

Transcending Asia-Pacific Multipolarity

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Abstract

The Asia-Pacific region will move from bipolarity toward multipolarity, then collective unipolarity against its common enemies of climate change, Covid-like pandemics, contagious conflicts and cyber-insecurity from artificial intelligence. The speed and strength of this transition will depend on the ultimately rational choices of the leaders of America and its major allies, China, a rising India and a reducing Russia.

Competition between America and China will dominate for the next two years, then cooperation for the following three. Multilateral institutions and alliances will play a modest, then increasing role, in fostering regional stability.

The G7 major democratic powers will initially adapt to the Asia-Pacific’s emerging multipolarity by increasingly uniting against China as a rising threat. The G20 systemically significant states will initially adapt by following America less and China more, to produce a weaker but still solid performance, and then by fostering a global collective unipolarity against the accelerating common threats to all.

Canada will increasingly play an important unifying role, as is its America’s brother, a Pacific power, and an effective G7 and G20 leader and host.

Environmental issues will provide a great deal of common ground among the Asia-Pacific’s key players, but only after two years and much economic pain, before they unite to conquer their common existential enemy of climate change.

Emerging Multipolarity, Future Shapers, Regional Players’ Leverage

The Asia-Pacific region will move from bipolarity toward multipolarity to collective unipolarity against, and due to, its common enemies of climate change, Covid-like pandemics, contagious conflicts and cyber-insecurity from artificial intelligence (AI). The speed and strength of this transition will depend on the ultimately rational choices of America and its allies, China, a rising India and a reducing Russia.

At present, bipolarity dominates. At one pole stands the powerful United States, joined by its allies and affiliates of Japan, Korea and Taiwan, and Australia and Canada further afield.

At the other pole stands an increasingly powerful China, joined by its affiliates of North Korea, Laos, Cambodia and its proclaimed “no limits partnership” with an embattled Russia next door.

In terms of relative power, alignment polarity and relative vulnerability, America is ahead of China and its coalition. But China already produces regional bipolarity and its more rapid rise means bi-

power and bipolar equivalence, and China could soon lead. The result could be war between the two, bred by the classic “Thucydides trap.” It could be peaceful coexistence, reminiscent of the far less interdependent Soviet Union and United States between 1948 and 1989. Or it could be a peaceful ascent to the unipolarity of either America or China, depending on their relative capabilities and vulnerabilities and the foreign and domestic policy choices their leaders make.

The choices of US president-elect Donald Trump, backed by his Congressional Republican majority, remain unpredictable. But Trump, backed by a bipartisan consensus in Washington, and his allies see China as a rising threat, even an existential security threat. He will quickly impose his long-promised tariffs of up to 60% on China, and restrict its investment, cyber activities, immigration and more. He will ask Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Australia and Canada to pay more for their own defence and threaten that America will pay less. This could tempt China to move further, faster to squeeze, weaken and perhaps even acquire Taiwan.¹

Five possibilities then arise.

The first is that Trump’s threats work and America’s allies acquiesce. They will build up to produce more balance within their coalition and better collective deterrence against China, especially if Trump’s direct assaults on China weaken it more than they do the US.

The second possibility is that America’s allies will bond together without America. This could even balance and deter China without an isolationist America involved, especially if Japan or South Korea acquire nuclear weapons of their own.

The third possibility is that America’s allies will diversify, defect from a still involved America, and ally among themselves, producing an emerging tripolarity, reminiscent of the Bandung Non-Aligned Movement during the first Cold War.

The fourth possibility is that America’s abandoned allies will increasingly support a welcoming China. This could lead to Chinese unipolarity, or America – fearing a Thucydides trap – initiating war against China before it is too late. The winner would produce a new unipolarity, and a stalemate would restore bipolarity.

The fifth possibility is an unprecedented collective unipolarity against the common unifying enemies of climate change, Covid-like pandemics, escalating, globalized conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, and cyber-insecurity from exploding AI.

The fifth path of collective unipolarity will prevail in the medium term.

The first common enemy of climate change is certain to get rapidly much worse. Neither America nor China nor their coalitions can protect their increasingly vulnerable citizens by themselves.

The second common enemy of Covid-like pandemics will recur, from variants or cognates still unknown.

The third common enemy of deadly conflict – either unintentional, unwanted, accidental or even intended war – could easily erupt, between China and America over Taiwan, between China and India, or between North and South Korea and their pre-eminent power backers.

¹ Before Xi Jinping’s desired date of October 1, 2029, on the 80th anniversary of the formal creation of the People’s Republic of China 80 years before, on October 1, 1949. On the importance on anniversaries, see Welch 2005.

The fourth common enemy of cyber-insecurity from AI cannot be contained within a stronger great Chinese firewall, or by its equivalent in America alone (Takach 2024).

Finally, this Asia-Pacific collective unipolarity will be an integral part of a global collective unipolarity against the same common enemies. The Asia-Pacific region is a completely integrated component of the world as a whole.

Climate change is inherently global, as emissions that go up from sources anywhere and are sequestered by biodiverse sinks anywhere swiftly have effects everywhere.

Covid-like pandemics quickly spread everywhere, and the vaccines that prevent more people dying from them now do.²

Conflicts in Europe's Ukraine and the Middle East have already spread into the Asia-Pacific. North Korean troops, supported by China, are now fighting alongside Russia against an American and allied-supported democratic Ukraine. France and Germany may send troops to help Ukraine. Britain and France, alongside America, are territorially global powers, with valued possessions in the Asia-Pacific.³ Support from America's democratic allies, led by the UK and France, are powerful enough to overcome a weakening Russia's assault on Ukraine and them next.

Cyber-insecurity comes from AI, invented in Canada and the UK.⁴

Thus, today's global war against nature will become tomorrow's global war for nature, as humans stop killing other living things and the planet's endangered ecology on which all depend.

Choices by Regional Players

How much and how fast collective unipolarity emerges depends primarily on the ultimately rational choices made by the leaders of America and its major allies and a highly experienced, politically secure and predictable Xi Jinping.⁵

It also depends on the choices made by the leader of a coal-fuelled, smog-smothered, rapidly growing India, with its long border and recurrent deadly conflicts with China.

And it depends on the choices of Vladimir Putin, whose Russia is geographically an Asia-Pacific, European, and Arctic country and a natural superpower too.

Competition-Cooperation Balance, Multilateral Institutions' Role

Competition between America and China will dominate for the next two years, then they will cooperate for the following three, with multilateral institutions or alliances playing a modest role in fostering regional stability throughout.

² Covid-19, erupting in China and countered by MNRA vaccines born in the United States, needed the United Kingdom's Astra Zeneca, India's Serum Institute, and scientists born and living in Germany and Turkey to get the pandemic under control in America and beyond.

³ For whom they will fight as the UK did in the Falklands war.

⁴ By Nobel Prize winner Geoffrey Hinton from Canada and the UK. The global governance of AI was invented in 2018 at Canada's G7 summit among the leaders of the US, Japan, the UK, Germany, France, Italy, Canada and the European Union, with Trump there.

⁵ In reaction to Trump's choice or developments inside China itself.

Competition Dominant, 2025–2026

Competition will dominate from 2025 to 2026 as America's Trump administration unleashes assaults on China, backed by the bipartisan consensus that China is enemy number one. It will begin with the imposition of Trump's long-promised tariffs of up to 60% on China's exports to the United States, as he imposed during his first term. China will retaliate with its own tariffs or an engineered devaluation of the Chinese currency.

China will increase its investment penetration of America to get behind Trump's tariffs walls and seek backdoor routes through transshipment through America's free trade partners, starting with a leftist Mexico and centrist Canada. They will also be attacked by Trump's tariffs, promised in November 2024, of up to 25% on them. They will retaliate against the US.

America will impose further restrictions on inward Chinese investments and exports of American and allied technology to China, including semiconductors.

China will increasingly, more forcefully squeeze Taiwan. Trump will support Taiwan, for fear of appearing weak. Armed conflict could arise between America and China.

China will increase its cyber-attacks on American economic, infrastructure, energy and security targets. Trump will respond in kind.

Another assault on America could come from North Korea expanding its missile and nuclear capabilities and threats to the United States, as well as deploying more troops, with Chinese backing, to help Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Trump will quickly realize that more "love letters" to North Korea's leader will only make Trump look weaker still.

Cooperation Dominant, 2027–2028

Then the tide will turn, and cooperation will dominate during the second half of Trump's term.⁶

The American mid-term elections in November 2026, still largely free and fair, could see Trump's Republicans lose their thin legislative majority and campaigning Republicans distance themselves from Trump to enhance their re-election prospects.⁷

They will be motivated by America's slowing economy and employment, and rising inflation, cost of living and interest rates caused by Trump's tariffs and mass deportations of the undocumented migrants on whom American firms and domestic supply chains depend.

America may also cause a contagious financial crisis, as Trump compounds its already massive and soaring government fiscal deficits and debts. An aging, sicker population will increase the costs and cutbacks to social security, health care and Republican popularity at the polls.

China will also face a more severe growth slowdown, which more fiscal stimulus cannot fix. Its own aging, sicker population, and soaring social security and healthcare costs will imperil its leadership's greatest goal – social stability to ensure regime survival.

Both China and America, and their coalition partners, will face ever more catastrophic costs from the extreme weather events fuelled by climate change.

⁶ This coincides with the views of Trump's nominee for his treasury secretary, Scott Bessent (Valee 2024).

⁷ The Republican majority from the November 2024 election in both the House and Senate is very thin and could even be lost before the mid-term elections come.

Both Trump and Xi will increasingly turn toward Xi's constantly repeated refrain of peaceful coexistence and then toward collaboration to confront and conquer the common enemies that they cannot cope with alone.

Multilateral Institutions and Regional Alliance's Modest Role

Multilateral institutions and even alliances will initially play a modest role and then an increasing one in fostering regional stability.

Trump will withdraw the US from some of its global international contributions, agreements and international organizations, on the environment, health and perhaps trade, migration and refugees. But how this erosion of the global institutionalized liberal order affects the Asia-Pacific region is unclear, as few global organizations are based there, or even cover it.

The Asia-Pacific has few regional multilateral institutions or alliances of consequence.⁸

For economics, the Asia-Pacific has only China's-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.⁹

For security, Asia-Pacific has nothing. It still relies on America's hub-and-spoke architecture of separate bilateral alliances with Japan, South Korea and others and its unilateral defence guarantee to Taiwan. Despite the appeal of creating a Pacific Alliance Treaty Organization similar to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, there is none in sight (Takach 2024).¹⁰

Moreover, the most consequential international institutions for Asia-Pacific countries extend well beyond the region and even across the world.

This is true at the leaders' level, through annual plurilateral summits addressing all subjects, the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum (APEC), invented in America in 1993, joins America with democratic Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Mexico, Peru and Chile, along with non-democratic China, Hong Kong, Russia and Vietnam.

The G7 major democratic powers, also invented by America in 1975, joins America with Japan, Canada, and the UK, France, Germany, Italy and the European Union (Kirton 2024c; Kirton and Koch 2024b).

The G20 systemically significant states, co-created by America and Canada, has since 2008 joined America and China and the rich Global North with the poor Global South in a very balanced way (Kirton 2013; Kirton 2024a; Kirton and Koch 2024a).

The BRICS, invented by Russia in 2009, joins China with its neighbours authoritarian Russia and democratic India, and the global democracies of Brazil and South Africa.

⁸ Compared to Europe, which has the European Union and North America; which has the US, Mexico, Canada Agreement and North American Aerospace Defence Command; and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which connects the two.

⁹ It is a free trade agreement designed to liberalize trade in goods, services and intellectual property among 15 countries, led by democratic Japan, Korea, Australia, Indonesia, New Zealand and Singapore and including eight smaller, less democratic ones (Cambodia, Laos, Brunei Darussalam, Myanmar, Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam).

¹⁰ There are only tiny steps toward trilateral cooperation among the US, Japan and South Korea.

Thus, in this key component of polarity – international institutional affiliation – the US-led democratic coalition clearly, easily wins.

And below the leaders' level the same is true (see Appendix A).

Thus, these institutions and alliances have an initially modest but then increasing role in fostering regional stability.

The most promising one is the G20, with the most balance between the American-led and Chinese-led coalitions. Vladimir Putin has been absent for the last three years. China's Xi Jinping was absent in 2023 but returned to the G20's Rio Summit in November 2024.

G7 and G20 Adaptation, US-China Rivalry

The G7 will adapt to the emerging multipolarity in the Asia-Pacific by increasingly uniting against China as a rising economic, ecological and security threat, while still supporting the G20.

The G20 will adapt initially by following America less and China more, to produce a weaker but still meaningful consensus between them, and then by fostering a global collective unipolarity against the accelerating common threats to all.¹¹

G7

The G7's adaptation against China was seen at its most recent summit in Italy on June 13–15, 2024. On its eve, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni announced Italy's withdrawal from China's Belt and Road Initiative, leaving no G7 member inside.

At the summit, G7 leaders made 459 commitments, with seven explicitly directed at China (see Appendix B). Five commitments were critical and only two were cooperative ones.

The first two critical commitments specifically promised sanctions against China for aiding Russia's war machine in Ukraine. Two opposed China's malicious cyber activity and its dangerous actions in the South China Sea. Another supported Taiwan's participation in the World Health Organization.

The two cooperative ones generally promised to seek constructive and stable relations with China and the cooperation necessary to address global challenges.

This balance was expanded in the declaration issued by the G7 foreign ministers' meeting in late November 2024.

G20 Rio

The G20's adaptation to accommodate China dominated its most recent summit in Rio, Brazil, on November 18–19, 2024. This time Xi Jinping attended, as did US president Joe Biden.¹²

On their way to Rio, on the margins of the APEC leaders meeting in Lima, Peru, Xi and Biden met bilaterally (White House 2024). They advanced their cooperation on climate change, AI-related risks, counternarcotics, military-to-military cooperation and people-people exchanges.

¹¹ This assumes that Xi will not invade Taiwan and turn it into an Asia-Pacific Ukraine.

¹² They had met before at the G20's Bali Summit in 2022, but only once outside the G20 context, on the margins of the APEC meeting in California in 2023.

Biden also raised the conflictual issues of North Korean troops in Ukraine, China's support for Russia's defence industry, freedom of navigation in the South and East China Seas, Taiwan, China's unfair trade and technology practices, detention of US citizens and human rights violations.

Xi in turn emphasized cooperation, notably peaceful coexistence, stability, open communication and a rejection of decoupling and supply chain disruption (Xinhua 2024a). He also noted he would resolutely safeguard China's sovereignty, security and development interests. Strikingly, he said "the Thucydides Trap in not a historical necessity. A New Cold War should not be fought and cannot be won" (Xinhua 2024b). Xi consistently argued that in an era of globalization, where countries are deeply interconnected, power politics must be replaced by cooperation to build a community with a shared future for humankind. This vision of connectivity creating vulnerability and joining capability to create systemically significant states was the core conception that created the G20 in 1999 and continues it now (Kirton 2013).

None of the G20's Rio Summit's 174 commitments explicitly referenced China, or the Asia-Pacific or Indo-Pacific regions. But several reflected Xi Jinping's influence, the Xi-Biden desire for China-US cooperation, and the looming presence of Donald Trump.

On the latter, the Rio Declaration had no anti-protectionist pledge, or support for a renewables transition. And all knew that Trump was due to host the G20 in 2026.

Canada's Role

Canada will increasingly play an important unifying role in the shifting power dynamics of the Asia-Pacific, given its relationships with both China and the United States. It is America's sibling, a Pacific power, and an effective G7 and G20 leader and host.

Canada is a front-line state bordering the US and deeply integrated with its economy and society.

Canada is also a Pacific power. Its largely accommodating relationship with China dates back to 1972 when Justin Trudeau's father as prime minister recognized the People's Republic of China as the legitimate government of China. The recent chill in the relationship due to China's long imprisonment of two Canadian citizens is thawing now.

Trudeau is highly experienced in both the G7 and G20 summits, having attended all since he was first elected in 2015. He has met Xi at nine G20 summits, and Trump at four G20 and three G7 ones. So, Trudeau is the expert on tackling Trump in the G7 and G20.

Trudeau hosted the G7 at Charlevoix in 2018, with Trump there. It was a very successful summit, even if Trump tweeted shortly after its end that his officials should "unsign" the communiqué. The Charlevoix Summit made 315 commitments. Members' compliance with them a year later averaged 78% for all and 68% for Trump's US.

Charlevoix invented the global governance of AI. This was a critical subject on the cooperative agenda of both Xi, Biden and the G20 at Rio and will be in the years ahead.

At Charlevoix and elsewhere, Trudeau tackled Trump's trade war against Canada, China and many others, and helped prevent it from getting out of hand.

In mid-June 2025, Canada will host the G7 summit in Kananaskis, Alberta. To be sure, Trudeau's progressive priorities of gender equality, good migration and Indigenous peoples' reconciliation are

not shared by either Trump or Xi. But Trudeau's priorities for Kananaskis share some priorities with both and thus form a basis on which to build.

At Apulia, Canada identified five priorities (Kirton 2024b):

1. "economies that benefit everyone"
2. "fighting climate change"
3. "managing rapidly evolving technologies"
4. clean energy; and
5. foreign election interference

Added later was stable economic growth.

In 2025 Canada will also cooperate with South Africa, its Commonwealth colleague that chairs the G20 in November, to forge another North-South link.

So Canada will succeed at its G7 in 2025 and Trump's G20 in 2026 to play a much greater unifying role in 2027 and beyond.¹³

Environmental Issues as Common Ground

Environmental issues will provide a great deal of common ground among key players in the Asia-Pacific Region amid rising geopolitical tensions, but only after two years and much economic pain, before they unite to conquer their common existential enemy of climate change.

The Asia-Pacific region is increasingly the epicentre of the global environmental challenge, including the existential threat of climate change.

The region already produces a predominant share of global carbon dioxide emissions. They are led by China's 30%, then the US at 13.5%, India 7.3%, Russia 4.7%, and Japan 2.9%, for almost 60% in all (see Appendix C). Eight of the world's top 11 emitters are the Asia-Pacific members of the G20.

Basic bipolarity exists here. The pro-green JUSCANZ coalition, producing almost 20% of global emissions, contains America, Japan, Canada, Australia, South Korea and New Zealand. Its US leader has progressively and rapidly reduced its emissions and has an ambitious reduction target of 50% by 2030.

The competing black, pro-fossil fuel, G77+ coalition, led by the BRICS members of China, Russia and India, produces twice as many, or 43%, of global emissions. They have rising emissions and weak and distant targets for stabilizing and reducing them.

But a great reversal is imminent, due to the arrival of Donald Trump. On January 20, 2025, the US will suddenly become severely black, when he withdraws the US from the Paris Agreement and much else. Meanwhile China, Indonesia and others will continue to go green, with Indonesia's new president just promising to end its coal power in 15 years.

To be sure, the G20's Asia-Pacific powers could follow Trump's lead in a race to the black bottom. They could argue: "why bear we bear our share of the cut-back burden when the US will not", and that: "we cannot solve the problem without the US, which controls much of the essential climate finance, technology and fossil fuel production and use."

¹³ Moreover, if the G20's hosting order repeats that of its first cycle – after America in 2026 and the UK in 2027 – Canada would host the G20 in 2028.

But all will more likely refuse to follow Trump. Thus, big black America will be alone against the rest of the world – with the old green countries now joined by a more swiftly greening China, smog-drenched India and decarbonizing Indonesia.

This will take two years, and much economic pain for all. By 2027 Trump's perverse policies will produce an American, Chinese and then global economic slowdown, and even a severe recession (Wolf 2024). This, the record from 1979 to 1984 and from 2020 to 2022 shows, is by far the most effective way to cut emissions. Then, to revive the global economy, perhaps right after the US mid-terms elections in 2026, when Trump's US holds the G20 presidency, all its Asia-Pacific powers will come together, now joined with their European, Latin American and Saudi Arabian and Turkish colleagues to revive the global economy, as they did from 2008 to 2012. And now they will do so in much cleaner, greener ways. Russia will be forced to come on board due to its sanctions-hastened economic slowdown, escalating deaths from proliferating extreme weather events, or Putin's defeat in his war against Ukraine.

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Appendix A: Asia-Pacific Regionally Relevant International Institutions

For security, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue is a diplomatic partnership among the United States, Japan, Australia, and India, designed to support an open, stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific.

Aukus, formed in September 2021, is a trilateral security partnership among the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom, designed to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific and counter China.

For economics, the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership, led by Japan and Canada, excludes both China and America.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development is a global democratic club that excludes China and other Asia-Pacific autocracies.

For health, the regional Western Pacific Region regional office of the World Health Organization excludes Taiwan.

Appendix B: 2024 G7 Apulia Leaders' Communiqué Commitments on China

	Subject	Number of commitments	Percentage of commitments
1	Regional security*	65	14%
2	Energy	52	11%
3	Trade	51	11%
4	Development	44	9%
5	Migration and refugees	34	7%
6	Digital economy	33	7%
7	Gender	26	6%
8	Health	24	5%
9	Environment	24	5%
10	Food and agriculture	17	4%
11	Cybersecurity	14	3%
12	Non-proliferation	12	3%
13	Climate change	12	3%
14	Macroeconomics	11	2%
15	Labour and employment	8	2%
16	Infrastructure	7	1%
17	Democracy	6	1%
18	Taxation	6	1%
19	Social policy	5	1%
20	Peace and security	4	1%
21	Crime and corruption	4	1%
22	Human rights	3	1%
23	Financial regulation	3	1%
24	Terrorism	2	0.4%
25	International cooperation	2	0.4%
26	Drugs	1	0.2%
	Total	469	100%

*Regional security = 65 consists of Ukraine = 43; Gaza = 8; China-Taiwan = 4; Haiti = 2; Iran = 2; North Korea = 2; Indo-Pacific = 1; Libya = 1; General sanctions = 1.

China-Taiwan = 4 + 3

1. G7 2024-51. We will continue taking measures against actors in **China** and third countries that materially support Russia's war machine, including financial institutions, consistent with our legal systems, and other entities in **China** that facilitate Russia's acquisition of items for its defense industrial base.
2. G7-2024-51. Accordingly, we will impose restrictive measures consistent with our legal systems to prevent abuse and restrict access to our financial systems for targeted individuals and entities in third countries, including **Chinese** entities, that engage in this activity.
3. G7 2024-139. We seek constructive and stable relations with **China** (regional security)
4. G7 2024-140. [Given **China's** role in the international community, cooperation is necessary to address global challenges, and] we continue to engage in areas of common interest. (regional security)
5. G7 2024-149. We will continue our efforts to disrupt and deter persistent, malicious cyber activity stemming from **China**, which threatens our citizens' safety and privacy, undermines innovation, and puts our critical infrastructure at risk. (democracy)
6. G7 2024-150. support **Taiwan's** meaningful participation in international organizations, including in the World Health Assembly and WHO technical meetings, as a member where statehood is not a prerequisite and as an observer or guest where it is. (regional security)
7. G7 2024-153. We continue opposing **China's** dangerous use of coast guard and maritime militia in the South China Sea and its repeated obstruction of countries' high seas freedom of navigation. (regional security)

Appendix C: Global Share of Carbon Emissions

1	China	30.9%	30.9%
2	United States	13.5%	44.4%
3	India	7.3%	51.9%
4	Russia	4.7%	56.4%
5	Japan	2.9%	59.3%
Total Top 5			59.3%
6	Iran	2.0%	
7	Germany	1.8%	
8	Saudi Arabia	1.8%	
9	Indonesia	1.7%	
10	South Korea	1.7%	
11	Canada	1.5%	
Asia-Pacific Powers (8 of top 11)			64.2%

Source: World of Statistics, May 9, 2024.