

**THE UNITED STATES AND  
REGIONAL GREAT POWER RIVALRY**

**CAN AMERICA STILL PASS THE MEARSHEIMER TEST?**

**Mark N. Katz**

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## CAN AMERICA STILL PASS THE MEARSHEIMER TEST?

The United States is clearly no longer seen as the dominant great power in the world, with great power rivalries and regional powers seeking to expand their influence. But how significant is the much-reported decline in American power, and the rise in that of others? In his book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, renowned international relations theorist John Mearsheimer set forth a very clear standard for measuring great power influence, namely their influence in the various regions of the world. According to Mearsheimer, the United States is the only country that has achieved predominant influence in its own region (the Western Hemisphere) and has also been able to prevent any other great power from dominating any other region. But is this still true?

Through examining the balance of power in the various regions and subregions of the world, this FIIA Working Paper concludes that the US can still pass “the Mearsheimer test” in all regions of the world, albeit not in all subregions. The paper also points out possible contingencies in which the United States may become less able to pass the Mearsheimer test.



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# THE UNITED STATES AND GREAT POWER REGIONAL RIVALRY

## CAN AMERICA STILL PASS THE MEARSHEIMER TEST?

### INTRODUCTION

The United States is clearly no longer seen as the dominant great power in a unipolar world. After the end of the Cold War, however, it appeared for a time to be just that. American influence even seemed to expand in the wake of the 9/11 attacks when the US not only intervened in Afghanistan and Iraq, but these interventions initially appeared to be successful. President George W. Bush raised the prospect of democracy spreading throughout the greater Middle East, and there was even talk of whether the US would turn next to “liberating” Iran, Syria, or perhaps Yemen.

The role of the United States in the world appears very different now, however. In 2021, the Kabul government fell to the Taliban even before the completion of the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan. American forces are no longer involved in combat missions in Iraq, and Iran seems to have much more influence in Baghdad than Washington does. Furthermore, democratization is no longer spreading as it was after the Cold War up to the briefly hopeful beginning of the 2011 Arab uprisings. Indeed, democracy now appears to be increasingly under threat, including in the US itself. America’s alliances also appear to be in disarray, with many of its allies concerned about just how committed Washington is to them. Moreover, while American power appears to be on the decline, China and Russia are actively seeking to expand not just their influence, but their territory as well. Russia has actually invaded Ukraine, and China has become increasingly belligerent about achieving its goal of re-taking Taiwan. Regional great powers are also actively, even forcefully, seeking to spread their influence – including America’s longtime adversary Iran and its ambivalent ally Turkey.

Russia, China, and various regional powers, however, appear to be experiencing problems of their own in extending their power and influence in their immediate vicinity, much less farther afield. Russia in particular has hit a roadblock in its ambitions in Ukraine in the form of fierce resistance to its invasion. How significant, then, is the much-reported decline in American power when the rise of others is encountering significant obstacles?

There are, of course, different ways of comparing the relative strengths of great powers. This FIIA Working Paper will apply what international relations theorist John J. Mearsheimer set forth as a standard for measuring great power strength in relation to one another, namely their influence in various regions of the world. This is what I call the “Mearsheimer test.”

This paper will examine the balance of power in the various regions and subregions of the world to assess whether the United States can now pass the Mearsheimer test in each of them. It will first discuss American prospects for preventing other great powers from dominating the regions and subregions of the world outside the Western Hemisphere, and then consider the prospects for the US to retain predominant influence in the Western Hemisphere. The paper concludes that the US can, in fact, still pass the Mearsheimer test in all regions of the world, albeit not in all subregions.

### 1. THE MEARSHEIMER TEST

John J. Mearsheimer is one of the foremost contemporary international relations theorists. In his book entitled *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001, updated 2014), he set forth a great power-centric theory of international relations, which he termed “offensive realism.” In his view, great powers “look for opportunities to gain power at each others’ expense.”<sup>1</sup> He further theorized that great power competition has played out through a struggle among them for influence in the various regions of the world, and that great powers “seek regional hegemony whenever the possibility arises.”<sup>2</sup> Further, policymakers in great powers are never “satisfied with their share of world power when they have the capability to gain more.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, in Mearsheimer’s view, great power competition over various regions is something that is unceasing. Not everyone, of course, agrees with Mearsheimer’s offensive realist theory of international relations. But one need not agree with it to see the usefulness of his view on America’s role in the various regions of the world.

1 Mearsheimer 2014, 5.

2 Mearsheimer 2014, 168–169.

3 Mearsheimer 2014, 169.

According to Mearsheimer, the United States is the only country that has achieved predominant influence in its own region (the Western Hemisphere) and has also been able to prevent any other great power from dominating any other region. He saw this as being the case both in the first edition of his book published in 2001 when the US really did appear to be the sole great power after the Cold War, and even in the updated version published in 2014, despite America's poor showing by then in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> Mearsheimer himself, however, foresaw that China would attempt to become the predominant power in Asia like the United States had done in the Western Hemisphere, and that the US and China could well clash over this.<sup>5</sup>

But however much American power and influence appear to have declined and that of others risen, the real question is whether America can still pass the Mearsheimer test: Is the US still the predominant power in the Western Hemisphere and able to prevent any other great power from dominating any other region? Another way of asking this is: Can one or more other great powers end US predominance in the Western Hemisphere and/or gain predominant influence in any other region of the world?

These questions cannot be answered definitively, but something can be said about whether the conditions in the various regions of the world are propitious for the US to prevent any other great power from dominating them, and to maintain its own predominant influence in the Western Hemisphere.

The US is best able to play such a role when there is both "supply" and "demand" for it to do so. Beginning with demand, there must be one or more states in a region which fear that another state—either located in the region or outside of it—seeks to dominate all, or just more, of that region. Further, the state or states that fear this other state must be willing to seek support from the US in preventing the latter from becoming predominant. In other words, they must see American influence or presence in their region as necessary to avoid being dominated by any other state or states, which they regard as an undesirable prospect. But in addition to this demand for American influence or presence (or support, assistance, or protection), there must also be a supply of it. In other words, the US must be willing and able to provide, in conjunction

with other states inside or even outside the region, sufficient support for those states that demand it.

## 2. US PROSPECTS FOR PREVENTING REGIONAL PREDOMINANCE BY OTHER GREAT POWERS

Mearsheimer wrote about large-sized regions as the arenas of great power competition. Their size alone makes America's self-appointed task of preventing other great powers from dominating them easier since, presumably, it is harder to dominate a larger as opposed to a smaller region, and a larger region usually has more states which seek to avoid being dominated by another great power. Indeed, some of these regions—particularly Asia—are so large that it makes more sense to discuss the subregions within them. And here, as we will see, the prospects for the US preventing another power from dominating a subregion may differ from its prospects for preventing a power from dominating a larger, continental-sized region.

### 2.1 Asia

Like Mearsheimer, the US government itself has identified China as the greatest challenge to America's role in the world.<sup>6</sup> It makes sense, then, to focus first on analyzing the prospects for the US continuing to be able to prevent any other great power from dominating Asia, or whether China could come to dominate it. The US faces other rivals in Asia, but none of them is in a position to attempt to dominate the continent as a whole and certainly not to dominate China.

In Asia, the US has several partners which continue to seek its assistance in avoiding the possibility of being dominated by China or any other power. The US has bilateral defense agreements with Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines and has acknowledged, albeit in imprecise terms, a commitment to support the defense of Taiwan.<sup>7</sup> Less formal defense cooperation has recently developed between the US, Japan, Australia, and India in a grouping known as "the Quad."<sup>8</sup> A number of other Asian states—including Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and even America's erstwhile adversary Vietnam are also fearful of China and see the American presence in Asia (if not in these countries themselves) as affording them a degree of protection

4 Mearsheimer 2001, 40–42; Mearsheimer 2014, 40–42.

5 Mearsheimer 2014, 360–411.

6 Mearsheimer 2014, 360–363; US Department of Defense 2022.

7 Davidson 2020, 148–174.

8 Cannon and Rossiter 2022.

against Beijing.<sup>9</sup> The recently signed AUKUS agreement between Australia, the UK and the US is also aimed at countering the rise of China.<sup>10</sup>

Asia, however, is so large that it would appear very difficult for even an increasingly strong China to dominate all of it. Even excluding Southwest Asia (Iran and countries to its west), which does not border China, it would be extremely difficult for Beijing to dominate all the countries and subregions of Asia that do border it, even without the US actively opposing such an endeavor. The fact that the US has formal alliance relationships with many countries in Asia, and engages in less formal defense cooperation with others, makes a hypothetical Chinese attempt to dominate Asia as a whole extremely difficult to achieve, especially if Asian states receive support from the US and other countries external to the region in resisting any such attempt.

Indeed, the extreme difficulty of gaining dominance over all of Asia is arguably so great that China does not seem likely to attempt it. What China could try, however, is to concentrate on dominating one or more of the six subregions of Asia bordering it: Northeast Asia, the special case of Taiwan, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, and (for want of a better term) North Asia (Russia and Mongolia). Its prospects for doing so, as well as America's prospects for helping prevent it, will be examined in each of these subregions in turn.

**Northeast Asia.** In Northeast Asia, there are two countries—Japan and South Korea—which have relied on the United States to defend them for decades. The US maintains a large military presence in both.<sup>11</sup> During the Korean War in the early 1950s, the US and many of its allies fought a grueling war over control of the Korean peninsula. Because an attack on South Korea and/or Japan is highly likely to result in the attacker being directly at war with the US, it is extremely unlikely that China (much less Russia or North Korea) would attempt it. Further, since the US does not appear likely to end its defense commitments to Japan and South Korea, the ability of the US to continue passing the Mearsheimer test of preventing any other great power from acquiring dominance over the entire Northeast Asian subregion appears quite strong. The US has even committed itself to defending the largely uninhabited Japanese-claimed chain of islands in the East China Sea between southern Japan and Taiwan,

which China also claims.<sup>12</sup> In Northeast Asia, then, there is both demand for and supply of US support for preventing the subregion from falling under the dominance of China or any other great power.

**Taiwan.** Taiwan by itself hardly qualifies as a subregion, but because of its special status of being recognized by not just Beijing but most governments as a part of China, although not (yet) under Beijing's control, Taiwan deserves a separate discussion. In recent years, China has been actively declaring both that it will not tolerate any declaration of Taiwanese independence from China, and that it wants to extend Beijing's rule over the island. Beijing has been engaged in a series of military maneuvers near Taiwan, which some see as designed to intimidate it into concluding that resistance is futile and so capitulation is its best option.<sup>13</sup> But while the US defense commitment to Taiwan is not as unambiguous as its defense pacts with Japan and South Korea, Beijing cannot be certain about just what the US would do to defend Taiwan in any conflict between it and China – especially after US President Joe Biden confirmed in May 2022 that the US would defend Taiwan militarily.<sup>14</sup> Further, Japan has recently indicated that it would join the US in defending Taiwan.<sup>15</sup>

The example of fierce Ukrainian resistance to the Russian invasion may also have served to raise fears in Beijing that a Chinese invasion of Taiwan would encounter similar resistance. It is possible, then, that the anticipated costs of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan may cause enough uncertainty in Beijing about whether it would succeed that China would be deterred from launching one, at least in the near future.<sup>16</sup> Regarding Taiwan, then, there is definitely the demand for American military assistance in preventing it from falling under Chinese dominance. The supply of American military assistance to Taiwan is less certain than it is for Japan and South Korea, but it is present to some degree. Hence, the US may still pass the Mearsheimer test when it comes to Taiwan, although its ability to do so could diminish as Chinese military strength grows.

**Southeast Asia.** Although the US has an operative bilateral defense pact with just one country in this subregion, the Philippines, Washington has engaged

9 Harold et al. 2019.

10 Maude 2021.

11 US Government Accountability Office 2021.

12 Reuters, January 14, 2021.

13 Maizland 2022.

14 Kim et al. 2022

15 Kuhn 2021. The Australian defense minister made a similar statement in November 2021, but the Australian foreign minister immediately cast doubt upon it: Stünkel 2022.

16 Russia Matters 2022.



in various forms of defense cooperation with several Southeast Asian nations, including its erstwhile adversary, Vietnam's communist government.<sup>17</sup> Since most nations in Southeast Asia could be expected to put up resistance, it seems doubtful that China would be able to easily dominate this huge region or even the three countries in it that directly border China: Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar. Chinese economic influence in Laos, however, has grown significantly, especially with the opening of a modern train line from the Laotian capital, Vientiane, to Kunming in southern China.<sup>18</sup> Still, it is highly doubtful that China could extend its influence over this entire region, especially if the US acted to support governments in resisting China.

China, however, has shown a much greater ability to assert its expansive claims to the South China Sea, through which so much shipping now passes. While virtually no other state recognizes Beijing's claims, China's presence in this area has grown through increased naval deployments, "fishing boat" presence, and even construction of artificial islands.<sup>19</sup> Further, the other littoral states (Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines) are not powerful enough on their own to prevent China from asserting its claims to the South China Sea. Indeed, Cambodia may even be helping China to do this if reports that it is allowing Beijing to have a naval base are true.<sup>20</sup>

Still, China has thus far been unable to prevent US Navy vessels from traversing the South China Sea.<sup>21</sup> The US Navy presence in the South China Sea prevents China from completely dominating it, and this is something that the other littoral states benefit from. If, however, the US ever becomes less willing or able to maintain a naval presence there, or if China vastly increases its own, then the US may not be able to prevent China from gaining predominance over the South China Sea. But even the achievement of this goal may not lead to increased Chinese influence over Southeast Asian governments that would resent Beijing for having done so, and therefore increase their motivation to seek support from the US and its allies. This might include helping organize and protect alternative sea routes through or around the Indonesian archipelago

which bypass the South China Sea.<sup>22</sup> While there is demand for US military assistance in preventing Chinese predominance in Southeast Asia, there is uncertainty about how much military assistance the US may be willing and able to provide, both now and especially in the future.

**South Asia.** With India and China at odds over their common border, China's close relations with Pakistan, and Beijing's efforts to increase Chinese influence in other South Asian countries (notably Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka), New Delhi definitely sees China as an adversary.<sup>23</sup> Since India has a population about as large as China's, a growing economy, and both a nuclear arsenal and modernizing conventional armed forces of its own, India by itself has considerable ability to prevent China from acquiring predominance in South Asia. Growing US-Indian defense cooperation only enhances India's ability to withstand China (as do Russian arms sales to New Delhi).<sup>24</sup> With its tradition of "non-alignment" as well as current policy disagreements with Washington, including over how to react to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there cannot be said to be a firm alliance between India and the US.<sup>25</sup> There may, however, be sufficient Indian demand for and American supply of security assistance to prevent China from becoming predominant in the South Asian subregion. Indian-American security cooperation has nevertheless been unable to prevent China's influence from growing in the subregion's smaller countries, which have often been at odds with India. Yet China's ability to gain and retain influence in them is by no means assured due to these countries' animosity toward Beijing's often heavy-handed economic policies, especially regarding debt repayment.<sup>26</sup>

**Central Asia.** The situation in Central Asia is quite different. The five states in this region (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan) were all part of the Soviet Union up until its collapse in 1991, and only became subject to influence from other states besides Russia after that. American ability to influence this region appeared to grow, especially after 9/11 when the US not only had a huge troop presence in Afghanistan but acquired military facilities in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. The US did not keep these facilities for long, however, and its influence in Central Asia diminished even before the withdrawal of US

17 Poling et al. 2021. Given Thailand's acrimonious relations with Washington and growing defense ties with Beijing, US-Thai defense agreements no longer appear to be fully operative: Abuza 2020.

18 McDonald et al. 2021.

19 Jenner 2021, 513-531.

20 Both the Chinese and Cambodian governments have denied these reports: Nakashima and Cadell 2022.

21 Vivona 2021.

22 For one such suggestion, see Black Swan 2017.

23 Roy-Chaudhury 2018, 98-112.

24 Gould 2022.

25 Grossman 2021.

26 Saeed 2021; Singh 2022.

and Coalition troops from Afghanistan and the Taliban's return to power in 2021.<sup>27</sup> China and Russia are now the two great powers with the most influence in Central Asia. Russia has exercised its influence mainly through security assistance while China has done so through trade and investment, although Beijing has also acquired small military facilities in Tajikistan.<sup>28</sup> At present, China and Russia appear willing to share influence with each other in Central Asia as well as to work together to exclude the US and the West from the region. In short, the US is not only no longer maintaining a military presence in Central Asia, but the states of Central Asia are not in a position to request this in the face of Russian and Chinese opposition. Whether China acquires predominant influence over this Central Asian subregion appears more likely to be impacted by the overall state of Sino-Russian relations than by anything the US might do.

Given that both Soviet and American military efforts to support weak allied governments in Afghanistan ended in failure, it is doubtful whether China would undertake such an effort there either. Indeed, the question now is whether the restored Taliban government will support or inspire Islamist opposition movements in Central Asia or Chinese-ruled Xinjiang.<sup>29</sup> Thus far, Sino-Taliban relations have been warily friendly.<sup>30</sup> Afghanistan, however, may not prove any more amenable to Chinese influence than it was to either Soviet or American influence.

**North Asia.** Some Russians fear the prospect of an increasingly powerful China gaining influence over Russia, especially over the region along their current border between Mongolia and the Pacific Ocean.<sup>31</sup> But even if, despite saying otherwise, President Vladimir Putin also fears this, he is hardly likely to turn to Washington for help against Beijing when he clearly views the US as Russia's principal opponent.<sup>32</sup> For Moscow to see China as more of a threat than the US would require either Beijing initiating an unambiguously hostile stance toward Russia, which is something that Beijing seems determined to avoid, or a new Russian leader who sees China as more of a threat and America as less of one. In the meantime, Moscow is not going to turn to Washington for support against Beijing. Indeed, one result of the economic sanctions imposed by the US

and its Western allies against Russia for its invasion of Ukraine in 2022 may be to increase Russian economic dependence on, and vulnerability to, China.<sup>33</sup> In short, there is at present no demand from Putin's Russia for American security assistance with regard to China.

If China ever decides to reassert control over Mongolia (which it lost in the early 20th century as a result of Soviet policy),<sup>34</sup> the US will be completely unable to prevent or reverse this.

In sum, whatever ability America has to prevent China from acquiring predominance in other regions of Asia, it has no real ability to do so in either Central or North Asia at present. Russia, on the other hand, has been able to accomplish this on its own, but its ability to do so may diminish as a result of its increased isolation from the West and dependence on China resulting from Putin's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

## 2.2 Europe

The US has even more partners in Europe than in Asia, which continue to seek its assistance in avoiding the possibility of being dominated by any other great power—the most likely one in the case of Europe being Russia. Indeed, the US-led Cold War era alliance, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), not only remained intact when the Soviet Union withdrew from Eastern Europe and the USSR broke up at the end of the Cold War, but expanded to include the formerly Soviet-dominated countries of Eastern Europe and even the three Baltic states, which had been part of the USSR. Further, unlike America's mostly bilateral defense pacts in Asia, NATO is a multilateral security agreement in which an attack on one is considered an attack on all.<sup>35</sup> As long as this remains true (i.e., there is both a European demand for and an American supply of security assistance), an attempt by Russia to assert predominance either over Europe as a whole or any part of it belonging to NATO would appear far too risky for Moscow to attempt. Indeed, as Mearsheimer himself has argued, the continued expansion of NATO long after the end of the Cold War is seen by Moscow as a threat to Russia.<sup>36</sup>

Dividing Europe into meaningful subregions is somewhat complicated as the geopolitical alignments

27 Stepansky 2021.

28 Jardine and Lemon 2020; Umarov 2021.

29 Lau 2021.

30 Tiezzi 2022.

31 Liik 2021.

32 Katz 2021b.

33 Kirillova 2022.

34 Haining 1996, 69–79.

35 NATO 2022.

36 Mearsheimer 2022. See also Chotiner 2022. For a comprehensive statement by Putin on his highly negative view of NATO just prior to the February 24, 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, see Putin 2022.



of European countries have changed over time. During the Cold War, Western Europe was largely allied to the US, Eastern Europe was largely allied to the USSR, and a few others (Ireland, Sweden, Finland, Austria, Switzerland, Yugoslavia, Albania, Cyprus, and Malta) were not allied to either. Now, perhaps the most meaningful way to divide Europe into subregions is between NATO Europe on the one hand, and the non-NATO former Soviet Europe on the other.

**NATO Europe.** While President Donald Trump cast doubt on America's defense commitment to NATO Europe, the Biden Administration has reiterated the US commitment to NATO.<sup>37</sup> In NATO Europe, European demand for and American supply of security assistance should enable the US to pass the Mearsheimer test and prevent Russia or any other external power from dominating the continent. Even though some NATO politicians—especially Hungary's prime minister, Victor Orban—have developed what many in Washington and other European capitals consider to be uncomfortably friendly relations with Moscow,<sup>38</sup> no European government seems willing to withdraw from NATO or to forgo the US defense commitment, either at Moscow's behest or for any other reason. The Russian invasion of Ukraine that began in February 2022 has only served to reinforce the NATO alliance, and has even resulted in increased defense expenditures on the part of several NATO members.<sup>39</sup>

**Non-NATO former Soviet Europe.** The situation is very different in the six European (broadly defined) former Soviet republics of Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan that have not joined NATO or the European Union (unlike Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania). Some of these states have sought closer ties to the US, NATO, and the EU, while others have just sought to assert and preserve their freedom to maneuver between the West on the one hand and Russia on the other.<sup>40</sup> Under President Putin, however, Russia has steadily worked to prevent them from doing either. Russia has a defense commitment to two of these republics—Belarus and Armenia—through their membership in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The four others—Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and to some extent Azerbaijan—would all like to associate more closely with NATO and/or the EU. Putin's Russia, however, is not only fiercely

determined to prevent this, but neither the US nor most of its European allies have been willing to support these states sufficiently to enable them to escape from Russian influence.<sup>41</sup> In other words, even where there is a demand for American and European security assistance in the states of non-NATO former Soviet Europe, the US and its NATO allies are not willing or able to send ground forces to defend them.

Still, the US and other NATO members have supplied large quantities of arms to Ukraine since the beginning of the February 2022 Russian invasion.<sup>42</sup> While it was widely expected that the Russian invasion would quickly succeed, Ukraine's fierce resistance, Western arms supplies to Ukraine, and Western sanctions and other measures against Russia have not only imposed huge costs on Moscow but raised doubts about Putin's ability to prevail.<sup>43</sup> And with Russian forces facing such fierce Ukrainian resistance, Moscow does not seem to be in a position either to pressure or persuade any European state to withdraw from NATO, much less assert Russian influence beyond Ukraine into Eastern Europe.

Finland and Sweden did not belong to either NATO Europe or non-NATO former Soviet Europe. Finland, however, has just joined NATO and Sweden has received approval to do so from all NATO members except Hungary and Turkey. Ireland, Austria, Cyprus, and Malta remain formally neutral, but are oriented toward the West through their membership in the EU. Serbia, by contrast, has long had close ties to Russia, and is linked to it through their common Orthodox Christian heritage as well as shared grievances toward NATO. Yet Serbia has not completely allied with Russia, but has sought to play Russia, the EU, and China off against each other in order to derive benefits from all three.<sup>44</sup>

## 2.3 Middle East

Unlike Asia and Europe where the US seeks to prevent mainly one great power (China in the former and Russia in the latter) from gaining predominance in these regions as a whole as well as important subregions within them, the Middle East is a region in which there are now several powers vying for influence. After retreating from the Middle East at the end of the Cold War, Russian influence in the region has rebounded, with Russian forces successfully intervening in Syria

37 Sabbagh 2021.

38 Tharoor 2022.

39 Mackenzie 2022.

40 Dembińska and Smith 2021, 247–263.

41 Milosevich 2021.

42 Cohen 2022.

43 See e.g. Boot 2022.

44 Menshikov 2022; Bechev 2023.

both to protect Moscow's beleaguered ally, the Assad regime, and to help it regain territory from its internal opponents. Russia has also sent private military forces to Libya, where they play an important role in the internal conflict there.<sup>45</sup> China's economic role in the region has also grown, especially as a result of its massive purchases of Middle Eastern oil.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, there are several regional powers within the Middle East vying for influence both within and beyond the region: Israel, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Egypt.<sup>47</sup>

The US is no longer (if it ever really was) the predominant power in the Middle East that it seemed to be during the early years of the War on Terror when the US-led intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq appeared successful, and the George W. Bush administration undertook to promote democracy throughout the region. On the other hand, the US has not withdrawn from the Middle East either, as many of its allies in the region have claimed. Indeed, the US has basically the same Middle Eastern allies now that it had at the end of the Cold War: Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, Oman, and Morocco.<sup>48</sup> Turkey is a member of NATO, but its relationships now with the US and Europe are difficult (just as they often were during the Cold War), especially after expressing objections to Sweden and Finland joining the alliance.<sup>49</sup>

There is still demand from America's Middle Eastern allies for protection against regional powers, especially Iran, that they fear being dominated by. What they are not demanding from the US, however, is protection from external great powers Russia and China. Indeed, what is remarkable about the current situation is that each and every US ally in the Middle East also has good relations with Russia and China, and none of them seeks their expulsion from the region.<sup>50</sup> Instead, America's Middle East allies are more concerned about threats from within the region—especially from Iran and its armed allies such as Hezbollah and the Houthis. More problematic for the US is that some of its Middle Eastern allies have sometimes considered some of its other allies in the region to be threats.<sup>51</sup>

There are now so many global or regional great powers vying for influence in the Middle East that the

US may not have to do anything to prevent any of them from becoming predominant in the region, as their efforts serve to check one another. But the continuing US presence in the region serves to help America's allies to prevent this from happening at lower cost to themselves than if the US did not provide them with security assistance.

## 2.4 Africa

Like the Middle East, Africa is also an arena in which various powers have been vying for influence. China's influence has grown through its Belt and Road Initiative involving increased trade with and investment in the region.<sup>52</sup> Russia's influence has increased both through arms sales and through its deployment of private military contractors to several African countries.<sup>53</sup> With the drawdown of French forces from the Sahel and the continent not being a priority for the US, some view Russia and China as gaining influence in parts of Africa or even the entire continent.<sup>54</sup>

But even if American and French influence is receding from Africa, there are several regional powers—some of which are allied to Washington—that are also seeking to extend their influence in Africa. While Djibouti allows China to maintain naval facilities there, it also permits France, America, and Japan to do so.<sup>55</sup> In May 2022, Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki stated that he was willing to allow Russia to have a naval base, but this only occurred after the UAE pulled out of a naval base it maintained there.<sup>56</sup> Sudan previously expressed its willingness to grant naval facilities to Russia, but there has apparently been disagreement over the terms. Sudan has also expressed willingness to allow other countries to have naval facilities.<sup>57</sup> In Libya, Turkish forces have played an important role in preventing Russian-backed forces in eastern Libya from taking over the entire country. Further, the group Russia is supporting in eastern Libya also receives support from American allies Egypt, the UAE, and France.<sup>58</sup> While China has strong trade and investment ties with Africa, so have other countries, including the EU, US, India, and Japan.<sup>59</sup> South Africa is a regional great power in

45 For an overview of Russian policy toward the Middle East, see Kozhanov 2022.

46 Fulton 2022.

47 Krasna and Meladze 2021; Falk 2022.

48 Katz 2021a.

49 Gilsinan 2019; Crowley and Erlanger 2022.

50 Fulton and Sim 2022.

51 Hoffman 2021, 87–104.

52 Rolland 2022.

53 Ramani 2023.

54 Turse 2019; Baroud 2022.

55 Gurjar 2021.

56 Grambrell 2021; AT Editor 2022.

57 AI-Monitor Staff 2022.

58 Robinson 2020.

59 Oluwole 2022; Fofack 2022, 36.

southern Africa while Egypt is a regional great power in North Africa. Moreover, Sunni jihadist forces have grown strong enough to challenge several African governments receiving not just Western, but also Russian security assistance, especially in the Sahel.<sup>60</sup>

In addition, while Russia and China both want to see Western influence in Africa decline and their own increase, they have reportedly been at odds with each other in some instances. Indeed, their influence thrives in very different environments: China's emphasis on economic assistance depends on stability, but Russia's emphasis on security assistance depends on instability.<sup>61</sup> In addition, Russians and Chinese may be no more immune to jihadist attacks in Africa than Westerners have been. Indeed, a cynical view may see the French withdrawal from the Sahel as deflecting onto an overconfident Russia the burden of containing the jihadist threat, which Moscow is not in a position to deal with effectively. Even without Africa being a priority for the US, the sheer number of great powers as well as regional ones vying for influence makes it very difficult for any great power to dominate any of the subregions of Africa, much less the continent as a whole.

## 2.5 Oceans

Mearsheimer saw large land masses as the regions in which great powers struggled to acquire predominance or prevent others from gaining it. But rivalries over the world's oceans have also heated up in recent years and therefore need to be discussed.

**Pacific Ocean.** The US and its allies Australia, New Zealand, and France have had predominant influence over their colonies as well as the independent island nations of the Pacific Ocean since the end of World War II.<sup>62</sup> This did not go completely uncontested during the Cold War when the Soviet Union tried to gain influence there.<sup>63</sup> In recent years, however, Chinese influence has grown mainly through economic means, not just in the many Pacific Island nations but even in Australia and New Zealand. Several island nations in the Pacific relish their newfound ability both to benefit from China's growing economic interest as well as the desire of America and its allies to counter it by increasing their own largesse.<sup>64</sup> In April 2022, China

and the Solomon Islands signed a security agreement which reportedly allows the former to send armed police and other military personnel to the latter for the purpose of maintaining social order, which the Solomon Islands government might invoke to subdue its internal opponents.<sup>65</sup> Yet while this China-Solomon Islands security agreement means that the US and its allies may no longer have absolute predominance over the Pacific, neither China nor any other great power is now in a position to gain predominance over this vast region either. Indeed, China was subsequently unable to persuade ten Pacific Island nations to agree to a multilateral security pact with it.<sup>66</sup> Still, the Pacific is now more open to great power competition than it has been at any time since the end of World War II.

**Arctic Ocean.** While great power competition has been present in the Arctic for centuries, the difficulty of navigating it due to ice coverage served to mute this. However, with the Arctic becoming increasingly navigable due to climate change as well as rising hopes for exploiting the abundant natural resources beneath the seabed, great power competition over the Arctic has risen along with temperatures in the region. There are five countries that border the Arctic Ocean: Russia, Norway, Denmark (via Greenland), Canada, and the United States (via Alaska). Due to its control both of so much shoreline as well as the many islands just north of the Russian mainland, Russia is in a strong position to assert its influence in the Arctic.<sup>67</sup> Norway, Denmark, and Canada alone are not in a position to challenge Russian influence in the region, but the US working together with these three as well as Finland and Sweden (both of which are also members of the Arctic Council) can probably prevent Russia from acquiring predominance if indeed that is what it is trying to do. In addition, there are other countries that do not border the Arctic which are interested in the region, including China, which has deemed itself a "near Arctic power."<sup>68</sup> It is difficult to see, however, how any power without a physical presence in the Arctic—which would require the cooperation or subordination of at least one Arctic state—could acquire significant, much less predominant, influence in the region.

**Indian Ocean.** Several nations maintain a naval presence in the Indian Ocean, including the US, the

60 Faleg and Mustasilta 2021.

61 Ramani 2021, 12–15.

62 Britain was also a Pacific power, but gave up all of its colonies there except for the isolated Pitcairn Islands in the Eastern Pacific.

63 Boobbyer 1988, 573–93.

64 Strating and Wallis 2022.

65 Kim 2022.

66 Shepherd 2022.

67 Paul and Swistek 2022.

68 Sharma 2021.

UK, France, India, China and others.<sup>69</sup> Indian observers in particular see China as seeking to expand its influence by establishing a “string of pearls” network of bases and controlled ports limiting the freedom of maneuver of India and other rivals.<sup>70</sup> Still, neither China nor any other power seems likely to become the predominant power in the Indian Ocean as long as the US and its allies maintain a presence there.

**Atlantic Ocean.** The US remains the predominant power in the Atlantic Ocean, especially the North Atlantic. China has reportedly tried and failed to obtain a naval base in Equatorial Guinea on the West African coast.<sup>71</sup> However, China or any other American rival would have to acquire a much greater presence than just one base to even contest American influence over the Atlantic, let alone acquire predominance itself.

### 3. US PROSPECTS FOR RETAINING PREDOMINANCE IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE

The US, then, seems capable of passing the Mearsheimer test with regard to preventing any other great power from becoming predominant in the regions (even if not all subregions) of the world outside the Western Hemisphere. According to Mearsheimer, however, the US has not just been able to prevent other great powers from becoming predominant in the Western Hemisphere, but the US itself has exercised predominance over it.<sup>72</sup> But is this still true?

China has gained economic influence in many Latin American and Caribbean countries through its trade and investment activities.<sup>73</sup> Russia engages in security cooperation with anti-American governments in Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua.<sup>74</sup> While neither Russia nor China has become predominant in the Western Hemisphere, they are certainly contesting American predominance over it. Hence, it is arguable whether America meets the Mearsheimer test of exercising predominance throughout the Western Hemisphere.

But this situation is not new. As Mearsheimer himself pointed out, there have been several instances when external great powers have sought or even achieved some

degree of influence in the Western Hemisphere ever since the US declared its Monroe Doctrine in 1823: 1) France under Napoleon III took advantage of the American Civil War to briefly assert influence in Mexico; 2) Imperial Germany sought to work with Mexico against the US in World War I; 3) Nazi Germany attempted to gain influence in Latin America before and during World War II; and 4) the Soviet Union supported a Marxist regime in Cuba during the Cold War.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, after Fidel Castro came to power in Cuba, there was great concern within the US and several Latin American governments that the Soviet Union and Cuba together could foment a Marxist revolution in several countries in the region—a concern that prevailed right up until the end of the Cold War.<sup>76</sup>

Thus, the fact that American predominance in Latin America is now being contested is not unusual but normal as it has occurred on several occasions since Spain’s withdrawal from most of the region in the early 19th century. It would appear that Mearsheimer may have exaggerated the extent of American predominance over the Western Hemisphere. Some might argue, however, that unlike in other regions of the world, America’s influence in the Western Hemisphere is less dependent on there being a match between regional demand for American protection against other powers and American supply of that protection. This is because the US has supplied protection to the Western Hemisphere whether there has been a demand for it or not. Still, whatever their differences with the US and resentments over the role it plays in the region, most (albeit not all) Western Hemisphere governments have joined the US in seeking to prevent any external great power, or any potential internal one, from gaining predominant influence in the region. As long as this remains true, the US should be able to retain its predominant role in the Western Hemisphere even though this may continue to be contested, as it long has been.

### CONCLUSION

Despite the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq and the image that American power is declining while that of other great powers is rising, America can still pass the Mearsheimer test in all the major regions of the world, even if not in all of its subregions. This should remain true as long as there are countries in the world that want its assistance in preventing any other great

69 Hiranandani 2018; Baruah 2021.

70 Dabas 2017. See also Colley 2021.

71 Vergun 2022.

72 “The United States has been a regional hegemon in the Western Hemisphere for at least the past one hundred years. No other state in the Americas has sufficient military might to challenge it, which is why the United States is widely recognized as the only great power in its region.” Mearsheimer 2014, 40.

73 Ellis 2022a.

74 Ellis 2022b.

75 Mearsheimer 2014, 249.

76 Dominguez 1999, pp. 33–50.



power from acquiring predominance over their region, and as long as it is willing and able to provide it. Indeed, the enormous difficulties experienced by Russia's intervention in Ukraine show that fierce local resistance combined with American and allied arms support for the country under attack, and sanctions against the invader, can raise the costs for America's great power rivals of any attempt to assert their predominance, even in a subregion where they would appear to have greater ability to do so.

What could change this, of course, is a dramatic change in the supply of American security assistance. President Trump raised the possibility that the US might become less willing to supply security assistance to its traditional allies.<sup>77</sup> It was never quite clear whether he made these statements in order to induce the allies to spend more on defense or to take other policy actions which would result in his being willing to defend them, or whether he really just wanted to withdraw the US from NATO and cut back on America's security guarantees to some of its other allies. If Trump or someone with similar views is elected president in 2024 or later, greater clarity may emerge. If, however, the US really does become less willing to provide security support to its current allies in any given region or subregion of the world, then the obstacles faced by another great power in asserting its predominance there will diminish. America cannot pass the Mearsheimer test if it stops trying to do so.

But a diminution in the supply of American military support for preventing other great powers from acquiring predominance in various regions of the world is not the only possible reason why the US may no longer be able to pass the Mearsheimer test. Another possibility is a diminution in the demand for such American military support. One possible reason why this might come about is through the drastic deterioration of democracy in the United States. Even this, however, might not bother America's non-democratic allies. Indeed, they may actually feel more comfortable with a less democratic American government which would presumably not criticize them for their own democratic and human rights deficits. Even the democratic allies of the US might come to the conclusion that they are better off continuing to cooperate

with a less democratic America in order to keep other great powers at bay. Still, a world in which the US is considered to be "no different" from Russia or China is one in which smaller countries are more likely to try to balance among all great powers rather than see the US as a more desirable ally than others.

Perhaps an even more profound change in the demand for American military support would result from democratization in China, Russia, or both, however unlikely that may seem now. A democratic Russia or China that behaved reassuringly toward other countries might result in their neighbors feeling that they do not need US protection against either or both of these countries. Democratization in Iran, though, might result in America's autocratic Arab Gulf allies becoming even more fearful of Iran than they are now—and seeking security assistance from the authoritarian governments of Russia and China if democratization in Iran resulted in Iranian-American rapprochement. While democratization in Russia but not China could result in less European demand for American protection against Russia, it could also result in Russia seeking support from the US and NATO against what many Russians already see as a rising Chinese threat. By contrast, the democratization of China could result in a dramatic decrease worldwide in demand for American protection. If the democratization of China led to the democratization of North Korea and the reunification of the Korean peninsula, the demand for US protection might disappear altogether in what would be United Korea.

Such dramatic changes in world politics might seem too unlikely to even consider. But for those of us alive at the time, Sino-American rapprochement in the early 1970s, the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989, and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 all appeared highly unlikely until they occurred. A similar dramatic change or changes that upend the existing pattern of international competition and rivalry could well occur again. But until it does, the United States seems likely to continue to be able to pass the Mearsheimer test of retaining its predominance in the Western Hemisphere while preventing any other great power from becoming predominant in any other region of the world, even if not in every subregion. /

<sup>77</sup> For an eyewitness account of President Trump's negative attitudes toward so many of America's traditional allies by one of his National Security Advisors, see Bolton 2020, *passim*.

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