

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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Reveal About the Global Order

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Today's great powers—China, Europe, Russia, and the United States—will undoubtedly have a role to play in the conflict between Israel and Hamas. Whether any of these powers will be able to resolve or contain that conflict is far less certain. The notion that great-power competition defines geopolitics has come back into vogue after it fell into obscurity at the close of the Cold War. Unspoken Cold-War-era assumptions, however, still shadow many contemporary claims about the nature of this competition. Great powers, analysts assume, will marshal immense resources to shape the international order. What they do will shape global affairs. Using their financial and military might for proxy wars, they will remain intensely focused on each other. Wherever one acts, the others will respond in kind.

For all four current great powers, the sense that this competition orients them has become foundational, integrating lines of military, economic, technological, and diplomatic effort. Russia's war against Ukraine, for instance, can easily be interpreted as a traditional example of great-power

competition. In Putin's telling, his invasion was an act of resistance to American primacy in Europe. Both Russia and Western states are drumming up global support for what they regard as an existential struggle between values and regime type. The Ukraine war has, indeed, deepened tensions between Russia, the United States, and Europe. And as with the Berlin crises in the early years of the Cold War, the war in Ukraine has radiated outward, generating waves of new migrants and sparking inflation.

But silhouetted behind the framework of great-power competition are subtler new developments. The great powers are no longer a binary. The United States and Europe are tied by formal alliances, whereas China and Russia have a loose partnership; mostly, they do what they can not to get in each other's way. New forms of military, economic, and technological competition, such as U.S. subsidies for green technology, pit Europe and the United States against each other, and the United States' and China's profound economic interdependence make them irresolute adversaries. Toxic domestic politics gets in the way of the great powers' international ambitions.

Distraction on the part of great powers might seem a blessing. The sprawling competition between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War generated serial proxy wars, each one devastating in its own way. But great-power distraction is starting to look more like a collective curse. Vacuums of power are proliferating. In Africa, the Balkans, the Middle East, and the South Caucasus, old conflicts, some of which had been dormant, are rekindling into new crises. Middle powers and local actors are exerting themselves more and more boldly. Very often, the great powers end up looking on helplessly.

In the coming months, the many parties affected by the Israel-Hamas war will look to the great powers for leadership. But they are likely to find these four great powers inadequate to the crisis. Russia depends on Iran for military aid. The United States will likely lend significant support to Israel but will have a hard time bringing the Palestinians to the table. China may generously offer platitudes about peace but will try to avoid any kind of direct involvement, and Europe will find itself largely without

leverage. If this ambivalent scenario unfolds, it will be a microcosm of the twenty-first-century international order.

TIED IN KNOTS

Each of the current great powers competes for different geopolitical prizes. Looked at side by side, their struggles to act effectively make them strangely similar. Take Russia: in September, Azerbaijan launched a military offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh, the disputed 1,700-square-mile enclave long populated mainly by Armenians. Russia had been the major outside diplomatic and military broker in the area. Moscow heavily influenced the outcome of both post-Soviet wars over the region, brokering cease-fires between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1994 and 2020. After 2020, Russia sent some 2,000 peacekeeping troops to Nagorno-Karabakh.

Had Russia not invaded Ukraine in February 2022, it might have been better able to back its ally, Armenia, in this festering conflict. But in Ukraine, Russia has burdened itself with an unwinnable war. Since the spring of 2022, Moscow has not seized a meaningful amount of Ukrainian territory; that fall, Russia was pushed out of the Kharkiv region and out of the city of Kherson. The war has consumed so much Russian manpower and materiel that Moscow will need years to rebuild its military. Its misadventure has pulled back the curtain on a once formidable military reputation, revealing the Russian military to be strategically and tactically mediocre. Going forward, Russia's security apparatus has a near impossible job on its hands. The means and the budget Moscow has allotted for its dark ambitions in Ukraine are stretched thin.

As a result of its frustrations in Ukraine, Russia's modus operandi in Nagorno-Karabakh became increasingly passive in the past year. In December 2022, banking on Russia's fragility, Azerbaijan tested long-standing Armenian redlines by blockading the Lachin corridor, the sole road connecting Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh. After the Russian peacekeepers failed to unblock it, Azerbaijan and its main ally, Turkey, rightly judged Russia to be an emperor with no clothes. The September offensive led to a mass exodus of Armenians from the enclave. From a

distance, Russia cruelly suggested that Armenia's woes were self-inflicted—the price it had to pay for its westward drift.

SOFT POWER, SOFT POTENTIAL

Europe has long sought to use its substantial soft power to bring its values—the rule of law and careful deliberation—to bear on world crises. Since the Arab Spring and Syria's descent into catastrophe, however, Europe has been struggling to act on its vision. It is an asymmetrical great power: Europe's military might does not match its economic might. Because its armed forces are dispersed across a handful of different entities—sovereign states and NATO—Europe cannot project military power nearly as quickly as Russia or the United States.

In the aggregate, the European Union and the United Kingdom command vast economic and military resources. Europeans, who had enjoyed decades of stability and expected peace on the continent to last forever, were shocked by Russia's aggression against Ukraine. War had returned to the continent, and Europe needed to safeguard itself militarily. Eager to end Russia's war on European terms, Europe has helped to keep Ukraine's war effort afloat but also mired it in uncertainty. Europe has often lagged behind the United States in bolstering Ukraine's defenses, and the war has illuminated its weaknesses as a force on the international stage. Many of the nation-states in the EU are not aligned in their interests and their strategic priorities. They do not brood over the same nightmares: Italy worries about migration, for instance, while Poland worries about Russian aggression and Portugal worries about its economy. Europe's political setup militates against a proactive foreign policy.

In the face of Azerbaijan's offensive and the mass flight of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh, renewed tensions between Kosovo and Serbia, and a civil war in Sudan, Europe has been more a bystander than an effective broker. In Africa, postcolonial nations have not forgotten the depredations of Europe's colonial past, and in a succession of coups in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and the Sahel expelled European military forces and even some European ambassadors. The EU has mounted no real response.

HOME FIRES

The United States is capable of being a more decisive actor. For four years, President Donald Trump tied U.S. foreign policy in knots, but the United States remains the world's preeminent great power. Its combined strategic assets, from its economy to its intelligence institutions to its military, are unparalleled. It is hardly a diplomatic absence in Europe or in the Middle East, and Israel's war with Hamas will likely draw the United States back into the troubled region.

President Joe Biden's administration has restored focus to the United States' international role, and not just in Europe. To compete with China's Belt and Road Initiative, the United States unveiled a plan at the recent G-20 summit in New Delhi to invest in a new economic corridor that will bolster transportation and trade links between the European Union, India, and the Middle East. Washington has also recently strengthened its partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, and Biden's team has put considerable effort behind Israel's new efforts to normalize relations with neighboring Arab states, chiefly Saudi Arabia. With Washington's help, progress is being made on climate change.

But U.S. foreign policy also suffers from a disparity between intent and capability. The war in Ukraine has consumed a great deal of the Biden administration's attention, imposing resource constraints on the provision of arms and ammunition that may now affect Israel or, in the future, Taiwan. Washington drew no credible redlines for Baku in Nagorno-Karabakh, and its attention to the wars and crises unfolding in west Africa has been episodic at best. Like Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Biden was caught completely off guard by Hamas's recent attack.

If the United States is wavering as a great power, it is not because of the war in Ukraine, as some of the more demagogic voices in the U.S. Congress claim. It is because of domestic U.S. politics. Political polarization and an increasing alienation between the U.S. government's executive and legislative branches have made the foreign-policy transitions between presidential administrations abrupt and discordant. Thanks to congressional resistance, many of the United States' top diplomatic

positions are currently unfilled. Distracted by disunity, the United States leaves other countries with an impression of fickleness, which impedes it from acting resolutely.

A FLIGHTY FORCE

China is the most perplexing of the contemporary great powers. In the past half century, China has steered clear of costly wars, exercising a caution that Beijing considers a hallmark of its national identity. This avoidance of war has increased China's prestige in the global South and reinforced its reputation as an economic powerhouse—a superpower of trade and commerce rather than a geopolitical provocateur. Chinese President Xi Jinping has not yet invaded Taiwan, and he may never do so. China has more concentrated military power at its disposal than Europe does, and by using it infrequently, is less overextended than Russia and the United States.

Yet China has not translated its economic clout and reputation for nonaggression into successful management of global problems. In February, for example, China proposed a peace plan for Ukraine, but the plan is unserious: Beijing cultivates the appearance of being a mediator while doing nothing concrete to end the war. In fact, China has helped to prolong it. Shortly before Russia's invasion, China promised a “no limits” partnership with Russia. Beijing maintains an important defense-industrial relationship with Moscow, and in international forums, it shields Russia from criticism. China's muddled position on the war has only underscored its diplomatic absence from Europe.

Focused on economic gain and weighed down by domestic economic travails, China has become one of the world's most eager but least able mediators. It has made diplomatic forays into the Middle East, promising that it will be a neutral broker able to do business with everyone. In March, to considerable fanfare, Beijing announced a peace deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran and proclaimed its desire to fashion a similar agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. To date, however, China's efforts have done nothing to contribute to lasting peace and stability in the region.

THE DARK SIDE OF DISTRACTION

Long a central arena for great-power competition, the Middle East may represent something new. The civil war in Syria, which began in 2011, was a harbinger. A single country became the site of multiple battlefields contested by myriad adversaries: Islamic State (ISIS) terrorists; Turkey and the Kurds; Israel and Iran; an autocrat—Bashir al-Assad—and his democratic antagonists; and Russia and the United States, whose militaries curiously cohabited the region, neither aligned nor at loggerheads. There is a risk that Israel's new war with Hamas could expand into a similarly unwieldy conflagration, engulfing neighbors such as Lebanon and Syria.

There should be no nostalgia for past ages of great-power competition. They have never been orderly: great-power competition pushed Europe into the excesses of nineteenth-century imperialism and lured it into World War I, when a local disturbance triggered great-power competition. Adolf Hitler's lust to see Germany as a great power led directly to World War II. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the United States competed so ferociously that they came to the brink of nuclear war.

But the current cocktail of competition and distraction poses a different problem, one the world is ill prepared to tackle. Tension now emanates from two separate and often overlapping sources: the collision of great powers' ambitions in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia as well as the great powers' paralysis and passivity outside of a few hot spots. And so a profusion of crises is emerging in which midsize powers, small powers, and even nonstate actors collide, and the great powers can neither deter nor contain them.

Great-power distraction invites considerable long-term risk. It invites revisionism and aggressive risk-taking by other actors. Azerbaijan is anything but a superpower: its population is some ten million people. And yet it has been able to act with impunity in Nagorno-Karabakh. Hamas is not a state at all, but it was emboldened to attack a country with world-class military and international partners, the United States among them.

As tensions in the Middle East boil over, great-power competition—classically understood—cannot be the world's sole focal point and means

of analysis. This is not an era of strengthening international order. It is not merely another era of great-power competition. It is a moment of anarchically fragmenting power, an age of great-power distraction.