial policy of the United States should be geared towards strengthening the US economic base, even at the expense of third countries.<sup>167</sup>

India's priorities vis-à-vis the changing world order are to be understood, first and foremost, through the prism of national objectives. They include, above all, the country's energy security, territorial integrity and economic growth. These objectives form the foundations of flagship foreign-policy projects such as I2U2, IMEC and Quad, which are revered in India as a contemporary and appropriate form of international cooperation in the area of global governance. At the same time, there is a growing number of associated narratives and concepts designed to underpin India's status as a major power. The term *vishvaguru* (world teacher), for example, conveys an image of India as a peaceful and spiritual nation that can serve as a role model for other states. Prime Minister Modi's remark on the war in Ukraine ("This is not an age of war") is

**162** Aine Quinn and Katarina Hoije, "Russia in Africa: Putin Seeks to Counter Western Influence With Free Grain", *Bloomberg*, 23 February 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-02-23/russia-in-africa-putin-seeks-to-counter-western-influence-with-free-grain?utm>.

**163** Denis M. Tull, *Wie weiter in der Sahelpolitik?*, SWP-Aktuell 19/2024 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, March 2024), doi: 10.18449/2024A19.

**164** Zhao, "The Collapse of the US-led World Order" (see note 95).

**165** *Ibid.* This was also confirmed in a conversation with a Chinese think-tank delegation in Berlin on 11 June 2025.

**166** Sebastian Haug, Anna Novoselova and Stephan Klingebiel, *Trump's Assault on Foreign Aid. Implications for International Development Cooperation*, IDOS Discussion Paper no. 4 (Bonn: German Institute of Development and Sustainability, 2025), doi: 10.23661/IDP4.2025; Stewart Patrick, *The Death of the World America Made*, Emissary (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 19 February 2025), <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2025/02/trump-executive-order-treaties-organizations?lang=en>.

**167** See *Welthandel am Abgrund? Trump, Zölle und die Zukunft der Globalisierung*, ifo Schnelldienst, no. 6 (Munich: ifo Institute, June 2025), <https://www.ifo.de/publikationen/2025/zeitschrift-einzelheft/ifo-schnelldienst-062025-welthandel-am-abgrund>.

emblematic of this posture.<sup>168</sup> In general, India's political restraint vis-à-vis conflicts such as those in Ukraine and the Gaza Strip underscores that the country is not a global power; indeed, its priority is to gain regional influence in the Indo-Pacific.

South Africa, on the other hand, has responded to increasing multipolarisation by attempting to strengthen multilateral cooperation formats in the areas of climate, health and trade policy. It has launched initiatives in those policy areas at the G20 level (for example, aimed at helping resolve the debt crisis of African states<sup>169</sup>), in cooperation with the EU (for example, on renewable energies and critical raw materials)<sup>170</sup> and, above all, in sub-Saharan Africa. And, besides representing African interests in international institutions, it has lobbied for African concerns to be taken into account in the international response to the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>171</sup>

In Indonesia, foreign policy across different administrations has focused on policy areas that are closely linked to the country's national economic development. This applies, above all, to industrial policy, which aims to promote domestic industries, especially manufacturing, by attracting foreign direct investment, among other things, and thereby reducing economic dependence on raw material exports. While the preservation of strategic autonomy and non-alignment remain top priorities of its foreign policy, Indonesia is becoming increasingly dependent on China, particularly in the areas of trade and investment. Food

**168** Shubhajit Roy, “‘Not an Era of War’: In US, Modi Calls for Peaceful Resolution of Ukraine Conflict”, *The Indian Express*, 23 June 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/narendra-war-speech-us-modi-peaceful-resolution-ukraine-conflict-8681176/>.

**169** Farai Shawn Matiashe, “Africa Resolves to Reform G20 Debt Framework at Major Gathering”, *African Business*, 15 May 2025, <https://african.business/2025/05/finance-services/africa-resolves-to-reform-g20-debt-framework-at-major-gathering>; Karoline Eickhoff, *G20 Debt Negotiations: What Can the African Union Achieve?*, MTA Policy Brief no. 37 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, April 2025), <https://tinyurl.com/498xkb8p>.

**170** European Council, “EU-South Africa Summit Declaration”, press release, Brussels, 13 March 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/03/13/south-africa-eu-summit-declaration/>.

**171** Department of International Relations and Cooperation, “President Cyril Ramaphosa’s Remarks on Advancing Pandemic Prevention, Preparedness and Response in Africa, New York, USA”, Pretoria, 18 September 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/3x8y5hhs>.

security, energy security and the modernisation of the military are other priorities of the current government – not as a means of influencing international politics but primarily for domestic political reasons.

Turkey is deliberately maintaining a flexible stance in response to the multipolarisation of the international order. Amid the geopolitical tension between the United States and China, it has pursued a balancing strategy; but, more recently, following Trump's re-election, it has moved closer to the US once again. On the one hand, Turkey is maintaining its economic and security ties with the West; on the other hand, it wants to strengthen its technology partnership with China and has intensified its energy cooperation with Russia. At the same time, Ankara is pursuing a geopolitically motivated industrial and supply-chain policy that is based on close economic ties with Germany and a strategic orientation towards the EU. The aim is to ensure that Turkish production and distribution are gradually brought into line with EU standards and to develop a green high-tech and services economy – even if the measures to decarbonise the economy taken so far fall well short of those standards. As regards regional policy, Turkey is attempting to establish itself as a force for peace and order.

That aspiration is reflected in its mediation efforts in the war between Russia and Ukraine, in the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and between the conflicting parties in Libya. And it also reflected in its cooperation with the Syrian interim government to stabilise that country and rebuild its state structures.<sup>172</sup>

## Interim conclusion

Of the countries examined, only China, Russia and the United States are decidedly pursuing global ambitions and defining their strategic interests across multiple policy areas and in global terms. While South Africa aspires to a global role in a multipolar order,

**172** Yaşar Aydın, *Turkey's Industrial and Supply Chain Policy*, SWP Research Paper 2/2025 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, July 2025), doi: 10.18449/2025RP02; idem., *Geopolitics on Wheels: The Repositioning of the Turkish Automotive Industry*, SWP-Comment 45/2025 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, October 2025), doi: 10.18449/2025C45; see also the brief analysis of relations between the US and Turkey, in *CATS Network Roundup*, November 2025, [https://www.cats-network.eu/assets/cats/CN\\_Roundup/CATS\\_Network\\_Roundup\\_November\\_2025.pdf](https://www.cats-network.eu/assets/cats/CN_Roundup/CATS_Network_Roundup_November_2025.pdf).

Table 3

**Multipolarities in Action**

	<i>Own aspirations</i>	<i>Shaping international relations</i>	<i>Preferred norms<sup>a</sup> and international organisations</i>	<i>Spaces and spheres of influence</i>	<i>Own priorities and initiatives</i>
China	Global	Loose, flexible partnerships	UN Charter UN, BRICS	Formation of spheres of influence	Reducing dependence on US, strategic autonomy in all policy areas, provision of global goods (security, development)
India	Global	Loose, flexible partnerships	UN Charter UN, G20, BRICS, Quad	Formation of (regional) spheres of influence	Energy security, technological development, migration
Indonesia	Regional	Loose, flexible partnerships	UN Charter UN, G20, BRICS, ASEAN	Prevention of spheres of influence	Trade, industrial policy, military, food security, energy
Russia	Global	Loose, flexible partnerships (exceptions: alliance with North Korea, CSTO)	UN Charter <sup>b</sup> UN Security Council, BRICS	Formation of spheres of influence	Reduction of US influence, strategic autonomy in all policy areas
South Africa	Global	Loose, flexible partnerships	UN Charter UN, BRICS, G20, AU	Prevention of spheres of influence	Climate, health, trade, financial policy
Turkey	Regional	Loose, flexible partnerships	UN Charter UN, BRICS, EU, GCC	Ambivalent	Energy, technology, regional mediation role
US	Global	Alliances	Liberal norms (under Biden), transactionalism (under Trump)	Formation of spheres of influence	“America first,” withdrawal from global policy areas

**a** The preferred norms of the countries examined are declaratory in nature.

They do not necessarily correspond to their actual observable behaviour, which ranges from compliance to open violation.

**b** Included here solely on the basis of statements made by Russian officials.

Such statements are invariably propagandistic in nature. Russia is in flagrant violation of the UN Charter, not least through its war of aggression against Ukraine.

its interests have so far been defined, above all, in relation to a handful of policy areas. The aspirations of Turkey and India are presented as global in official statements but are limited to their respective regions in foreign-policy practice. Indonesia does not express any such aspirations. With regard to international cooperation, all the countries – except for the US – emphasise the growing importance of flexible partnerships with as many actors as possible (diversifica-

tion). Those partnerships are based predominantly on interests rather than common values or shared ideas about the future world order. However, there appears to be a strategic imperative for China to differentiate itself from the US and for Russia to differentiate itself from the “West” in general. No such imperative applies to the other states.

All the countries examined also emphasise the importance of international law for the normative

foundation of the changing international order. Norms such as national sovereignty, non-interference and territorial integrity play a particularly prominent role in this context. At least in the public official discourse, there is no indication that an alternative normative foundation is being considered. The United States is the exception here; pre-Trump, it was a strong advocate of liberal norms and corresponding amendments to international law. In all the countries examined – again, with the exception of the US – the discourse on the institutional framework of the changing international order revolves mainly around the United Nations and other multilateral institutions and clubs such as ASEAN, the AU, the G20 and the BRICS (for India, minilateral formats such as the Quad are important for the Indo-Pacific region). And all seven countries are calling for the reform of the UN, although opinions differ on what the precise nature of that reform should be. Russia, for example, has joined the general call for the reform of the UN but wants to protect its own seat on the UN Security Council. Meanwhile, China, Russia, the US and India address the spatial dimension of a future multipolar order mainly in terms of propagating the need to form spheres of influence. Indonesia, South Africa and Turkey, however, are opposed to the formation of spheres of influence by major powers because they want to preserve their respective strategic autonomy in a changing regional order.

For their part, China and Russia are setting many priorities and launching initiatives with the aim of reducing their dependence on the US and the West as a whole, respectively, and thus being able to function as independent poles in a multipolar order. China is the only country examined that also focuses on the provision of global public goods such as security and development. The US under Trump, on the other hand, is scaling back its global engagement and acting solely in accordance with the “America first” maxim. South Africa, India, Turkey and Indonesia see the focus of their engagement with the emerging world order as intensifying cooperation with many different partners. This includes continued pragmatic engagement with the US, China or Russia in areas such as health, trade and climate policy.

# Summary and Conclusion

The purpose of this comparative analysis was to show the different ideas and goals associated with the construct of multipolarity in selected countries. The systematic comparison reveals similarities and differences in the perception of multipolarity that are unlikely to have shown up in individual case studies. It demonstrates that, despite the term “multipolarity” becoming increasingly prominent in their respective foreign-policy discourses, the countries examined have significantly different understandings of what that term signifies.

## Findings: Status quo of the international order and multipolarity

Five of the seven countries examined believe that the current international order is already multipolar. The two outliers are Indonesia and the United States: the former continues to regard the world order as bipolar while the latter sees it as unipolar under US leadership and with China as the main challenger. This explains why the term “multipolarity” is not (yet) part of the official language of Indonesia or the US, although it is used sporadically by officials. In all other countries examined, policymakers routinely refer to the term in a positive way and seek to promote multipolarisation. However, there are significant variations in the scope, depth and coherence of the understanding of multipolarity. Russia and China use the term to challenge the dominance of the US – and, in the case of Russia, the West as a whole. Most of the other countries examined expect that in a multipolar world, their own power and status will improve, their foreign-policy room for manoeuvre will increase and the US will witness a relative loss of power. Furthermore, Russia, China and India consider the process to be irreversible. With the exception of the US and Indonesia, all the countries examined have reached their own understanding of multipolarity: that is, they have not simply adopted the construct originally propagated by Russia and China; rather, they have developed and applied it in line with their own interests.

But in most of the countries examined, the construct remains vague and gives rise to contradictory interpretations.

## Findings: Multipolarisation

While five of the seven countries examined perceive the transition to multipolarity as an evolutionary process, Russia and Indonesia associate it with violent and disruptive change. South Africa identifies disruption as a risk, but it does not emphasise that threat. There are also differences over the constituent elements of the emerging multipolarity: some states see (military) power politics as a crucial element, while others emphasise economic cooperation and growing interdependence. Liberal norms play a marginal role at best. As regards the spatial dimension of multipolarity, Indonesia and India see it as largely Asia-centric, whereas the other countries regard it as global.

Exhaustive lists of the poles – that is, the main actors in any kind of multipolar order – are never drawn up by the countries examined. However, across all seven countries, it is the United States and China as well as Russia that are perceived as the main actors in the transition to multipolarity. As for the policy areas considered to be the drivers of multipolarisation, these vary widely – from the economy and technology to defence and the military. Nevertheless, it is striking that alongside security, there is an immediate focus on the economy and technology. This can be seen as an indication of the increased importance of economic and technological competition in international politics. Indonesia, South Africa, Turkey and India reject a multipolar order that is based predominantly on military power and perceive instability as a threat. Nevertheless, all four countries regard states with comprehensive military power at their disposal as central poles of the new emerging order.

At the same time, it is evident that perceptions of the patterns of international cooperation and conflict are changing. The majority of the countries examined see themselves in a process of diversifying their part-

nerships — not in the form of alliances but as flexible, ad hoc cooperation. At the normative level, all the countries examined are reinterpreting international norms, albeit to a varying extent. The widely acknowledged decline in the legitimacy of established multilateral organisations is prompting the US to increasingly pursue a unilateralist course. Others are responding to that loss of legitimacy by turning to new multilateral organisations such as the BRICS group. This does not mean, of course, that those countries do not support other multilateral processes — for example, in the context of the United Nations. China, the US and Indonesia all see the rivalry between Washington and Beijing as the single, main line of conflict. That is why all three tend to identify the US and China as the dominant players in shaping the future international order. The other countries examined, on the other hand, perceive multiple lines of conflict and multiple centres of power (poles), which can differ from one policy area to another.

What also stands out is the differences between Russia and China. Russia is striving for a radical, military-led or even war-induced transformation of the international order and sees the conflict in Ukraine as something akin to the “birth” of the multipolar order. Because it is falling behind both economically and technologically, it is seeking to capitalise on its destructive potential. China, on the other hand, is in favour of a gradual transformation and can lever its economic and technological potential to play a leading role. The exception to that peaceful approach is the aspiration to “reunify” with Taiwan, which renders military force an explicit part of the instrumentarium of the new world order.

### Findings: Multipolarities in action

The divergences identified in the first two parts of the analysis are also evident in the third part. In general, many of the foreign-policy strategies apparently derived from multipolarity seem to be a continuation of existing foreign-policy formulas rather than actual derivations from multipolarity. This continuity of existing formulas could be due to the rather narrow conceptualisations of multipolarity in the respective national foreign-policy discourses. With the exception of the United States, all the countries examined associate the changing international order with the increasing importance of flexible partnerships over formal alliances in their respective bilateral relation-

ships (and, for its part, India also emphasises the importance of minilateral formats). With the exception of the US, all the countries highlight the importance of the role played by the United Nations in the future international system and of multilateral cooperation in general. At the normative level, they all refer positively to international law, even those that violate it — a contradiction that is particularly striking in the case of Russia. The US is the exception here, too. Under Biden, the focus was on liberal norms and a vaguely defined rules-based order; under Trump, however, it is on transactionalism and “Might makes Right” without any clear normative frame of reference.

For China, Russia, the United States and India, the formation of spheres of influence within the context of multipolarity is a strategic imperative. Indonesia and South Africa, on the other hand, are opposed to any spheres of influence, which is in keeping with their foreign-policy traditions. Turkey remains ambivalent on this issue. Both Indonesia and Turkey are pursuing primarily regional ambitions, while the other five countries have global aspirations. In addition, South Africa has set itself the goal of ensuring that African interests are brought more to the fore at the international level. While just several years ago US foreign policy actors were still identifying the US as the sole superpower in world politics, at least some parts of the current administration are now questioning that assessment. China, on the other hand, is increasingly determined to present itself as a global power and wants to fill the gaps left by the withdrawal of the US. It already sees itself in a dominant position in Asia in areas such as trade, infrastructure and the energy transition. But its ambitions go well beyond that and it does not appear to have a serious challenger. Russia, which claims to be a stabilising force among the successor states of the Soviet Union, has established regional groupings such as the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and the Eurasian Economic Union and regularly intervenes — directly or indirectly — in political crises in its neighbourhood. However, the more its influence has declined, the more Russia itself has become the cause of crises, political destabilisation and wars.

Despite the widely acknowledged weakness or even crisis of international institutions, functional sectoral orders in areas such as trade, climate and health continue to provide scope for multilateral cooperation. The countries examined regard such sectoral orders as possible launching pads for the reform of the international system. Although the official rhetoric of

those countries presents multipolarity as an alternative to the liberal unipolar order, it is noteworthy that – with the exception of Russia – the transition is not perceived, at least from a functional point of view, as a radical break with the old order.

## Discussion of the findings

The analysis shows that most of the seven countries examined have a positive attitude towards multipolarity. They hope that the relative loss of power of the United States will give them more room for manoeuvre in foreign policy and increase their own power and status. At first glance, this may come as no surprise given the countries selected for the purpose of the analysis: with the exception of the US and Indonesia they all use the term “multipolarity” as a foreign-policy construct and, to a large extent, promote its use in the international arena. It is striking that most of the countries analysed view the current deterioration of the former-unipolar world order as providing an opportunity for change. They also view many of the changes currently to be observed as largely positive. Indonesia and the US are the exceptions in that they emphasise the risks associated with any transition to multipolarity. However, Indonesian foreign policymakers have increasingly begun to grapple with the possibility of a multipolar world order and are beginning to weigh up the associated opportunities and risks. For their part, various South African administrations have at least partly acknowledged the risks.

It is interesting to note that even in countries that promote the use of the term “multipolarity” in the international arena, there is no common understanding of that construct among the various domestic actors. Although shared positive references to multipolarity are evident at the national level in those countries, an underlying coherent concept of the new world order is lacking. Consequently, there is no agreement at the national level on what exactly is meant by multipolarity. Nuanced definitions of the term can be found even in Russia, which has long sought to promote a multipolar world as its own distinct foreign-policy construct.

The analysis also shows that the understanding of multipolarity differs from country to country and at times leads to contradictions. This applies to the so-called middle powers South Africa and India even though these states have submitted joint proposals at

the international level for the reform of multilateral institutions. Thus, it is clear from the analysis that multipolarity is associated with widely diverging ideas of the world order. States that promote the use of the term do not necessarily mean the same thing or have the same ideas about the emerging new world order. However, many of the analyses of multipolarity undertaken until now have assumed this to be the case.

It is noteworthy that the United Nations and international law form a central point of reference in the discourse of all the countries examined – with the exception of the United States. However, Russian and Chinese foreign-policy actors who refer to them in this context are more likely paying lip service to, rather than demonstrating any credible interest in, the preservation of international norms. Other states – above all, South Africa and India – are strongly committed to the reform of the international legal order. All the states examined can be accused of a certain double standard when it comes to compliance with international law, although the extent to which this is true varies considerably from actor to actor.

For their part, India and South Africa are both pushing their own ideas for specific reforms at the multilateral level, as evidenced by their lawsuit against the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) and their advocacy for the release of patents for drugs against Covid-19. Furthermore, almost all the countries examined agree that the reform of the UN Security Council is necessary. However, none of those countries has come up with a comprehensive global reform programme. The People’s Republic of China has launched its own initiatives to change the international system, reshape international institutions and provide global public goods; but it remains unclear whether what Beijing has in mind is a fundamental transformation of the world order or merely an adjustment of the status quo. At the same time, China is insisting that it is not a hegemon and does not want to be at the helm. A more systematic examination of proposals on the reform of multilateral institutions – which was beyond the scope of this study – could provide more in-depth information about whether states are pursuing joint reform proposals in other policy areas as well. Finally, the findings of this study make it clear that the ideas of the world order associated with multipolarity are far from being mere ideological constructs; rather, they are inextricably linked to power resources, power relations and power politics.

## Final conclusion

German and European foreign-policymakers face not only the analytical task of understanding the different ideas of the world order associated with the term “multipolarity”. They also have to deal with those ideas constructively, not least as they are already confronted with them in multilateral formats and bilateral partnerships as well as in the development of new cooperation mechanisms. The construct of multipolarity should not be dismissed as irrelevant or anti-Western. All the countries examined in this study refer to it – whether openly or not – and their respective understandings of the term can provide important insights about international cooperation. This is chiefly because the different conceptualisations of multipolarity give rise to different degrees of policy convergence or divergence at both the conceptual and practical levels for German and European policy.

At the same time, the unreflective use of the term poses risks, as the analysis has shown. Multipolarity has become a highly politicised term – one that is used, in particular, by Russia and, at least to some extent, by China for verbal attacks on the West and thus on the EU. Advocacy for a multipolar world order could fuel fears among states that would be assigned – at best – a supporting role in such an order. On the other hand, political elites in the countries of the Global South see the multipolar world order as a vehicle for a foreign-policy reform programme aimed at ensuring that the current global power structures, which they perceive as unjust, are more inclusive. Thus, German and European foreign-policymakers cannot afford to ignore the term if they want to maintain or deepen foreign-policy relations with those countries. At the same time, they should use it sparingly themselves and not without qualification. Should they wish to endow it with a positive connotation as a foreign-policy construct – that is, as designating a more inclusive world order that involves the various regions of the world being integrated into international and multilateral processes on a more equal footing – they should spell out what they mean by it.

Instead of engaging in conceptual debates and running the risk of being misunderstood, Germany and the EU should endeavour to ensure that the issue of global power structures being perceived as unjust is addressed at the international level and that work on reforms already being called for gets under way in various policy areas. This is important because, in

contrast with the academic view of multipolarity, which focuses on the power structures of the international order, the political discourse tends to use the term when addressing the interests of the respective states and the challenges they face. Insofar as it does not serve a purely propagandistic purpose, the German government should see the commitment to a multipolar world order as an indicator of the need for reform at the international level. It should be more emphatic in its support for reform and – preferably together with so-called like-minded states – initiate negotiation processes that deal with this issue. Such efforts should take place at both the international and the European level, as the EU is perceived worldwide as a relevant actor, particularly in specific policy areas such as trade. German and European decision-makers would thereby signal that they are taking legitimate concerns seriously – without becoming entangled in conceptual debates. To this end, it is recommended that German and European policy-makers engage in a strategic discussion of those ideas of a world order that would be advantageous for Germany and the EU. And that discussion could, in turn, provide the basis for seeking partners and institutions that could help German and European actors move closer to achieving that goal.

## Abbreviations

AIDS	Acquired immune deficiency syndrome
ANC	African National Congress
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AU	African Union
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
CBAM	Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organisation
EU	European Union
G2	Group of Two (US, China)
G4	Group of Four (Brazil, Germany, India, Japan)
G7	Group of Seven
G20	Group of 20
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
HIV	Human immunodeficiency virus
I2U2	India, Israel, US, United Arab Emirates
IBSA	India, Brazil, South Africa
ICJ	International Court of Justice
IMEC	India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor
MIKTA	Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, Australia
MSC	Munich Security Conference
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OIC	Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
Quad	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue

SAIIA	South African Institute for International Affairs
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
TPP	Transpacific Partnership Agreement
UN	United Nations
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
US	United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WHO	World Health Organization
WTO	World Trade Organization

