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Multipolar continental balance on  
the Eurasian mainland: the US as  
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role of 19th century Britain

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# Multipolar continental balance on the Eurasian mainland: the US as a maritime power reprising the role of 19th century Britain

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*Throughout the 18th-19th century, the European order was shaped by a multipolar power balance on the continent, with Britain as an offshore maritime island nation pursuing a strategy of keeping the continental powers in balance, preventing any of them from achieving hegemony over the others. Several trends today suggest a similar international order being reformed, but this time with Eurasia as the continent characterized by a multipolar balance of continental powers, and the United States as the maritime power offshore pursuing a similar continental balancing strategy, as Britain did in the period before 1914.*

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## Introduction

From the British Glorious Revolution of 1688, up until the end of the Second World War in 1945, the system of European powers was characterized, and to a great degree determined by the consequent continental power balance policy of the United Kingdom. This policy meant that while Britain as an island nation off the shores of the European continent was not strong enough to be the dominant military power in Europe, it was influential enough to prevent any continental power in Europe from achieving hegemony on the continent. Thus from the mid eighteenth century, it sustained a multipolar balance of roughly equal powers within Europe.<sup>1</sup> This way, as an offshore power it managed to preserve its hegemony on the high seas, which kept it in a role of primus inter pares among European powers through the nineteenth century.

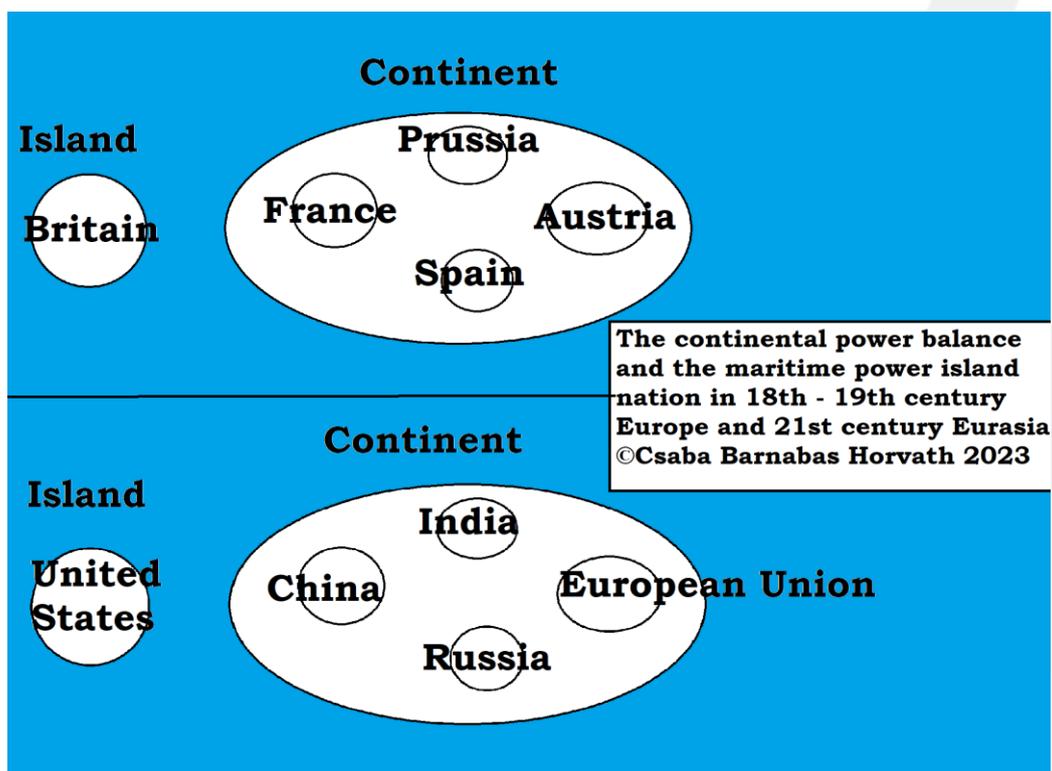
Today, we seem to be witnessing a trend that increasingly echoes this pattern, but on a much larger scale. The Eurasian landmass is the world continent landmass, not just Europe, and the US dominating the North American continent as an offshore power and pursuing a similar balancing strategy regarding the continental powers of Eurasia, as Britain did regarding continental powers of Europe. It was the geopolitical theorist Nicholas J. Spykman, who drew the parallels in 1942 between Britain's position towards continental Europe, and the US' position towards Europe and Asia, as an island nation assuring its security by balancing between continental powers.<sup>2</sup> Spykman already predicted China, India, Russia and the United States becoming the four dominant powers of the planet by the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> After 1940 Spykman's scenario was prevented for decades by WW2 that annulled the power of virtually all European and Asian powers with the sole exception of the Soviet Union, and the Cold War, super power balance marked distorted geopolitics for several decades.

At the same time the economic growth of China and India lagged several decades behind what Spykman assumed when he asserted the target date of the 1990s for his new balance. Arguably this lag was caused by the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution in China, and by Nehruvian Socialism in India. With the end of the Cold War, the start of the Chinese reforms in 1978 and the liberalization of India's economy in 1991, and the relative decline of Europe however, Spykman's analysis is more and more starting to seem prophetic. It presumes the same likely outcome as well as the one that Britain's balancing policy had in 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Thus while no longer being strong enough to maintain its global hegemony, the US is likely still strong enough to prevent any of the continental powers from achieving hegemony on the world continent, sustaining a multipolar balance between the continental powers of Eurasia, and thus enabling the US to preserve its hegemony on the high seas. In his book, "Diplomacy", Henry Kissinger predicted the US to remain primus inter pares for most of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> If this trend does evolve, it will very likely have such a result.

### The Balance in Europe as a precursor to the new world balance

The main driver of Britain's balance of power strategy were its island nation status and its subsequent pioneering of industrialization and global trade based on its command of the high seas. The beneficial conditions of being an island nation meant that as long as it was in control of the surrounding seas, its security was assured by its navy. Consequently it didn't have to put much effort into maintaining a sizable land army. Its continental adversaries, even those roughly equal to it or larger than it in size of their economy and population, could not afford to maintain a navy that could match the British, as they had to put most of their efforts into their land armies, to secure their post Westphalian boundaries as states, which severely limited how much effort they could put into their naval capabilities. If however, any of these continental powers could have achieved, and on the long term sustained hegemony on the continent, that would have given such a power the capability of building a navy, that could have challenged Britain on the high seas. If defeated on the sea, Britain couldn't have defended itself from an invasion by the larger population and economy that such a continental power by that point would have likely accumulated.<sup>56</sup>

The same is true for the USA today: Canada and Mexico are not only much weaker than it, but are also closely aligned with and influenced by it. By possessing an unquestioned hegemony over the North American continent, practically possessing all strategic features of an island nation. Something Nicholas J. Spykman already concluded in 1938, but it is as true now, as it was then.<sup>7</sup> Thus it is secure as long as it sustains its hegemony on the high seas. On the other hand, it can only sustain this as long, as no power unites either the western nor the eastern half of Eurasia, let alone achieves hegemony over the whole.<sup>8</sup>



### **From old to new**

How this played out in the case of Britain was that from the formation of a United Kingdom of Great Britain after 1707, until the final defeat of Napoleon in 1815, the continental hegemon aspirant which it sought to contain was France. Britain's most frequent continental partners against it were Austria, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Savoy, occasionally also involving Prussia, Spain, Russia as well. Four characteristic conflicts in this period were the Nine Years' War of 1688-1697, in which the "Grand Alliance" of Austria, England, the Netherlands, Savoy and Spain stepped up to contain France, the aspirant continental hegemon. the War of the Spanish Succession of 1701-1714, in which Britain prevented France, from creating a union with Spain.<sup>9</sup> This was followed by the War of the Austrian Succession 1740-1748, in which Britain intervened to prevent the dismantlement of Austria, the main continental adversary to France, where a coalition of Austria, Britain, Hannover, the Netherlands, Russia, and Savoy faced a coalition of Bavaria, France, Genoa, Prussia, Spain and Sweden.<sup>10</sup> Fourthl the French Revolutionary Wars and the Napoleonic Wars between 1792-1815, where Britain contested a brief outright French hegemony over the continent.<sup>11</sup> (An uncharacteristic conflict of this period was the Seven Years' War, where France and Austria settled their differences. Here most continental powers, including Austria, Spain, and Sweden supported France, and Britain was initially only supported by Prussia, Portugal, and some minor German states. Russia supported France initially, however, it later switched sides.)

For much of the 19th century, Russia played this role, even though, this time the focus was not that much Europe, but more the Mediterranean and even South Asia, giving a Eurasian character to this geopolitical development. In the Crimean war of 1853-1856, Britain forged a coalition with France and Piedmont, to help the declining Ottoman Empire contain Russia, and further east, in the Great Game impacting Iran, Central Asia, Afghanistan and Tibet, Russia's aspirations to gain an exit to the Indian Ocean collided with Britain's concerns of keeping the Russians out of India by creating a buffer state in Afghanistan.

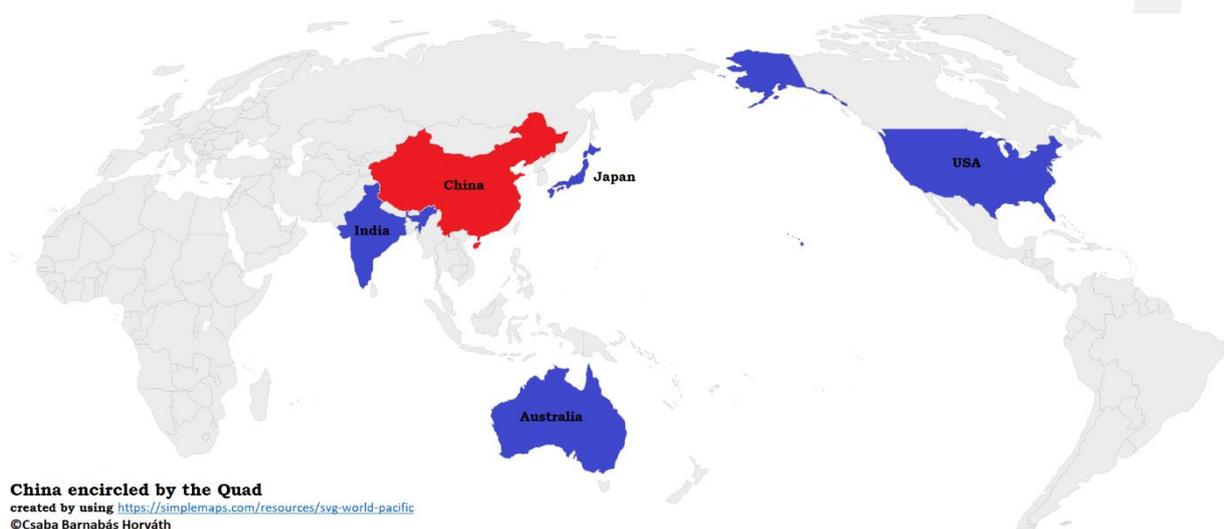
The German Unification in 1871, started Germany's rise to the position of potential continental hegemon, that eventually culminated in two world wars. The German unification immediately changed the European balance, not only by the population and resources the new empire acquired under its rule, but also by defeating Austria in 1866, and France in 1870. The shift in the blance evolved over several decades. In the 1870s and 1880s Britain still viewed Russia as the main threat to its global power. After the Russian victory over the Ottoman Empire in 1878, Britain cooperated with Austria-Hungary to pressure Russia to revoke the Treaty of San Stefano, and replace it with the more moderate Treaty of Berlin, and by the Mediterranean Agreements of 1887, aligned with Italy, Austria-Hungary, and Spain to contain Russian and French aspirations in the Mediterranean.

The 1890s was the key decade of the shift in the UK perception of German imperial ambitions. After the establishment of the Franco-Russian alliance in 1891, the formation

of the two opposing blocks consisting of France and Russia on the one hand, and Germany and Austria-Hungary on the other was already complete. Britain however, was still largely neutral throughout the decade. As its conflicts with Russia and France were still ongoing, and it still kept the possibility of cooperation with Germany on the table, Britain appeared to have been unsure, whether to perceive German or Russian expansionism as more dangerous. The Fashoda incident of 1898 marked an episode, when Britain and France found themselves on the brink of war, the Great Game between Britain and Russia in South Asia was still ongoing, and in the Russo-Japanese war Britain supported Japan with whom it had an alliance. Britain and Germany still engaged in negotiations on the possibility of some kind of strategic partnership, with Joseph Chamberlain, Secretary of State for the Colonies having urged an alliance between Britain, Germany and the United States as late as 1899. According to Kissinger, these negotiations broke down due to Germany's demands for continental style close-knit commitments, while Britain would have only agreed a looser partnership, and relations soon turned hostile due to the increasingly assertive and erratic policies of Germany, especially after it started its ambitious naval building program, challenging that very hegemony on the high seas that Britain saw as the cornerstone of its security. By the first decade of the twentieth century, Britain eventually identified Germany as the main threat to continental balance. It signed the Entente Cordiale with France in 1904, and the Anglo-Russian convention in 1907, settling the Great Game with Russia over Afghanistan, Iran and Tibet. These treaties established the triple alliance of Britain, France and Russia to contain the central powers of Germany and its ally, Austria-Hungary.<sup>12</sup>

What France, Spain, Prussia, and Austria were for the UK in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, China, India, Russia, and the EU seem to be for the US in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While the cold war is usually perceived as an ideological bipolar system we could already see the embryonic stage of this trend in the 1970s and the 1980s, as de facto coalitions formed between the US and communist China on the one hand, and between the Soviet Union and democratic India on the other, in both cases geopolitical calculations trumped ideological fault lines, without China or India becoming members of the alliance systems of the US and USSR in the traditional sense. The US opened to China after 1972 to contain Soviet aspirations of Eurasian hegemony despite their ideological differences. This echoed the logic of continental balancing.<sup>13</sup> However, during the Cold War, China and India were still much weaker than they are today, and the US was still strong enough to manage those areas of Eurasia, that belonged to its bloc.

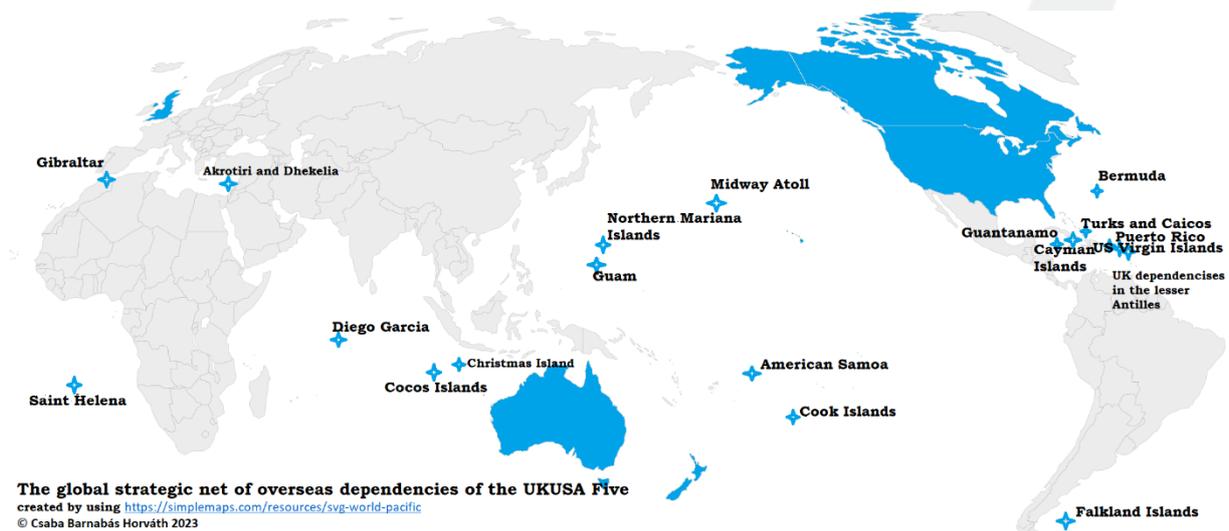
Perhaps the most important recent organization to reflect this balancing trend would be the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, aka the Quad, the strategic coalition of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, first formed in 2007, dormant between 2008-2017, reestablished in 2017, and alive and kicking ever since then.<sup>14</sup> This coalition resembles the coalitions built by Britain during the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century to contain the potential continental hegemonic power. First, the Quad is the most extensive arrangement openly seeking to contain China, the potential world continent hegemon. Besides the US, the balancing maritime power of our day, and its UKUSA ally, Australia, it includes India, the most populous country of the Eurasian continent (having recently overtaken China) and Japan, the second largest economy of Asia. Second, this coalition is no longer a Cold War-style tight-knit centralized alliance, but much more akin to a loose, 18<sup>th</sup>-century coalition, where powers otherwise follow their own agendas, but coordinate their steps to a certain degree. Even Japan, a close cold war ally of the US, more and more perceives itself as a regional middle power on its own, with its own independent agenda and military.<sup>15</sup>



### **The Anglosphere Five – the core alliance of the USA as a balancing maritime island bloc, outsourcing containment to an Eurasian multipolar continental balance**

To find how the US as an island nation, functions in the global arena, it is arguable to view it not on its own, but the inner core of its alliance system, the Anglosphere bloc. Best known by the Five Eyes intelligence Agreement, the bloc consists of the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. The US and the UK founded this alliance in 1946, and the other commonwealth countries joined in 1947. The alliance was kept secret until 2005. However, its structure makes it the inner core of the US alliance system, with standardization of the equipment, training, and command and control structures of the militaries of the five participant countries, and a mutual sharing of intelligence information. Cooperation between the five countries is actually regulated by a series of agreements: ABCANZ, AUSCANNZUKUS, ASIC, TTCP.<sup>16</sup> Culturally the bloc also forms a coherent unit, as it covers the core of the English-speaking world, with four of the

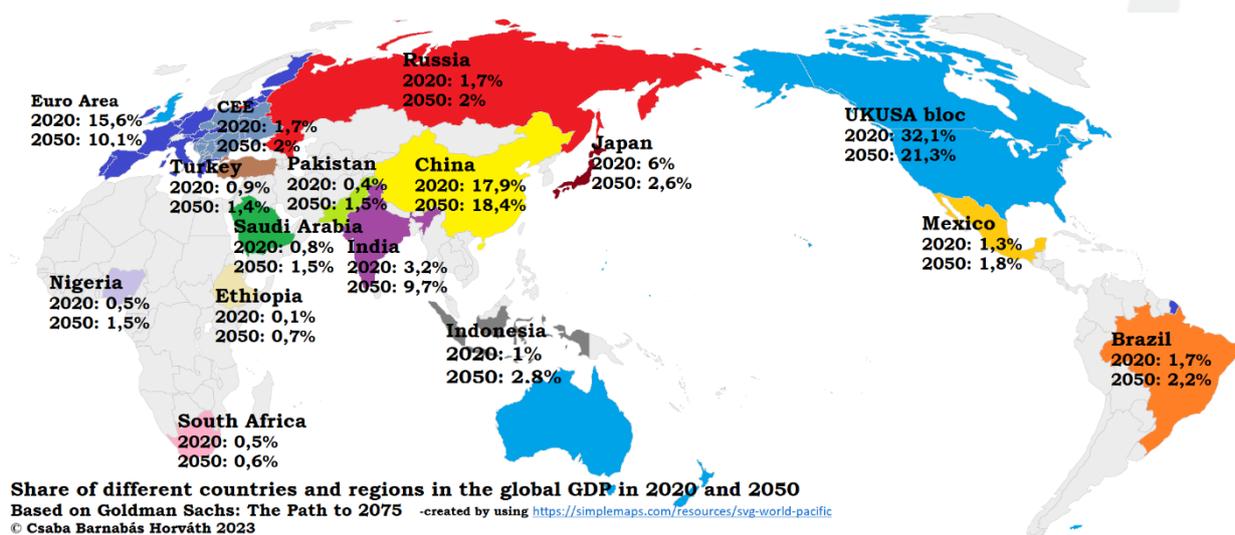
five members of the Commonwealth as well. Why it is reasonable to assume that even amidst its already noticeable withdrawal from the rest of the world, the US will keep the UKUSA bloc together as a close-knit alliance, is not only because of cultural ties but also this geopolitical setting. First, in a strategic sense, all five members of the bloc are islands: the US and Canada constitute the North American continent, with its only land border in the south in Mexico. Mexico and all of Central America are so tightly aligned with the US (with the exceptions of Cuba and Nicaragua) neither the Mexican border changes that strategic picture. The UK, Australia, and New Zealand are island nations as well. Therefore, all are suitable for the strategy of island nations, relying on maritime power, and requiring smaller land forces to defend themselves. Second, located right next to Southeast Asia and Europe respectively, Australia and the UK represent stand on the doorstep of these continents, while they also mean dominance over the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans for the bloc, by being present on both sides of each ocean. Moreover, the network of overseas territories and dependencies of the five participant states provide a global network of islands at strategic locations, that can be used as bases, not only naval but air bases as well. Among such strategic locations, we can mention Guam, Midway, American Samoa, the Cook Islands, and the Pitcairn Islands in the Pacific, Diego Garcia, Christmas Island, and the Cocos Islands in the Indian Ocean, Saint Helena and the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic, Gibraltar, and Akrotiri & Dhekeleia in the Mediterranean, and numerous overseas dependences of both the UK and the US in the Caribbean. Thus if we view not just the US, but the entire Anglosphere bloc as the island nation playing the balancing game, it represents a player of that kind with an unprecedented global network of strategic bases, covering the high seas.<sup>17</sup>



Besides the Anglosphere, the only two island nations that have the geographical, demographic, and economic conditions to be players on their own as maritime island powers are Indonesia and Japan. There are two factors however why the US is not viewing them as rivals to its maritime power. First, they are very obviously dwarfed by the Anglosphere bloc in terms of population, economy, and natural resources. Second, both

Indonesia and Japan are located close enough to the shores of the Asian continent, to feel threatened by China, and are even engaged in territorial disputes with it in the East China and South China Seas. Thus in the foreseeable future, they will likely put most of their efforts into naval buildup against China.

On the macro level, we can see two trends that appear to point toward the direction of an international order similar to 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, with several continental powers and an island power balancing between them. Thus, if we look at the GDP forecasts by Goldman Sachs published in December 2022, we can see that after the unipolar moment at the turn of the millennium, the global share of GDP not only the US, but that of the entire Anglosphere is significantly decreasing. By mid-century, it is predicted to be about two-thirds of what it was in 2020. This means that the US and its Anglosphere will have to accommodate to this new reality and deal with a world where its position is not as strong as it was at the millennium.



What we can also see, however, is that the days of the explosive growth of the primary continental hegemon aspirant, China already seems to be over as well. While its share of global GDP doubled between 2010 and 2020, it is predicted to be about the same in 2050 as it was in 2020. While on the one hand, this will mean that by mid-century, the economy of the Anglosphere bloc and China will roughly be equal as opposed to 2020 when the UKUSA bloc was one and a half times larger than that of China, it also means that China will actually be further away from continental hegemony in Asia, as other Asian powers, such as India, Indonesia, and Pakistan will be catching up to it. India, by mid-century will be an economy half the size of China or the Anglosphere bloc, and equal to the Euro Area, while the size of the economy of Indonesia will be equal to that of Japan.<sup>18</sup> This means, that instead of being dominated by a hegemon, the Eurasian landmass or the world continent will be characterized by a balanced system of several great and middle powers, providing the opportunity for the US and its broader Anglosphere, to maximize its global

influence by following the same balancing strategy, as the UK did regarding the European continent throughout the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries. <sup>19</sup>

share in global GDP (nominal) <sup>20</sup>	2010	2020	2030	2040	2050
UKUSA bloc	31,61%	32,10%	28,34%	24,13%	21,33%
China	9,32%	17,90%	20,18%	19,87%	18,39%
Euro Area	19,52%	15,59%	13,01%	11,42%	10,05%
India	2,64%	3,23%	5,44%	7,69%	9,74%
Indonesia	0,38%	1,04%	1,81%	2,33%	2,76%
Japan	8,94%	6,00%	3,62%	3,03%	2,63%
Brazil	3,40%	1,73%	1,89%	2,04%	2,15%
Russia	2,52%	1,73%	2,31%	2,16%	1,97%
CEE Region	1,76%	1,73%	1,89%	2,04%	1,93%
Mexico	1,64%	1,27%	1,57%	1,75%	1,84%
Saudi Arabia	0,88%	0,81%	1,24%	1,40%	1,54%
Nigeria	0,63%	0,46%	0,66%	0,93%	1,49%
Pakistan	0,25%	0,35%	0,49%	0,93%	1,45%
Turkey	1,26%	0,92%	1,07%	1,28%	1,36%
Ethiopia	N/A	0,12%	0,25%	0,41%	0,70%
South Africa	0,63%	0,46%	0,41%	0,52%	0,61%

Off-shore balancing as a US grand strategy as the global share of the US economy decreases,<sup>21</sup> will likely be the only option for the US to maximize its global influence. This will inevitably limit the US share in global military spending, the geographical location of the US as technically an island nation means that it can afford to maintain hegemony at the high seas while reducing its ground forces below what the size of its population and economy would suggest, in the same way as Britain did during the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries. There are two main reasons why hegemony on the high seas dictates such a strategy. Firstly, an island nation, as long as it manages to keep hostile powers away from its shores, needs no major land force. Secondly, sustaining hegemony over the high seas means a series of strategic advantages at the global level. It affords power to intervene anywhere on the globe, while having the capability of preventing others from doing so, and in case of conflict, confine them to their geographical region, protecting sea lanes supplying the maritime hegemon and its allies, while cutting sea lanes supplying its adversaries. We can already see a shift in this direction in the US military budget. In 2010, 27,1% of the military budget was allocated to the Department of the Air Force, 29,3% to the Department of the Navy, 26,6% to the Department of the Army. In the proposed military budget for the year 2024, the share of the Department of the Air Force has risen to 30,8%, and that of the Department of the Navy to 30,4%, while the share of the Department of the Army has

dropped to 22%, with the share allocated defense wide was 16,8%.<sup>22</sup> Extrapolating this trend points exactly in the direction of the discussed constellation, where the US maintains its maritime hegemony, at the price of reducing its capabilities in ground warfare (the latter underlined by the enhancement of ground warfare capabilities of emerging continental powers such as China and India, that we can expect to increase in upcoming decades.) The fact that the share of the air force is increasing faster than the share of the navy, does not contradict this fact, as the air force can also be used in sea-based operations: The global network of islands that are overseas dependencies of the five eyes member states discussed above provide a network of strategic bases, from where the air force can operate in the airspace not only above the surrounding seas, but also in the airspace of nearby continents, South Asia being accessible from Diego Garcia, East Asia from Guam, Europe from bases in the UK, and Southeast Asia from bases in Australia. At the same time, as all these air bases are on islands, or on the territory of island nations, their navies can shield them from attacks by enemy ground forces.

A further factor that makes prospects of the Anglosphere as the balancing maritime power different the UK's role in the nineteenth century is its comparative abundance of natural resources. While Britain was relatively poor in natural resources, and eased this weakness by building its colonial empire, the Anglosphere as a whole is one of the richest in natural resources in today's world, as can be seen in the two tables below, showing its share in two key global products, proven crude oil reserves, and wheat exports.

share in proven crude oil reserves <sup>23</sup>	
GCC (including Saudi Arabia)	30,30%
Venezuela	18,20%
UKUSA bloc	12,74%
Iran	9,50%
Iraq	8,70%
Russia	4,80%
Libya	2,90%
Nigeria	2,20%
Kazakhstan	1,80%
China	1,50%
India	0,29%
Euro Area	0,07%

share in global wheat exports in tonnage in 2021 <sup>24</sup>	
UKUSA bloc	36,04%
EU excluding intra trade	14,65%
Russia	13,81%
Ukraine	9,79%
Argentina	4,79%
India	3,07%
China	2,22%
Kazakhstan	1,93%

In US foreign policy, the main trend indicating this direction is what many describe as the isolationism of the Trump and Biden administrations. Calling it outsourcing would probably be more accurate: While the US indeed finished most of its direct interventions in Eurasia, such as in Afghanistan and Iraq, it is actively encouraging and building up its allies, to contain continental powers that they are concerned with, this is a much more active policy than what a truly isolationist power would do. Regarding China, containment seems to be outsourced to India, Japan, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, Regarding Russia, it seems to be outsourced to Europe, (and within that, increasingly to Eastern Europe, particularly Poland). Regarding Iran, to Saudi-Arabia, and regarding North-Korea, to South Korea. On the material level, this trend manifests itself in requiring European NATO member states to increase their military spending to 2% of their GDP, and within Europe increasingly encouraging the CEE region led by Poland to take a more active role.<sup>25</sup> The US has also encouraged Japan's efforts to rearm itself, increase its military spending and become a regional middle power in its own right, as well as giving a green light to India's great power aspirations.<sup>26</sup>

This balancing trend will likely result in a significant decrease in US capabilities in ground warfare, and ground interventions in Eurasia. Yet if it sustains its naval hegemony, that still enables it to intervene in conflicts between its allies and adversaries by providing naval support, air support, keeping sea lanes open while instituting a naval blockade against its adversary, and also sharing intelligence data with its allies. Even such limited intervention can decide wars if the supported party is a significant military power in its own right. So the US will likely sustain the capability to decide conflicts between its Eurasian allies and adversaries by intervening in support of its global network of allies.

## **Why the balancing maritime power is freer to maneuver than the continental powers**

Maritime balancing is a way to maintain an influence on the affairs of Eurasia at a relatively low cost. The price it has to pay for it is to allow its regional allies to form their own poles in this new multipolar structure. As the US will have to outsource more of the containment to its regional allies, this requires the US to allow these regional allies not only to grow in military and economic power but also to pursue their own regional middle power agendas. As the US won't have sufficient resources to sustain containment on its own, it has to outsource. Outsourcing is only effective if the participants are both sufficiently strong as well as willing to do the job, and they will only be willing to do the job if they are more or less allowed to pursue their own agendas, and strong enough to do the job will also mean being strong enough to pursue their own agendas. To put it differently, the US, in weakening in its global influence, will only be able to contain those continental powers, that it wants to contain, if it supports its regional opponents to pursue their own agendas, without telling them what to do. Simply, because the balancing game won't work otherwise. An apparent example of this is India, where the US had to tolerate India's neutrality in relation to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in order to ensure continuing cooperation with India against China, showing the changing dynamics in US-India relations. Thus instead of India being a prospective member of a cold war style US-led alliance system, Indian cooperation against China looks more and more similar to the cooperation between Britain, and one or another eighteenth century continental powers opposed to France.

What enables the US to pursue such a strategy, is the same factor that enabled Britain to do so throughout the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century, namely the geographical necessity described by Spykman in 1938. Continental powers are, and probably will always be more afraid of each-other within each-others direct neighborhoods, than of an offshore island nation.<sup>27</sup> The location of each continental power determines who they view as their main adversary. This may even be a higher priority than who the actual hegemon is. For instance, ever since their first border war in 1962, India views China as a key adversary. It did so not only since 1991, the era when China is the continental hegemon aspirant, but did so even before that when that aspirant was the Soviet Union and not China. But as it was China, and not the Soviet Union, that possessed the capability of an all-out land invasion of India, as China and India were neighbors while India and the Soviet Union were not, it still viewed China as the major threat. What makes Russia a somewhat more flexible player, is that it simultaneously borders the US-led NATO alliance in Europe and China in Asia. This makes it plausible for Russia to move closer to try to play out one of these two against the other if they conflict with each other, as they do now. However the geographical proximity with the resulting territorial disputes and mutual capabilities of all-out land invasions limits the potential for Russia to cooperate with either Europe or China, as we can see in the apparent limits of today's Sino-Russian "friendship without limits": Despite his visit in Moscow, Xi Jinping invited the leaders of the former Soviet republics of Central Asia for a China-Central Asia summit that excludes Russia,<sup>28</sup> and in the autumn of 2022, Xi also

vowed to support Kazakhstan's sovereignty and territorial integrity soon after Kazakh authorities cracked down on pro-Russian separatists.<sup>29</sup> Thus, despite pledging friendship without limits, seeing Russia's dire situation in Ukraine, China pursues a policy in Russia's Central Asian backyard, that is virtually identical to the US policy in Ukraine, that Russia cites as *casus belli* for its invasion of Ukraine. This demonstrates the limits of how limitless a friendship between two neighboring continental powers can actually be. While their location makes the geopolitical outlook of continental powers bounded, it is much more flexible for the island nation that plays the balancing game. As it has no direct land border with any of the continental powers that would pose a mutual immediate threat of all-out land invasions, it can afford to prioritize which continental power aspires to hegemony, instead of who its neighbors are. This makes it in the interest of the island nation, to keep as many options open as possible, as yesterday's foe can become today's friend depending on who the hegemon aspirant actually is.

The Saudi-Iranian agreement under Chinese mediation seems to be a fiasco of this outsourcing strategy of the US in the Middle East. It is also a test of the geostrategic boundedness of continental powers. Saudi and Iranian interests are in conflict in Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. Each of these countries is divided along sectarian lines to a degree close to civil war, and have been theaters of Saudi-Iranian proxy conflict for at least a decade. In each of these countries, Iran supports Shia political forces, while Saudi Arabia supports the Sunnis. The precondition of any meaningful Iranian-Saudi cooperation would be to settle these sectarian conflicts in these countries because as long as they are present, in case of any outburst of any of these conflicts, Iran and Saudi Arabia would face the choice of either again engaging in proxy conflicts with each other or risk an outcome where their own influence in the given country weakens compared to that of the other. Thus in order to settle these conflicts in a way that is acceptable to both Iran and Saudi Arabia, they have to be settled with some kind of power-sharing agreement between the Shia and Sunni political forces of the given country. No stable Iranian-Saudi cooperation is possible without such a settlement. However reaching such a settlement in Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen is an extremely hard task. This example demonstrates, how difficult it is to breach the divide between two continental powers bound by their geopolitical setting.

### **Characteristics of the system**

One more factor that helped the UK to play the balancing game throughout the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century, successfully sustaining the continental power balance in Europe was a simple fact, namely, that in a system, where a continent is shared by several powers, a continental hegemon usually has more continental countries feared by them and thus aligned against them, than ones seeing a perspective in aligning with them. At present, we can see this factor helping the US as well, Not only China's rise created the Quad as a backlash, pushing India and Japan into an alliance with the US against itself, having actually more inhabitants of Asia ending up in US-leaning countries than in China and China leaning countries

combined.<sup>30</sup> Similar trends are also visible on the regional level in Europe, and the Middle East. In Europe, Russia's invasion of Ukraine reinforced the cohesion among European members of NATO, their combined weight surpassing Russia not only in GDP but in population as well, while in the middle east, Iran's expansive ambitions pushed Sunni countries into the anti-Iran camp, with a combined weight exceeding that of Iran. Of course, there are China-leaning countries in Asia, Russia-leaning countries in Europe, and Iran-leaning countries in the Middle East, but they are the minority in all three regions, which appears to confirm the general pattern that countries pursuing regional hegemony tend to scare more actors into coalitions against themselves, than those they can convince to align with them.

The presence of an island power playing the balancing game in the system makes a great deal of difference regarding the independence of small states: It is in the interest of a continental power to sustain the independence of neighboring small states as buffer states only as long as it lacks the capabilities to fully conquer or subjugate them, while its adversary on the other side of the buffer has the capability to invade it. Or even worse, it may also be a rational choice for two continental powers to simply partition the buffer state between them, as Austria, Prussia, and Russia did with Poland in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, or as Austria and the Ottoman Empire *de facto* did with Hungary in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. For the island nation playing the balancing game on the other hand, the setting is different, as today's friend can easily become tomorrow's foe. Thus allowing even a friendly continental power to fully subjugate a small state in its neighborhood, or even part of it with a partition, would strengthen a potential future rival of the balancing island nation, and is therefore against its long-term strategic interests. Thus for the balancing island nation, small states are virtually buffer states simultaneously against all continental powers, worth kept in reserve even against those continental powers, that are at the given moment allied with the island nation, so that they can be mobilized even against that as soon as the wind changes. This way, securing the independence of smaller nations becomes the long-term interest of the balancing island nation. Thus a system with a balancing island nation in the game not only prevents a continental hegemon from rising but also keeps the whole system more fragmented, with lots of small states kept in the game, while a system of continental powers without a balancing island nation encourages continental powers to conquer or partition their smaller neighbors. Therefore, having such a balancing island nation in the game, is in the interest of small states in general, as it helps them sustain their independence. No matter how limited sovereignty is, it is still a better option for them, than a system of continental powers without a balancing island nation in the game, where the annexation and partition of small polities by major continental empires would most likely be the norm. This would be akin to how all states of Eastern Europe were conquered by either Austrian, Ottoman, Prussian or Russian expansionism by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. China and Russia divided Siberia and Central Asia between themselves by the treaties of Nerchinsk in 1689 and Kyakhta in 1727, and Hitler and Stalin partitioned Eastern Europe under the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact in 1939.

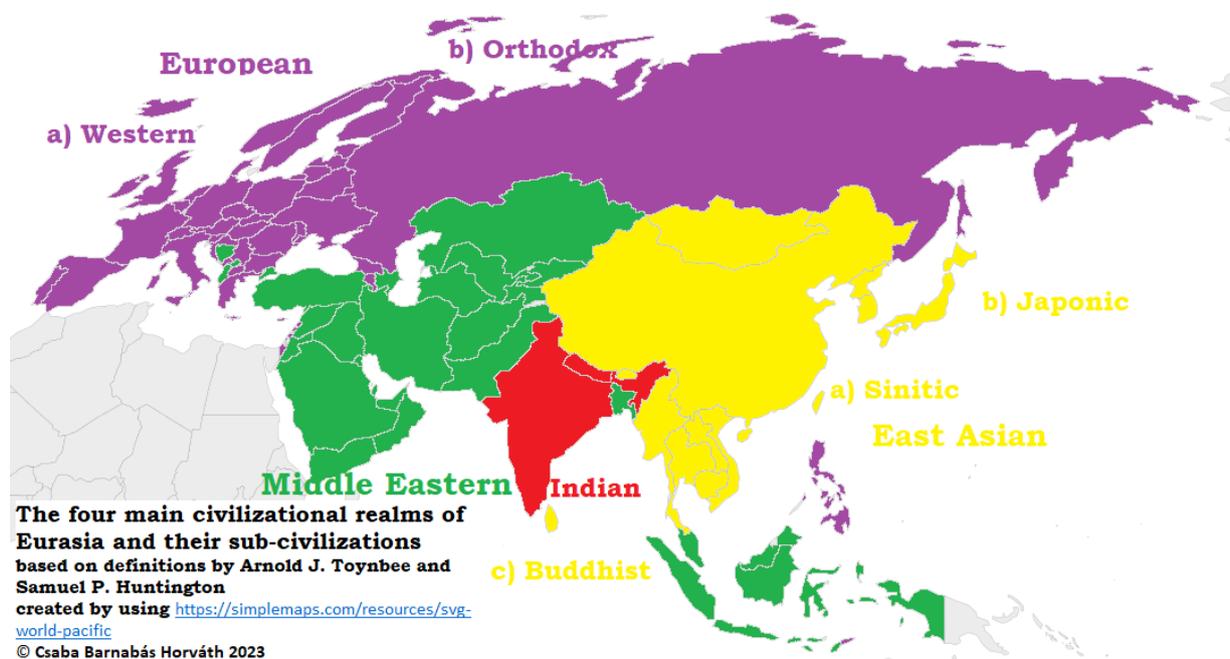
The binding nature of geographical location for continental powers means states that are bound in rivalry with the opponents of the potential continental hegemon, usually means these weaker states make up the natural allies of the hegemon aspirant. These countries, however, usually represent lower-tier states, than the primary continental opponents of the potential hegemon. Asia's pro-China countries are a good example of this: Laos and Cambodia are stuck between Thailand and Vietnam, to some degree Malaysia, which is also stuck between two stronger neighbors, Indonesia and Thailand, Myanmar, the historical arch-rival of Thailand, North Korea facing South Korea, Pakistan of course, facing India, and to some degree Sri Lanka as well. These countries however represent lower tier players than the countries that the US supports: Pakistan and Sri Lanka are weaker than India, Myanmar is weaker than Thailand, Malaysia is weaker than Indonesia, Cambodia and Laos are weaker than Vietnam, and North Korea is weaker than South Korea.

The result of the trend will be a spiral of multipolarization. As neither the US, with its power relative to the rest of the world on the decline, nor China with its relative power already having reached its peak, are strong enough to aspire to global hegemony, what both can only do is to support adversaries of each other and adversaries of their adversaries. This means encouragement for the aspirations of other great and middle powers to pursue their agendas, accelerating the rise of additional poles in the system besides the US and China. While the US encourages India and Japan against China, the Chinese support for the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement and building ties with Brazil can be seen as the other side of the same coin, with China encouraging the aspirations of powers, that it believes can limit US influence. This pattern creates not just one laughing third in the Sino-US rivalry, but a whole bunch of them throughout the world, building their own regional empires, encouraged by either the US or China to counterbalance the influence of the other.

### **The civilizational factor**

The cultural factor and the issue of civilizations are also to be reckoned with. Where it comes into play in the case of this increasingly multipolar system, its logic dictates that Eurasia remains divided, enabling the USA and the Anglosphere to continue to play the balancing game. Arnold Toynbee divides Eurasia into four main civilizational realms, characterized by four subcontinents, and four world religions: Europe – Christianity, the Middle East – Islam, South Asia – Hinduism, and East Asia – Buddhism.<sup>31</sup> Samuel Huntington defines sub-civilizations within these. Within the European realm as defined by Toynbee, besides the dominant Western civilization he distinguished two other sub-civilizations, the Orthodox civilization dominated by Russia, and the Latin-American one, while within the East Asian realm, besides the dominant Sinitic civilization he also identified two smaller sub-civilizations, Japan and the Buddhist proper of Mainland Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, Tibet, and Mongolia.<sup>32</sup> The logic of civilizations suggests that in the cultural sense, there is no such thing as Asia, and what we call Asia, is rather a Eurocentric collective noun for all those parts of the Eurasian continent, that are outside

the European subcontinent. In a civilizational sense, the cultural distance between China and India is no smaller than between any of the two and Europe, or between Europe and the Middle East, and the same is true regarding the cultural distance between the Middle East and China, or the Middle East and India. This means that if the civilizational factor is to have a role, then any kind of cooperation between for instance China and India is even less likely than between the United States and Russia, thus the setting of Eurasia being divided between rival powers is here to stay. (While obviously, the mere technological progress of transport systems, rail lines, highways, and pipelines can increase mutually beneficial trade relations and people-to-people relations between different powers of Eurasia, but more often than not, this on its own seems to be insufficient to ease political rivalry as long as security issues between participants are not settled, as we could recently see in relations between the West and Russia, the West and China, China, and India, or China and Japan, etc.)<sup>33</sup>



### Will such a multipolar balance last?

If we look at the predictions, by mid-century, Eurasia will likely become only more balanced, as China's slowdown is combined with the rise of countries such as India and Indonesia. China's position as the continental hegemon aspirant will likely wane from the 2030s on, and no other continental power seems to be able to take the role of a Eurasian hegemon aspirant. India, although becoming the most populous country in the world, will at best be equal in GDP with China and the US for most of the century, and is also located in a much more disadvantageous geographic position, than China: It lacks the vast buffer regions protecting its demographic core that China has in the form of the belt clockwise consisting of Tibet, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Manchuria. Also, India's northwestern border that it shares with Pakistan is an open plain right next to its demographic core,

making it critically vulnerable, should a Sino-Pakistani alliance masses not only Pakistani but Chinese troops there as well in case of a war. In the east, Bangladesh somewhat blocks India's strategic land access to Southeast Asia. Although Bangladesh and India enjoy good relations, this likely does not reach a degree where Bangladesh would be a partner in any hypothetical Indian aspiration for hegemony over Mainland Southeast Asia, and if India would try to coerce Bangladesh into doing so, it would be in China's best interest to help it out against India. Therefore, this geographically confined position means that even if India's GDP reaches the size of that of China in the second half of the century, it most likely makes it only more capable of standing Chinese pressure, than pursuing a continental hegemony the way China does now, or Russia did. Russia's demographic decline with a population of less than one-tenth of that of China and India, continues to decline, and now that China and India became economic great powers as well, deems Russia to a slow but steady slide rather into a middle power status in the long run, that it could postpone only by a few decades if it wins the ongoing war in Ukraine, but which process can also dramatically accelerate, should Russia face serious internal disturbances if it loses the war. Thus Russia is also unlikely to become a continental hegemon aspirant again, except in the unlikely case of a victory in Ukraine. The European union so far has not managed to create a degree of unity where it could act as an active political actor and seems to have the potential for little more than being a defensive alliance at best. Moreover, as the tables above show its share in global GDP is on the decrease, and so is its share in global population. The growing population of the Islamic World on the other hand could mean a huge potential influence, as the share of Muslims in the global population is predicted to increase to 30% by 2050 as opposed to an estimated 25% in 2020 and 23% in 2010,<sup>34</sup> representing much more dynamic demographics, than that of China or India. The Islamic world, however, is divided among individual Muslim-majority states that on their own only have the resources to become middle powers in this new continental balance, such as Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation shows even less political unity than the European Union, does not have a security structure, and does not pursue collective security,<sup>35</sup> not to mention the aforementioned Sunni-Shia divide, focused at the very geographic heart of the Islamic World. The only political actors that could convert this demographic expansion into a hegemon-aspirant great power are transnational movements in Political Islam, of which the Islamic State represented an extremist form, that indeed tried to establish a transnational empire by taking over in the mid-2010s significant territories of Iraq, Syria, and briefly some smaller areas in other countries as well. However its resurgence as of 2023 seems to unlikely. As the story of the Islamic State in the 2010s shows, transnational Islamist extremist movements that aim to build transnational Islamist polities are only able to raise considerable support in regions already in the depth of severe crises, such as the civil wars in Iraq or Syria. This suggests a paradox that even in cases when they are able to take over actual territory, they are only able to do so in the most unstable, war-torn, and impoverished regions of the Islamic World, which lack resources that would be needed for further expansion, while strong and prosperous Muslim-majority countries are apparently immune to them, and even if they are governed

by Islamist governments, these tend to think within the frames of the nationstate, as in the case of Iran. The most dynamic demographic growth for the rest of the 21st century is predicted to be the African continent. In 1990, Africa represented 12% of the population of the world, which by 2023 became 18%, by 2050 it is predicted to become 26%, and by 2100 38% in case of the medium scenario of the UN, and 30% in case of the low fertility scenario.<sup>36</sup> Such a dramatic demographic expansion would in most cases radically increase the influence of the region. However the politically fragmented state of Africa seems to be a serious obstacle. As of 2023, the African Union shows even less unity than the European Union. Thus for most of the century, a multipolar balance on the Eurasian continent seems to be the most likely scenario, with China and India being the two main powers, alongside a declining Russia and Japan, a declining EU as a defensive alliance, a series of Muslim majority middle powers, and a populous, but still relatively underdeveloped and politically fragmented Africa neighboring it.

### **The stability of a multipolar system – a Concert of Eurasia?**

Discussing the breakdown of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Concert of Europe as the prelude to the First World War, Henry Kissinger describes four conditions for a multipolar system to be stable, and to avoid world wars: first, constantly changing and evolving coalitions; second, each nation should feel free to align with any other nation, both to maintain flexibility in multipolar alignment, avoiding the formation of two antagonistic, rigid blocks; third, a balancing power (in the case of 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century Europe obviously Britain) balancing between adversaries; and fourth, low cohesion within opposing coalitions, so that a conflict between two members of the coalitions did not necessarily result in an all-out conflict between all of the two coalitions. Even if not all, just one or two of these conditions are met, should be sufficient to keep a multipolar system stable.<sup>37</sup> In the evolving new order described above, we can see some of these conditions met: While regarding the Asia-Pacific theater, India, as a member of the Quad, is an ally of the US against China, it is reluctant to give support against Russia, most recently manifested in the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. China appears to be equally reluctant to support Russia against NATO, while the recent comments by Emmanuel Macron suggested that the EU, while closely aligned with the US may also be reluctant to support the US against China. Earlier, Russia appeared to be reluctant to support China against India and even continued to deliver arms to India that it deployed against China. While Pakistan is an ally of China against India, it rather supports US ally Saudi Arabia against Iran in Middle Eastern affairs. This makes India, an ally of the US against China, to build good relations with Iran the archrival of the US in Middle Eastern affairs. While the US understandably views India's reluctance to support it against Russia, and European reluctance to support it against China as annoyances, in fact, they are signs of that very flexibility and low cohesion of coalitions, that Kissinger cites as conditions, for multipolar systems to be stable, and able to avoid system-wide conflicts, which in our case would mean world war. In the particular case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, ongoing as of May 2023, this characteristic of the present international order can even be viewed as beneficial for the US. India's reluctance to support the US against Russia, and the EU's reluctance to support

it against China, comes in a package with China's reluctance to support Russia. And if the war in Ukraine remains a proxy war of attrition merely between NATO and Russia, with both China and India remaining neutral, the chances of NATO victory may very well be higher, than in case if it was an all-out NATO-Quad vs. Russia-China proxy war. In a similar manner, if the EU remains neutral in a China-Quad proxy conflict of a similar kind in the Indo-Pacific, that will most likely mean Russia staying neutral as well, and not helping China. If India gave its full support to the US in the war in Ukraine, it would have most likely dragged in China as well, giving its full support for Russia the same way, while if the EU gives its full support for the Quad in case of a proxy conflict with China, that would most likely drag Russia into giving its full support to China. In a way, India's neutrality in the war in Ukraine is an unfired gun pointed at China, sending the message that if China gets involved, then India may get involved as well, thus potentially withholding China from getting engaged. And in a similar way, in the case of a Quad-NATO conflict, the EU's potential neutrality could be a way to keep Russia neutral, making clear that if Russia gets involved, then the EU will do so as well.

## **Conclusion**

To summarize, we can see an increasing trend pointing towards a similar international order, as prevailed in 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, with a continent characterized by the multipolar balance of continental powers, and a maritime power island nation besides the continent, following a balancing strategy regarding major continental powers, so that none of them can achieve hegemony over the continent. While in the nineteenth century, Europe was the continent, and Britain the maritime power island nation, currently, this pattern seems to repeat itself on a much larger scale, with Eurasia being the continent, and the United States being the island nation maritime power playing the balancing game. While the power of the US relative to the world is on the decline, it still seems to be sufficient to remain *primus inter pares*.

In this game, the inner core of the US alliance system that it will most likely keep tight-knit and centralized even if its links to the rest of its alliance system loosens is the five members of the Anglosphere, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States itself. Why this bloc is likely to remain close-knit, is not only that it already was the innermost circle of the US alliance system since the end of the Second World War, but not just the cultural kinship of these five countries, but also that with Australia, technically an island nation at the doorstep of Southeast Asia, and the UK, an island nation at the doorstep of Europe, providing not only on the doorstep of these two continents but also its control of both sides of the Atlantic and the Pacific makes the bloc a perfect constellation to sustain the hegemony of the high seas without having to get directly engaged in continental affairs.

In an ideal scenario, this trend could result in the long run in an international system similar to the "Concert of Europe" of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in which the multipolar balance of

great powers of the continent reached a relatively stable status quo, successfully avoiding a continent-wide war for decades. As we can see the system seems to fit some of the criteria set by Henry Kissinger for multipolar systems to be stable. The way multipolar systems can keep themselves in balance is that as alliance systems in them are flexible, there is an incentive not to destroy each other, as the foe today can be a friend tomorrow, or already is a counterbalance to another potential rival. This logic is visible in the much discussed, alleged fear of the US from a possible collapse of Russia, as Russia, even though an adversary of the US itself, is with its mere presence, a counterbalance to China, and its collapse would boost China's power, especially if China somehow manages to take over large parts of Siberia. If such a logic withholds major powers of the multipolar system from pursuing the elimination of each other, that already is a stabilizing factor.

This trend is based on the permanently given factors of geography, which makes such trends in the long run predictable. If it was Alexis de Tocqueville, who in 1835, predicted the advent of an era dominated by rivalry between a democratic United States, and a despotic Russia with Europe's powers being dwarfed by this two,<sup>38</sup> then it was Nicholas J. Spykman who by 1942 predicted another era marked by the dominance of China, India, Russia, and the United States, with the latter as a maritime power island nation playing the same balancing game when dealing with the powers of the Eurasian continent, as Britain did in 18<sup>th</sup>- 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe.<sup>3940</sup> We seem to be at the beginning of an era when Spykman's prophecy seem to be coming to fruition.

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