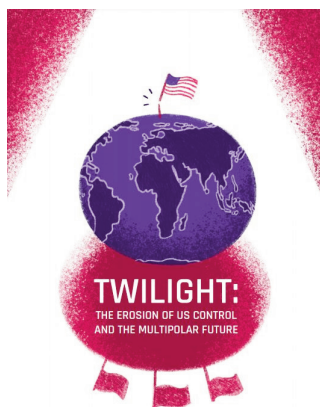


The war in Eurasia

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Extract from Twilight: The Erosion of US Control and the Multipolar Future, Tricontinental Dossier no. 36. Since the 1960s, Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research has focused on stimulating intellectual debate from the perspective of Africa, Asia and Latin America.

In April 2019, the US Indo-Pacific Command released a document entitled *Regain the Advantage*, in which it pointed to the ‘renewed threat we face from Great Power competition. ... Without a valid and convincing conventional deterrent, China and Russia will be emboldened to take action in the region to supplant US interests’. Admiral Philip Davidson, who leads the US Indo-Pacific Command, asked the US Congress to finance enhanced ‘forward-based, rotational joint forces’ as the ‘most credible way to demonstrate US commitment and resolve to potential adversaries’. The report has a stunningly science fiction quality to it, expressing a desire to create ‘highly survivable, precision-strike networks’ that run along the Pacific Rim, with missiles – including with nuclear warheads – and radar installations from Palau to outer space. New weapons systems already in development would enhance US pressure on both China and Russia along their coastlines; these weapons include hypersonic cruise missiles, which shorten the strike time against Chinese and Russian targets to within minutes of launching.

After the collapse of the USSR and the communist state system, the US found that it could exert its power without major challenge. For instance, it could bomb Iraq and Yugoslavia, and it could push for a trade and investment system that favoured its allies. The entire decade of the 1990s seemed like a victory lap for the United States, with its presidents, George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton, preening at international meetings, beaming into the cameras, and making sure that everyone

saw the world through their eyes, with the ‘rogue states’ (Iran and North Korea, for example) in their gun sights, and with China and Russia seemingly committed to US leadership.

In the decades since then, much has changed. China’s economic growth has been spectacular. The per capita disposable income in real terms expanded by 96.6% in the 2011-2019 period alone. On 23 November 2020, China announced that it had eliminated absolute poverty nationwide. China used its very high level of investment to build infrastructure within the country and used its massive foreign exchange to aid across the world through the Belt and Road Initiative, which began in 2013. While the US was bogged down by its wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere, China built up a system of trade and commerce that linked large parts of the world to its economic locomotive. During the coronavirus pandemic, China was first to break the chain of the infection and resume near-normal economic activity. As a consequence, the IMF projects that nearly 60% of the estimated global GDP in 2020-2021 will be due to China’s growth.

Key to the new period is not merely Chinese economic buoyancy, but its tightened links to Russia. China’s new linkages driven by the Belt and Road Initiative are taking place along the southern flank of Asia into Europe and Africa; its links to Russia allow for integration along the northern flank of Asia. The new ties between China and Russia culminated in a range of economic and military agreements that have been signed over the past five years.

Since the early years of the twenty-first century, countries across the Global South – including China – have sought to create regional and multilateral institutions based on international law and a genuine development agenda for the world’s people. These institutions are meant to transcend the period of full-scale US primacy that had opened up after the fall of the USSR. A range of such initiatives developed, including regional platforms – such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in Asia (2001) and ALBA in Latin America and the Caribbean (2004), as well as more global platforms – such as IBSA or India-Brazil-South Africa Dialogue (2003) and BRICS or Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (2009). The fourteenth Non-Aligned Movement summit in Havana in 2006 was framed around the issue of regionalism and multilateralism. At the 2013 BRICS meeting, leaders released the eThekweni Declaration, which summarised the spirit of this opening, indicating their commitment to the ‘promotion of international law, multilateralism, and the central role of the UN’, as well as the need for ‘more effective regional’ efforts to end conflict and to promote development.

The BRICS project developed a set of proposals to create new multilateral institutions to substitute for the institutions dominated by the United States. For example, a Contingency Reserve Arrangement was created to supplement the IMF with short-term liquidity for countries in foreign exchange trouble, and a BRICS Bank was formed as a challenge to the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. But the entire BRICS project had limits from the start: it articulated no ideological or policy alternative to neoliberalism, it lacked key independent institutions (even the Contingency Reserve Arrangement would utilise IMF data and analysis), and it had no political or military ability to counter US military domination.

Regional projects such as ALBA developed alternative forms of integration that experimented with building inter-state relations and new institutions. ALBA led to the creation of new regional formations, such as the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR, 2004) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC, 2010), and it created a new regional bank (BancoSur), a new virtual currency (Sucre), a new communications network (anchored in TeleSur), and a new attitude of hemispheric independence from US power. This is precisely why the United States spent effort and funds to undermine many of the constituent movements of ALBA, such as through an old-fashioned coup in Honduras (2009) and a lawfare coup in Brazil (2016). Such attacks against social and political regional integration in South America, alongside the subordination of the hemisphere to US power, have been the defining features of the United States' policies in Caribbean and Latin American politics for the last two centuries.

The internal limitations of the BRICS project eroded its potential when political developments in India (2013) and Brazil (2016) brought the right wing into power. Both countries immediately subordinated their foreign policy to Washington, unwilling to be party to any regionalism or multilateralism. There is no longer the possibility even of a sub-imperialism, as Ruy Mauro Marini argued in 1965, since now these fragments of the elites in places such as Brazil and India were content with being the forward posts for the US State Department rather than driving their own policy in their regions.

The exit of Brazil and India from any effective leadership in the BRICS bloc came alongside political convulsions in South Africa, where former President Jacob Zuma turned the African National Congress, once a movement for national liberation, into a repressive kleptocracy. For the past five years, the BRICS project has not been able to advance any

significant agenda, although its continued existence as a grouping that includes the largest developing economies in the world has some significance. Despite differences, China, India, and Russia have also continued to cooperate in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.



It is in this context that we see the growth of the Chinese and Russian pact, spurred on by attacks by the United States and other Western powers and by the attrition of the BRICS bloc. A great gulf between China and Russia appeared during the Sino-Soviet dispute from 1956, and tensions between the two countries continued to linger through the immediate years following the fall of the USSR, with an initially pliant Moscow looking toward the West for alliances. It was only in 2008 that China and Russia finally settled a long-standing border dispute, opening the way for the close ties of the present period.

In this period, US policy makers sought to corral a weakened Russia into a project to encircle China. The West overplayed its hand and attempted to bring Russia to its knees through the expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe, breaking a promise made during the dissolution of the German Democratic Republic. Russian power seemed destined to be totally drained when the West threatened both of Russia's only warm water ports in Sevastopol (Crimea) and in Tartus (Syria). A set of further aggressive moves by the West against Russia – including Russia's expulsion from the G8 in 2014 and a harsh sanctions regime set up by the United States – struck at vital Russian interests, enormously offended Russian national opinion, which was deeply involved with the events in Ukraine, and pushed Russia towards greater alignment with China.

In 2019, China's President Xi Jinping and Russia's President Vladimir Putin spoke at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, an annual business meeting set up in 1997, the scope of which has increasingly included assessing Russia's relations with Asia as well as with the West. Xi and Putin spoke of the intimate ties between their two countries,

emphasising that the two of them had personally met at least thirty times since 2013. Amongst the many agreements to increase trade, the two leaders agreed to enhance bilateral trade by using the rouble and the yuan – rather than the dollar – to reconcile cross-border payments. This snub was not the only thing that alarmed Washington – so did the increase in arms sales between the two countries, which came alongside more frequent joint military exercises: in September 2018, a third of Russia’s soldiers participated in the China-Russia Vostok 2018 exercises. In October 2020, when Putin was asked if China and Russia would form a ‘military alliance’, he answered, ‘We don’t need it, but, theoretically, it’s quite possible to imagine it’.

Weakening Russia in political and military terms has certainly been part of the overall eastward expansion of NATO, but China has been the main economic target for the United States and its allies. In particular, there is great anxiety about the developments in Chinese high-tech firms that produce telecommunications equipment and software, robotics, and artificial intelligence, among other things. It was one thing for China to be the workshop of the world, for its workers to be employed by multinational corporations while its own companies remained in the medium technology sector; it is entirely another thing for China to become a key technological producer in the world. That is the reason why the US government, nudged by Silicon Valley firms, went after Huawei and ZTE. In April 2019, the US Defence Innovation Board noted:

The leader of 5G stands to gain hundreds of billions of dollars in revenue over the next decade, with widespread job creation across the wireless technology sector. 5G has the potential to revolutionize other industries as well, as technologies like autonomous vehicles will gain huge benefits from the faster, larger data transfer. 5G will also enhance the Internet of Things (IoT) by increasing the amount and speed of data flowing between multiple devices, and may even replace the fiber-optic backbone relied upon by so many households. The country that owns 5G will own many of these innovations and set the standards for the rest of the world.

This country is not likely to be the US; even the Defence Innovation Board admits that neither AT&T nor Verizon will be able to manufacture the kind of transmitters needed for the new systems. Nor is it likely to be Sweden (Ericsson) or Finland (Nokia), who the Chinese firms are far ahead of. This is a grave threat to the future prospects of the US economy, which is why the US government has used every instrument to constrain the growth of China.

None of the largely false accusations against the Chinese firms (of intellectual property theft or of the erosion of privacy) have deterred customers around the world. What has stopped the commercial prospects of these firms has been direct US political pressure on governments to contain or ban the entry of Huawei and ZTE. The US acknowledges that China's rapid technological growth is a generational threat to the main advantage that the US has had for the past decades, namely its technological superiority. It is to prevent China's technological ascent that the US has used every mechanism, from diplomatic pressure to military pressure, but none of these seem to be working.

China, for now, is resolute. It is unwilling to back down and dismantle its technological gains. No resolution is possible unless there is an acknowledgment of reality: that China is equal to if not more advanced than the West in terms of its technological production in some sectors, that this is going to be gradually spread more widely, and that is not something that needs to be or can be reversed by warfare.

In 2001, China's then-Vice President Hu Jintao said that 'multipolarity constitutes an important base in Chinese foreign policy'. China remains committed to multipolarity, eschewing any prospect of a 'Chinese Century' to follow the 'American Century'. The Chinese position is mirrored in some of the US strategic documents, such as in the 2012 US National Intelligence Council's report, which states that 'by 2030, no country – whether the US, China, or any other large country – will be a hegemonic power'. What there will be instead is a 'diffusion of power'. But others in the US strategic analysis community, such as Richard N. Haass, the president of the Council of Foreign Relations, argue that if the US does not continue its 'leadership' of the global order, then the alternative 'is not an era dominated by China or anyone else, but rather a chaotic time in which regional and global problems overwhelm the world's collective will and ability to meet them'. Multipolarity, or a decline in US primacy, Haass claims, will be chaos: 'Americans would not be safe or prosperous in such a world', Haass wrote in *Foreign Policy Begins at Home* (2013). 'Our Dark Ages was one too many; the last thing we need is another'. For liberals such as Haass as much as neo-fascists such as Trump, there is no substitute for US primacy. It is the failure of the US elites to understand the inevitability of a multipolar future that drives them towards new cold wars, dangerous military interventions, and hybrid wars of all kinds.

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