

Bloc  
diplomacy  
trilogy

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## Strategic Clarity Carries a Mixed Bag

Reflecting on the period just after the North Atlantic Treaty was signed in 1949, the US Secretary of State, Dean Acheson said that the language of Cold War policy-making had to be “clearer than truth” if the American people were going to support it.

As treaties go, that one is both clear and flexible. The Article V guarantee of one for all and all for one is about as clear as can be. But it does not say precisely how each member of NATO may choose to defend the others. That is left up to each member state to decide.

The same goes for the “O” in NATO. The Treaty does not include definite plans for an organization; but neither does it proscribe one.

Today, with President Joe Biden pledging that the United States will defend Taiwan, and with some of the last remaining European neutral powers in Europe – Finland and Sweden – announcing their wish to join NATO, it is easy to believe that strategic clarity has reached an apex. Or at least it is doing so in the way that former President George W. Bush made infamous: you’re either with us or against us.

In fact, the strategic picture following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is much murkier.

Even though there may be fewer neutrals in Europe, much of the world – including some large countries such as Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia – have not taken a clear stand for or against the morality of Russian aggression. Their willingness to support sanctions against Russia, or to overtly help Russia skirt the sanctions in order to oppose the United States and its allies, is for the moment very uncertain. Even fewer would be likely to take a stand against China in the event of Chinese aggression against Taiwan.

Within Europe, there are varying positions on how tough sanctions should be and for how long. And even among those countries actively assisting Ukraine, there are a number of views over the basic aims of that assistance, which range from helping Ukraine defend its territory to using the Ukraine crisis to keep Russian power weak in perpetuity. Some commentators have speculated that the war in Ukraine may lead to the fall of the Russian government and even to the breakup of the Russian Federation. Similar wishful thinking has been applied to China and would no doubt become louder during a Taiwan crisis.

Of course, it is possible to entertain notions of clarity and uncertainty at the same time. During most of the Cold War, its outcome, and the survival of much of the planet, was uncertain. Today, however, strategic clarity raises a number of critical questions:

Will the admission of former neutrals to NATO harden or attenuate NATO's confrontational stance toward Russia over the longer term?

Will the more confrontational stance by the United States, and to some extent, Japan, toward China muddle or clarify their relations with other Asian powers?

How will those stances affect arms control, both nuclear and, someday, conventional, in Europe? In Asia?

Because more members almost always complicate relationships within an organization, how serious will intra-bloc divisions and tensions in NATO become? Will the same take place to a greater or lesser degree among US "allies and partners" in Asia?

What about overlapping institutional relationships? For example, will a bigger, stronger NATO come to dominate the EU? Or vice versa?

Finally, what about the ideology of "Eurasianism"? Will it survive Putin? Or will China, by its likely dominance of Russia, become a de facto European power in ways that few people until recently ever imagined?

These are just some of the questions that leaders and governments should be asking themselves and, one hopes, coming up with a few clear answers.

We don't have them, otherwise we wouldn't be posing the questions. We only suggest that the answers give priority to functional relationships, starting with the nuclear balance, rather than to geopolitical certainties.

The "clarity" that emerges in the West is probably going to be more a function of how China, Russia, and the United States behave in the next few years than of the vision held by any of the other powers. Ultimately, if a new Western bloc does emerge, it must as a matter of first priority obtain an active and positive understanding with competing blocs, starting with whatever also emerges between Russia and China.

The trickiest part is whether to think of blocs and the nations aligned with them as potential recruits for one very large security community, or to treat them as permanent rivals. Our preference would be to plan actively for the latter while hoping and working for the former, difficult though that may be.

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## Diplomacy for a World of Blocs

The calamity in Ukraine has thrown into sharp relief a trend that has been taking shape for some time: the division of the world into rival blocs. Clashes – of political and economic interests, and of cultural values – have for the most part taken place within societies and nations. But those clashes have brought about harder alignments between and among states. What were once called the “forces of movement” and the “forces of order” are at loggerheads in nearly every major country. Liberalism and anti-liberalism may continue to be used to justify these divisions, but they are not – nor probably will be – the main causes of them. The source has more to do with tribal and other types of identity, which under strain blur easily with geopolitical chauvinism.

### I.

During the Cold War, the bloc was strategically straightforward, if oftentimes operationally and tactically vague. It was a collective unit devoted to a clear purpose: survival. Today, that combination is reversed. States are furthering or attempting to break alignments in the most basic – even crudest – ways. But their rationale, and their overall strategic aims, are unclear. That is because the concept of the bloc is not well understood. It means something other than an alliance or quasi-imperial unit. It is no longer simply ideological, territorial and fixed so much as it is transactional, extraterritorial and variable. Countries such as India and Israel, for example, which may be strongly aligned with the West in some circumstances, are less so in others, such as today over Ukraine.

The concept is also regionally less grounded than it was in the past: today’s blocs, starting with the West, are both intra- and inter-regional – which is to say, they are instrumental rather than essential as to geography. They define themselves territorially but they are also virtual, and many of them intersect. There are blocs pertaining to currencies, languages, legal systems, and even cuisines.

Describing this environment as a clash or competition of discrete geopolitical entities and ideologies may not be the most useful way to deal with the problems and challenges the world now has. Nor is it possible to say if and for how long this condition will last. Thus, it is important to understand on a temporary basis that the major powers of the world – the G7 and the BRICS – are settling not into a direct clash, but instead something like an indirect rivalry of invented associations. The significance of these associations is to date not easy to pin down: they resemble early modern European leagues in that they are not quite alliances, but they are something more than informal alignments because they are at once exclusive, fluctuating, and competitive. They are, therefore, very unstable.

### II.

In response to strategic uncertainty has come a predictable call for geopolitical concepts that are easily grasped and therefore easily sold. For

example, Eurasianism is said to be an ideology that motivates Vladimir Putin. In effect, this ideology means that Russia aims to create a bloc comprising all the states in the continent of Asia that were once part of the Russian Empire or of the Soviet Union, and possibly others nearby. Moscow, of course, would dominate this bloc and so revive its natural role of presiding over an empire based on the value system that guides authoritarian governments and is thought to be the norm in Central Asia. If there is to be certainty about anything, it is that the goal of the US and other Western powers should be a Europe to which a democratic Russia can belong, and that it should be whole, free and at peace. Thus, Atlanticism and Eurasianism are mutually exclusive ideologies.

Regarding Europe itself, “strategic clarity” is the ironical term that some observers have applied to the effect that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has had on the thinking of other governments, especially Russia’s European neighbors. Its use in this context is appropriate, but subsequent discussions of the term have stretched its meaning beyond what it can bear. There is no doubt that Putin’s decision sent a message to every government around the world. The message was that Russia is prepared to use force majeure in the here and now to achieve its goals, and that those goals include putting an end to the national sovereignty of its neighbors and erasing internationally recognized boundaries.

To Russia’s European neighbors this was a shocking revelation and an unexpected one. Most of the nations that had experienced the horrors of World War II had come to believe that such a war would never again devastate Europe’s lands. To a large extent, this mindset was a tribute to NATO’s success in providing reassurance to the allied nations. To many, this conclusion derived from their belief that the advent of nuclear weapons had made war in Europe a self-defeating enterprise, one that no rational leader would risk. It was a shock to the people of Europe to find that living among them was a leader they had credited with cool, calculating rationality who had massed troops on the border of a neighboring independent state while denying that Russia had any intention to invade Ukraine, only to launch a major invasion aimed at seizing territory and ending the independence of Ukraine. No matter what else NATO has succeeded in doing, that action represents a major failure of Western diplomacy.

Adding to the shock of such an act was Putin’s warning that he would use nuclear weapons against any country that tried to thwart his ambitions. This message induced strategic clarity for European states that had been cooperating with NATO but had reasons of geography and history for hesitating to join.

For Finland, which had fought two wars to prevent Russia from reincorporating all or part of its lands into the Russian state, and which had exercised masterful diplomacy to escape becoming a satellite of Moscow during the Cold War, the message was clear. The time had come to decisively cast its lot with the US and Western Europe.

For Sweden, which had once been a great European power but had lost that status in the Great Northern War, 1700–21, after military defeats at the hands of Russia's Peter the Great, the message also was clear. Sweden had been able to sustain its neutrality for two hundred years and had exercised sovereignty over Finnish lands for 700 years.

The two nations were linked historically and geographically so that what affected Finland's security affected Sweden's. Finnish governments had long since concluded that Finland should consider membership in NATO but only in lockstep with Sweden. Opposition to Sweden's applying for membership in NATO was strong on the left wing of the political spectrum, but after Finland made it clear that its version of strategic clarity in 2022 called for membership in NATO, the Swedish government joined forces with Finland and also decided to apply for membership.

The Nordic Bloc, as the Danes have already called the five Nordic countries that will be members of NATO once Finland and Sweden accede, will exercise influence over NATO decision-making, acting as a bloc when they see it as desirable, but more often as geographically disparate states with their own sets of interests. Norway already has a status that precludes stationing nuclear weapons and accepting foreign bases on its territory in peacetime. Each of the Nordic states can be expected to favor arms control negotiations with Russia whenever that becomes a practical question, but NATO commitments do not require the three nuclear-armed members – the US, the UK and France – to follow the wishes of other members in such matters.

Likewise, NATO consultations on when and how to resume normal relations with Moscow will find some members supporting earlier moves in that direction than others. One issue that will probably continue to be controversial – but not because of the addition of new Nordic members to the Alliance – is that of sanctions. Economic pressures are already becoming visible because of the effects of sanctions on energy supplies. Another set of issues that have not had the same intensity as others are those involving the Arctic. That region has been growing in importance in recent years and it involves Russia as a security matter so it should be a net plus if the new Nordic members bring Arctic questions and Arctic cooperation into the consultations in NATO, which would have the added advantage of creating another bond between NATO and the EU.

So far, the two major institutions for integrating European and Euro-Atlantic interests such that the constituent states can act in solidarity with one another have succeeded in working together quite effectively, particularly during the crises engendered by Putin's war in Ukraine. This situation may not last. Multilateral organizations typically generate their own internal blocs so that these blocs become negotiating devices, usually a helpful tool in expediting policy-making. But if watering down positions becomes a way of reaching agreements, this could destroy the utility of the process. The overlapping membership of NATO and the EU will help to prevent differences from escalating out of control, but any friction between these two key organizations will also have a negative effect on public and parliamentary support for them. Thus, to the extent that "strategic clarity" divides the two

organizations with their different missions, it will have a damaging impact, starting with public opinion.

### III.

“Strategic clarity” in the sense of a reaction to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine that stimulates political, economic or military actions designed to resist it or similar violations of well-established norms is practically non-existent in Asia. And until only recently, its absence has had little effect on transatlantic relations. The leaders of China and Russia signed a joint statement on 4 February that committed to cooperation “without limits.” China has essentially followed the Moscow line by blaming the US for the war through its expansion of NATO. Beijing has avoided strategic clarity by otherwise remaining generally compliant with sanctions. Other Asian and Middle Eastern countries like India and Saudi Arabia have pursued ambiguous policies, eschewing strategic clarity.

Independently of the Ukraine war, is “strategic clarity” useful in describing the reaction of Asian countries to US and European calls for its friends to accept that we are all in a zero-sum competition with China? Only Japan has responded in a way that suggests strategic clarity has made an appearance. To other countries, strategic ambiguity, especially about Taiwan, still appeals. Although Joe Biden has declared that the US will come to the defense of Taiwan if it is attacked, the White House has made it clear that strategic ambiguity still has its uses in Asia, even as it continues to wither in Europe.

Instead, the Biden administration shares with its predecessor a predilection not for strategic, but for tactical, clarity. Unlike its predecessor, it makes use of the positive rhetoric of “regional integration,” but its definition of such integration in practice resembles less the idea of the regional security community that was developed in the Western Hemisphere and in Western Europe during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and more an older, and again, cruder, form of power politics. Members of the administration have recycled language from the Cold War – “situations of strength” – to describe what such regional integration amounts to. That is, it is nothing more than a temporary agglomeration of power against a presumed regional hegemon, be it China, Russia, or Iran. The aim of diplomacy in this respect is to strengthen the “tire” around such hegemons; in other words, to contain the exercise of their power, regionally as well as globally.

### IV.

The regional “tire” strategy, for lack of a better term, is as unlikely to succeed as externally-driven “tilting” strategies have done in the past, mainly because they aren’t really strategies but are instead simplistic means toward an unclear end. The hegemons against whom they are directed are also unlikely to behave in the ways that outsiders expect or demand. Meanwhile, the world has heard Putin’s threats to use nuclear weapons if Russia’s war in Ukraine leads to excessive intervention by countries determined to prevent him from achieving his goals. The impact of those threats has brought visions of nuclear Armageddon back into the minds of the public.

This fear should impart fresh energy to non-proliferation efforts and to the resumption of US-Russian nuclear reduction negotiations. There are only a few years left to negotiate a treaty to replace New START. Negotiations with China about nuclear and conventional arms control have become urgent, as China has embarked on a build-up of its nuclear forces, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Bilateral talks with China should not be impeded by the Russia–China understandings of 4 February, or by China’s subsequent silence about the Kremlin’s blatant violations of universal norms of behavior among states. “Strategic clarity” must not have the effect of driving Russia and China even more tightly together in opposition to the US and its allies.

Bilateral negotiations between Moscow and Washington, as well as China, will be almost impossible while strategic clarity about the Kremlin’s intentions is dictating confrontational policies. The situation is made more intractable by the extent to which the confrontation has become personalized, much as blocs have tended to be treated as ends in themselves. Technical-level conversations may be possible, and multilateral forums like the UN and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe could provide a means for negotiations to occur. If this encourages some bending of the rules of strategic clarity, it would be a small price to pay to avoid a nuclear holocaust.

A world of blocs need not be unpeaceful. Diplomats must adapt to it by using blocs’ inherent lack of clarity to their advantage: probing limits, restraining the use of geopolitical rhetoric, and enhancing transactional flexibility in a manner that brings the blocs together by aligning their operational and then their strategic best interests.

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## Bloc Diplomacy Can Usher in a More Stable World Order

It is frequently pointed out today that nations are dividing into competitive geopolitical blocs. However, this observation requires some clarification. It is not enough to say that this is taking place or even that the blocs – which are identifiable by geography, function, or a combination of both – intersect rather than strictly oppose other blocs. It must be understood *how* and therefore *why* they do those things.

There is another concept that may help further this understanding: regime. The French term refers not only to the structure and exercise of power – as in the *ancien régime* – but also, as it is more commonly understood today, to a system of norms, influences, obligations, and expectations. Nuclear nonproliferation, trade and investment, migration, and maritime affairs regimes were an important component of the international order during the last century when empires gave way to nations and, by the second half of the twentieth century, became the most important component of peaceful relations.

Regimes determine the behavior of governments toward one another and toward their own people. Regimes favor cooperation over competition and, ultimately, regimes transform geopolitical boundaries into peaceful economic and political borderlands designed to enhance mutual prosperity. This happens because consultations between governments create norms and expectations that act as a set of rules about how states within a system are expected to behave. A minimal level of institution-building can achieve this if consistency is attained by the governments of major powers and only if enlarging the scope of mutual interests beyond opposition to a common enemy takes place.

It is easy to conclude that, for the most part, this is not happening today. Boundaries, including physical walls, are emerging along many borders. Some of the most basic positive norms of international comity – bank reciprocity, for example, which was widespread even before the twentieth century – are breaking down or being replaced by negative ones. The blocs that are emerging from this state of disorder assert themselves as exclusive, closed, and possibly autarkic. They are the antithesis of a regime.

There have been similar devolutions in the past: Greece in the fifth century BC, Europe in the 1930s and again in the 1950s, and the Third World from the 1960s to the 1980s. But aside from war, either hot or cold, what options are available to nations or blocs where deep mutual hostility has become the norm? Surprisingly few, it seems.

Keeping blocs together and retaining the necessary degree of public support within democratic nations requires clear arguments. Embarking on negotiations to extricate blocs or nations from a war or crisis inevitably involves appeals to common unity, especially among democratic nations. For this reason, President Franklin D. Roosevelt insisted on unconditional

surrender as the only basis for ending World War II. The same problem has appeared recently in the Russo-Ukrainian War. Maintaining the prestige of the bloc rapidly becomes an end in itself.

In an era when multiple nations possess nuclear weapons, including four that are now involved in the war in Ukraine, it would be wise to give serious thought to war aims and how democratic blocs go about ending wars. A study of how to limit and end wars in the nuclear era was not undertaken by the United States government until 1963, eighteen years after nuclear weapons were first used by the United States. With nine nations now in possession of nuclear weapons stockpiles, perhaps it is time for another review.

It is certainly worthwhile to carefully examine the channels that are open to blocs like NATO and the European Union (EU) and the conditions under which those channels should be exercised. Channels that have been used so far in Ukraine include the United Nations secretary-general and the leaders of several European nations. Leaders of the European Union's international secretariat have been involved from time to time. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has offered diplomatic assistance to Ukraine, a member state, and had based a long-term mission in Ukraine before the war. Direct negotiations between Russia and Ukraine were conducted early in the war but discontinued. Negotiations to permit the resumption of grain shipments through the Black Sea were brokered with Russia and Ukraine by the United Nations (UN) secretary-general and Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan. To date, these talks have been the most productive.

Is this failure by the parties to communicate effectively an inherent problem for multilateral organizations and their efforts to supersede blocs? Probably not, although clearly during the wars in which the United States was the leading actor – Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, Iraq, and Afghanistan – managing talks between the opposing sides were not as difficult as they appear to be in the Russo-Ukrainian War. It is very likely that councils of war exist at some high level in NATO and the EU that are kept secret from the public. If not, there should be because the need for a more coherent approach to war management and termination is evident at this stage of the conflict. The Western bloc is not useful if it does not look after the interests of all of its members.

Nonetheless, intra and inter-bloc diplomacy, to the extent it now exists at all, would appear to offer little hope. But it helps to remember that blocs are dynamic organic bodies that continue to evolve and might take on the traits of a regime. Here are four propositions relating to how and why that may happen.

1. Today there appear to be two mega blocs led by the United States and China, as well as several mini-blocs, but the reality is more complicated. The China-Russia bloc has shown dynamism thanks to China but both systems are brittle. Neither major bloc has institutionalized its competition with the other, leaving the process in the hands of personalities, particularly heads of

state as well as policy entrepreneurs within and sometimes outside of state bureaucracies.

2. Blocs, even small blocs, tend to suffer from internal divisions. The challenge for members of the bloc and for non-members seeking entry is to resist the attempts of other non-members to take advantage of those divisions.

3. Blocs compete externally but they also engage in their own related but separate competition. A regime may emerge from a bloc; a bloc comes about in the absence or decline of a regime.

4. A regime emerges from a bloc mainly from a bloc's expansion and institutionalization. Without the latter, the bloc becomes a reactionary and, ultimately, hostile actor.

These four propositions have the following implication for foreign policy: So long as they are not openly hostile, the development of blocs should be encouraged by major powers so that the blocs develop to resemble regimes. Regimes, in turn, favor the harmony and prosperity of their members and peace with outsiders. A model of this development is the European Union. Already blocs like the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) have started to become more institutionalized and, at the same time, declaring themselves open to as many as a half-dozen new members, mostly middle-income nations that are already part of several other groupings. Should that continue to happen, a functional harmonization of standards and practices will almost certainly need to take place among blocs.

The process of transitioning from a bloc to a regime is too self-conscious to be called natural but it is occurring nonetheless. For example, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which was established for Central Asian countries in part to draw a distinction with non-Eurasian powers, has already entered into discussions about becoming a more general economic unit with common standards and policies for trade and investment. Like BRICS, the SCO has also broadened its institutional dialogue with other groups such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

This is how norms multiply and regimes are re-established. So do not fear today's proliferation of blocs. The world must learn to live with them and to encourage the growth of positive regimes that may yet evolve from them.

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