



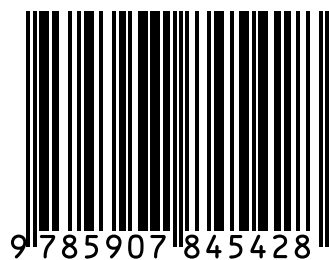
# Dr. Chaos or: How to Stop Worrying and Love the Disorder

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# Contents

4	An increasingly unuseful experience
6	A fragile order is still an order
9	Revolution potential, anyone?
11	The Trump casus: A half-baked revolution
15	Uncompromising confrontation
17	Back to the future
18	The end of universality
20	Classical diplomacy in a new environment
23	The changing purpose of wars
26	The substitution of institutions

Our wills and fates do so contrary run  
That our devices still are overthrown;  
Our thoughts are ours, their ends  
none of our own.

*William Shakespeare. Hamlet*

We are told incessantly that the changes unfolding today are without historical parallel – but since when, one might ask. How many years have elapsed since the world last witnessed shifts of a similar magnitude?

Could it be 40 years, taking us back to the moment when changes taking place in the Soviet Union created a pathway for ending the Cold War and the military and ideological confrontation between the two blocs? Or maybe 80 years back, when the Allies emerged victorious from the Second World War and when the UN system was conceived and established? But we can also look as far back as over a century ago when, having once ruled the world's destinies, Good Old Europe took a suicidal turn by unleashing a global carnage and losing its centrality in international affairs after a series of conflicts.

We could dive even deeper into the past to find seemingly fitting analogies, which ultimately only demonstrate how different today is from any other point in history. Even if some circumstances may concur or appear to resonate with one another, they invariably differ as to their consequences. If the historical processes are any guide, their non-linear nature appears as the key takeaway. What seemed cutting-edge and perennial one day has become a thing of the past these days, while matters long viewed as hopelessly outdated are now relevant like never before. Getting to grips with these changes and adapting to them takes time and is not for everyone.

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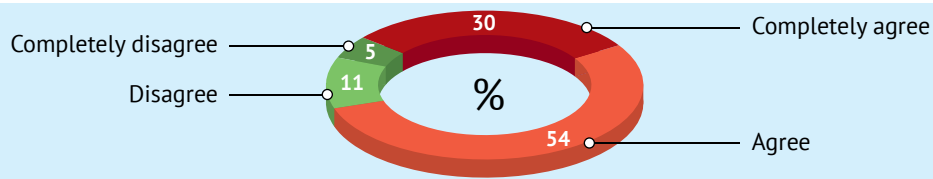
## An increasingly unuseful experience

It is rather natural for an individual, or an entire social group for that matter, to follow well-known and established models which have proven their worth and effectiveness. States are no exception in this regard. After all, history can be written as a patchwork of clashes between established worldviews and the processes seeking to challenge and change them. During periods of gradual change, these contradictions soften. But when change accelerates, stereotypes and behavioural patterns crumble, making it impossible to keep pace.

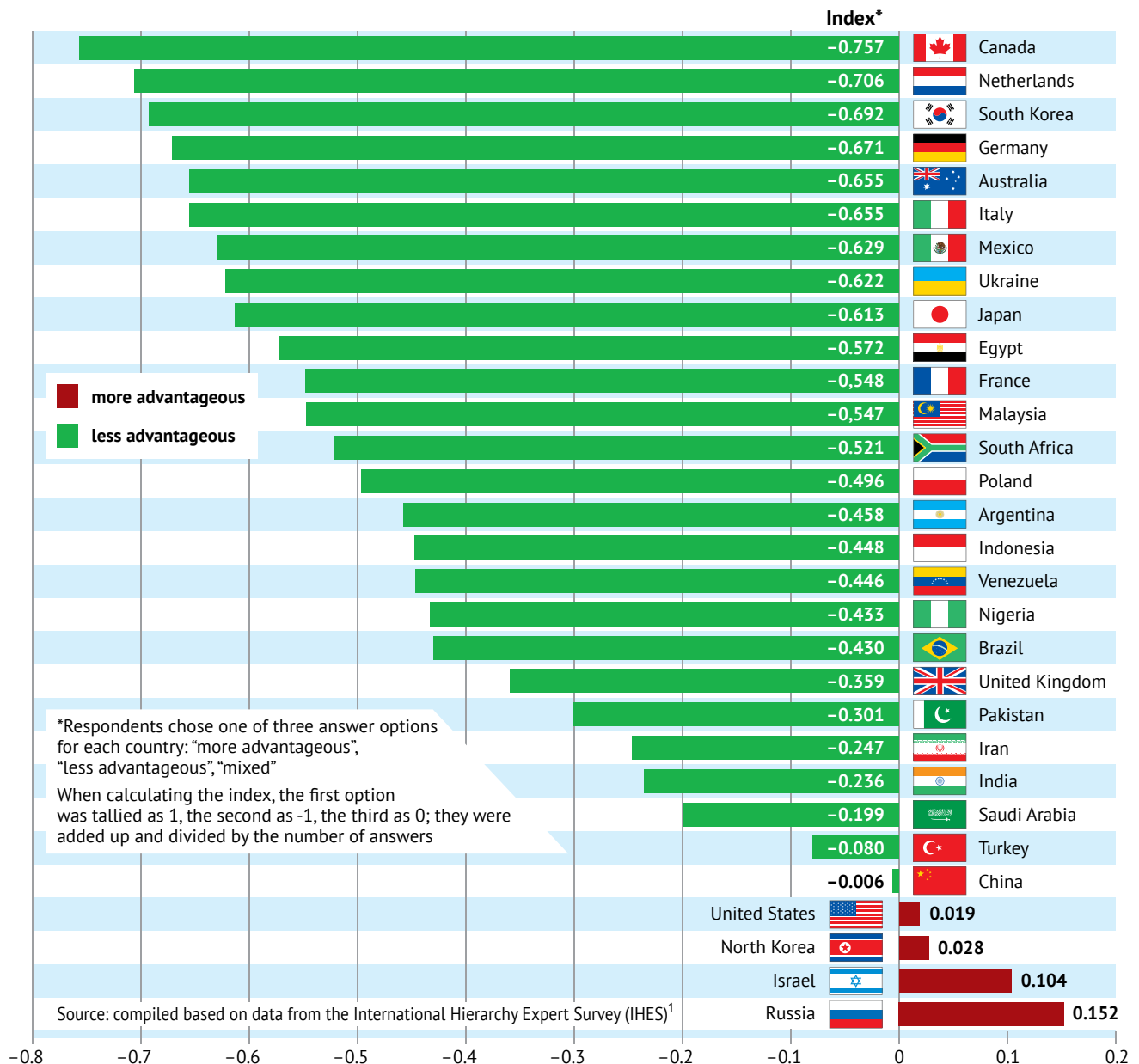
This is the kind of situation we are currently witnessing in international relations. The experience of the 20<sup>th</sup> century largely defines today's worldview. Of course, there was hardly any other period in history in terms of the shocks and suffering that befell humankind. That said, the legacy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is becoming less and less relevant when it comes to dealing with the ongoing processes, even if they can be traced back to this past. For several reasons, including ideological, political and economic, many have come to believe by the end of the previous century that the ideals of a liberal world order must govern the way we share this planet, are not subject to any critical review and are here to stay for an indefinite period of time. Needless to say that this has proven to be an illusion. In fact, it is that order and what made it stand out that paved the way for the swift, abrupt and sometimes even frightening changes we are witnessing today.

But what are these changes? Are they actually in the process of upending and radically transforming the existing patterns? Or could it be that we are witnessing a transition that will not erase the principles governing international relations entirely, even if it results in a major shake-up? Can it be argued that despite all the mind-boggling technological breakthroughs we are about to revert to the algorithms which had kept the clock ticking in the centuries past instead of getting something radically new and unseen before? This paper attempts to understand what is going on.

## WILL THE PRINCIPLE OF THE INVIOABILITY OF BORDERS BE BREACHED MORE OFTEN IN THE FUTURE?



## Will a more power-based international environment be more or less advantageous for the following states?



<sup>1</sup> For the survey methodology and indices calculated based on its results, see: Nesmashnyi A.D., Zhornist V.M., Safranchuk I.A. International Hierarchy and Functional Differentiation of States: Results of an Expert Survey // MGIMO Review of International Relations. 2022. Vol. 15. No. 3. P. 7–38; Safranchuk I.A., Nesmashnyi A.D., Chernov D.N. International Hierarchy Expert Survey: Wave III Report // Russia in Global Affairs. 19.01.2025. URL: <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/international-hierarchy-report/> (accessed on 13.08.2025). Full survey data are available on Harvard Dataverse: Chernov D., Nesmashnyi A., Safranchuk I., Zhornist V. (2025). International Hierarchy Expert Survey // Harvard Dataverse. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/PXVTEY>

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# A fragile order is still an order

The Valdai Club has been quite optimistic in its reports in recent years.<sup>1</sup> While acknowledging the rising number of urgent challenges and the inability of the global economy and politics to cope with them, we argued that the world has been surprisingly resilient in the face of the consequences of these shifts. In other words, the rapid erosion of global institutions may create more risks and comes at a cost but does not lead to a complete breakdown for the existing system of relations.

On this point, we fell out of tune with the way most of our colleagues to the west of Eurasia felt. They viewed these developments through the lens of the powers whose dominance has defined the world order's very essence for so long that there is hardly anyone who remembers, or knows, how it all worked before that. It is quite understandable that these powers and observers did not hide their misgivings over the fact that global governance was becoming less effective.

However, judging by the processes unfolding around the world, one can argue that the present-day system of trade and economic links, military and political constraints is more resilient than its creators could have imagined. That said, the latter, i.e., those who shaped this model, will be playing an increasingly diminished role in global affairs as new and more diverse centres of power, influence and economic potential emerge around the world.

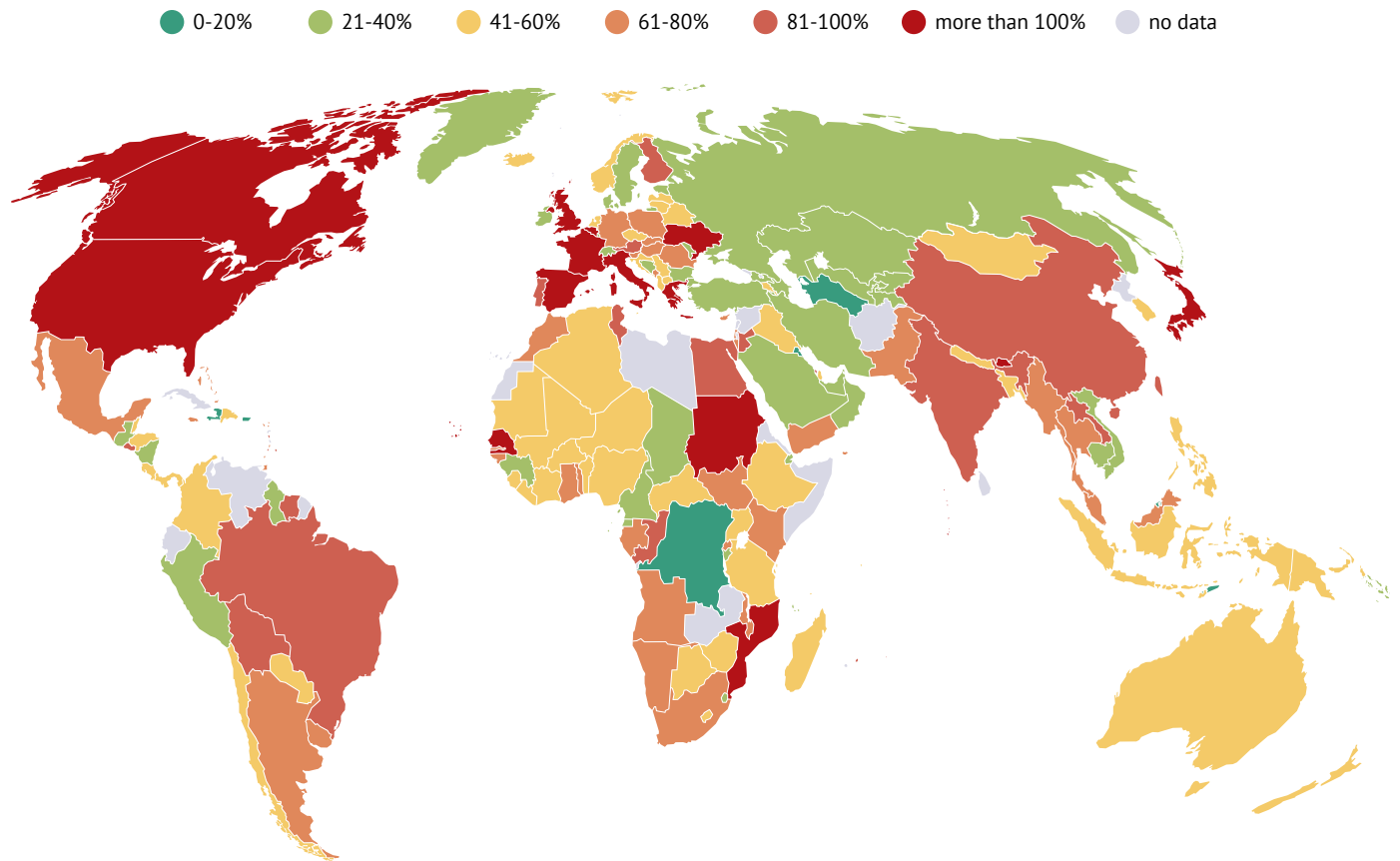
Yet the line between resilience and fragility remains blurry. In itself, multipolarity presents an environment that is less linear and offers much more variability but should not be regarded as forming a new order in itself. Some tend to tackle complex situations by coming up with straightforward approaches. For example, there has been a common trend to fulfil foreign policy objectives by military means. While failing to deliver in all its applications, the *might makes right* principle keeps resurfacing in the

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example: Barabanov O., Bordachev T., Lukyanov F., Sushentsov A., Timofeev I. *The World From the Bottom Up or The Masterpieces of Eurasian Architecture* // Valdai Discussion Club. 04.11.2024. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/the-world-from-the-bottom-up/>; Barabanov O., Bordachev T., Lukyanov F., Sushentsov A., Timofeev I. *Maturity Certificate, or the Order That Never Was* // Valdai Discussion Club. 02.10.2023. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/maturity-certificate-or-the-order-that-never-was/>; Barabanov O., Bordachev T., Lissovolik Ya., Lukyanov F., Sushentsov A., Timofeev I. *A World Without Superpowers* // Valdai Discussion Club. 24.10.2022. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/a-world-without-superpowers/>.



## LEVEL OF INDEBTEDNESS OF COUNTRIES OF THE WORLD



### Average indebtedness by region (%)

Australia and New Zealand	51.5	North Africa	73.6
Caribbean	51.6	North America	118.4
Central America	51.7	Pacific Islands	53.1
Central Asia and the Caucasus	26.4	South America	78.3
East Asia	111.8	South Asia	76.6
Eastern Europe	44	Southeast Asia	67.1
Europe	79.2	Sub-Saharan Africa (Region)	64.4
Middle East (Region)	44.9	Western Europe	87.2

Source: World Economic Outlook database: April 2025

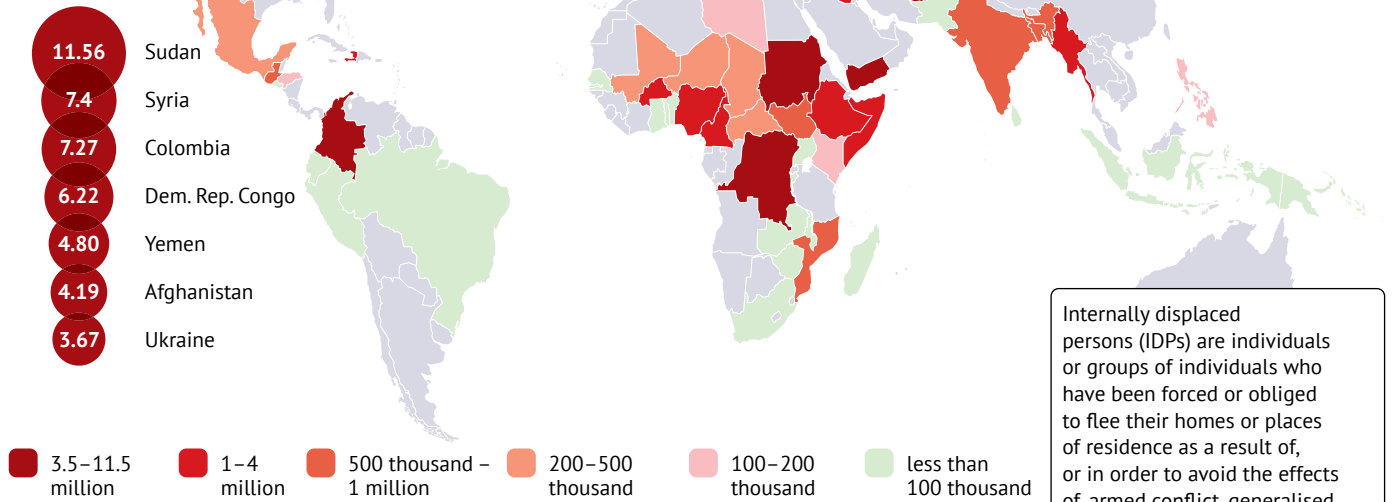
most heated hotspots of the planet with more archaic conflict settlement methods relegating international institutions to the background.

The main question here is whether the international community succeeds in going down the path of sustainable and steady development, even if marred with incidents every now and then, or, as we have seen

## HOTSPOTS: FORCED INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT IN 2024

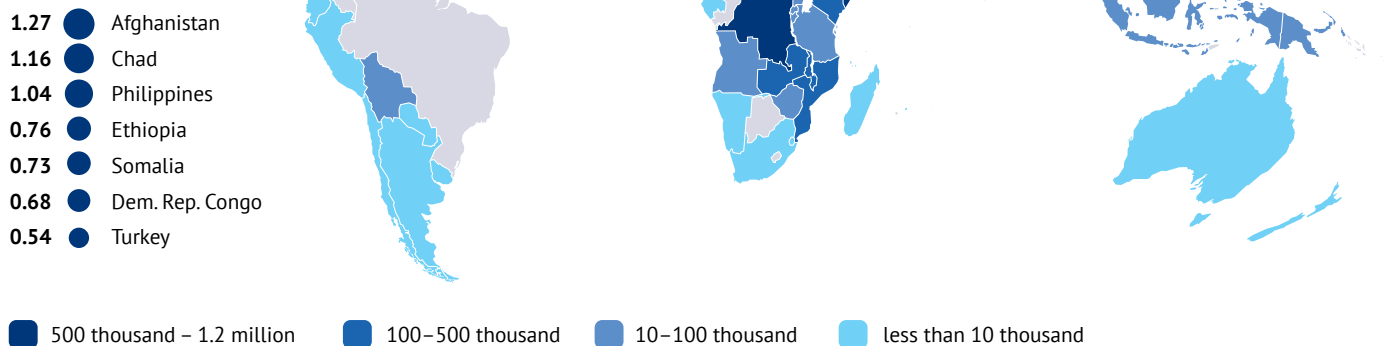
## Conflicts

## Top 7 countries by IDPs, million people



## Disasters

## Top 7 countries by IDPs, million people



Source: 2025 Global Report on Internal Displacement

so many times in the past, various crises will pave the way for a big war with its fatal consequences? It would be impossible to access the probability for any of these scenarios. The spectre of an all-out universal war will keep haunting us, maybe forever. While possible, it is never a given and does not have to happen, which does inspire some optimism. Arguing that the system of international relations has depleted its potential for radical change can serve as a starting point for understanding where it is headed.

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## Revolution potential, anyone?

Over the course of history, some countries made attempts to upend and reshape the norms and rules for themselves and the rest of the world. Their resolve can be measured along a spectrum of their revisionist aspirations, ranging from revising the existing system of relations to their benefit to adopting revolutionary behavioural patterns by taking deliberate action to dismantle the existing order and build something radically new.<sup>2</sup> This destruction drive brought about shocks which could go as far as to cause world wars. Once over, these shocks shaped a new vision of the balance of power as a stepping stone for the emergence of international relations in their new form which would last as long as this balance of power remained in place.

There is no doubt that today's shifts are profound and are taking place across virtually all domains. That said, they cannot be viewed as an expression of someone's deliberate will but should rather be regarded as a series of processes which were quite predictable and natural. We can go as far as argue that no power in today's world is willing or has the ability to turn everything upside down.

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<sup>2</sup> Classic examples of what can be described as truly revolutionary behaviour in international affairs can be traced to social revolutions in specific countries, such as France during the Revolution and Napoleonic Wars (1789-1815) or Soviet Russia / the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s. There was an element of revolutionary behaviour in US policy after the country declared independence and started to develop in late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, even if it was too weak and peripheral in the political landscape of that time. There is no point of arguing about revolutionary potential in international relations before that period, since there was no world order and hence nothing a revolutionary force could target. In fact, the very notion of an order becomes relevant starting in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century.

Nuclear weapons play a stabilising role, of course, by making a direct armed confrontation between nuclear powers pointless. In fact, the principle of guaranteed mutual destruction still largely defines the relations between nuclear powers and their strategy towards one another. However, in keeping with George Orwell's Cold War concept,<sup>3</sup> nuclear weapons have a different purpose, which consists of enabling nuclear powers to suppress any truly revisionist aspirations by weaker members of the international community. Orwell believed that the development of nuclear weapons created an unsurmountable level of inequality between those who have nuclear weapons and those who do not.

However, the Cold War no longer defines the world order in terms of the way international politics is structured. In fact, this would-be order has become too complex with the rulers unable to impose their total hegemony. They do not have the funds at their disposal for that purpose, nor any domestic impulses, nor even the will to do it. The United States offers a telling example in this regard. At the same time, the ruled ones have been expanding their potential without willing to radically change the existing order. On the contrary, they want to avoid a complete breakdown, fear collateral damage and believe that certain institutions may benefit them. Within the existing system, they can elevate their status without staging any revolutionary upheavals or assuming excessive risks. The World Majority<sup>4</sup> believes that a revolution is not something it needs.

Overall, in a post-globalised world, the international environment tends to absorb and cushion state action which could have caused a major crisis in the past, which is attributable to greater connectivity in communications, technological competition, and the fact that everybody owes something to others these days, coupled with the fact that between living better lives and accomplishing heroic feats, people tend to opt for the former.

These systemic factors have a cooling effect on international relations and do not favour radical changes. However, in themselves, they would not be enough. As we know, global economic connectivity did not prevent a world war in early 20<sup>th</sup> century, just like the family bonds linking the 19<sup>th</sup> century European monarchies failed to avert a whole series of violent, and brutal, clashes.

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<sup>3</sup> See: Orwell G. *You and the Atom Bomb* // Tribune 19.10.1945.

<sup>4</sup> See: Bordachev T. *The World Majority and Its Interests*// Valdai Discussion Club. 10.10.2024. URL: <https://valdai-club.com/a/reports/the-world-majority-and-its-interests/>.

Importantly, there are no countries capable of putting forward a revolutionary agenda, primarily in terms of domestic policy, which would require truly decisive action. Not a single power is willing to radically change its own society by transitioning to a novel social and economic framework. Therefore, making radical changes on the international stage becomes irrelevant too.

Considering how complex present-day societies have become, it is now impossible to predict the way radical changes in domestic and international politics can affect the economy and governance in general. Meanwhile, every state prioritises domestic stability and being able to ensure that it can develop in safety, overriding any external ambitions.

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## The Trump casus: A half-baked revolution

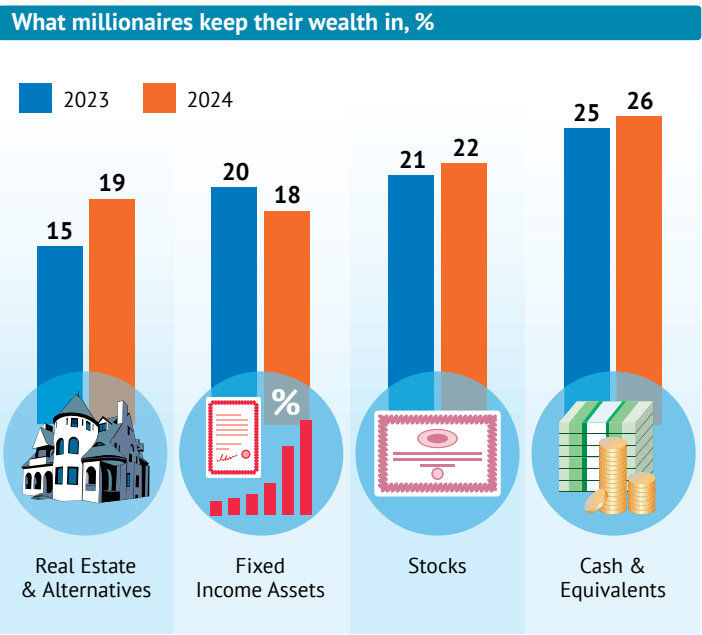
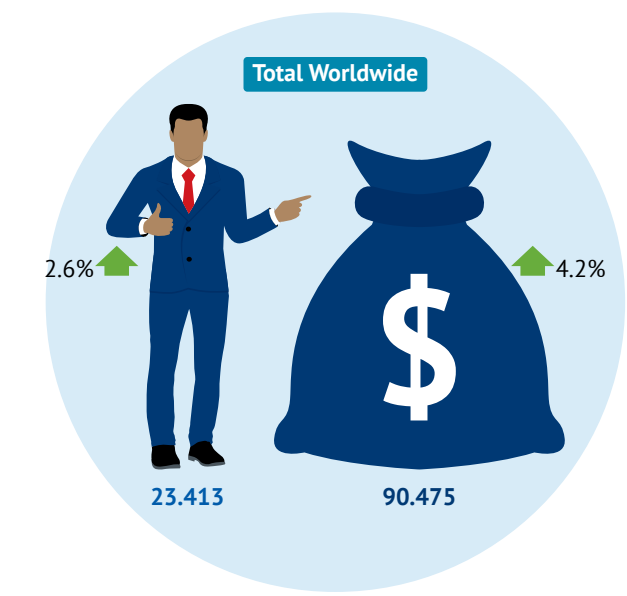
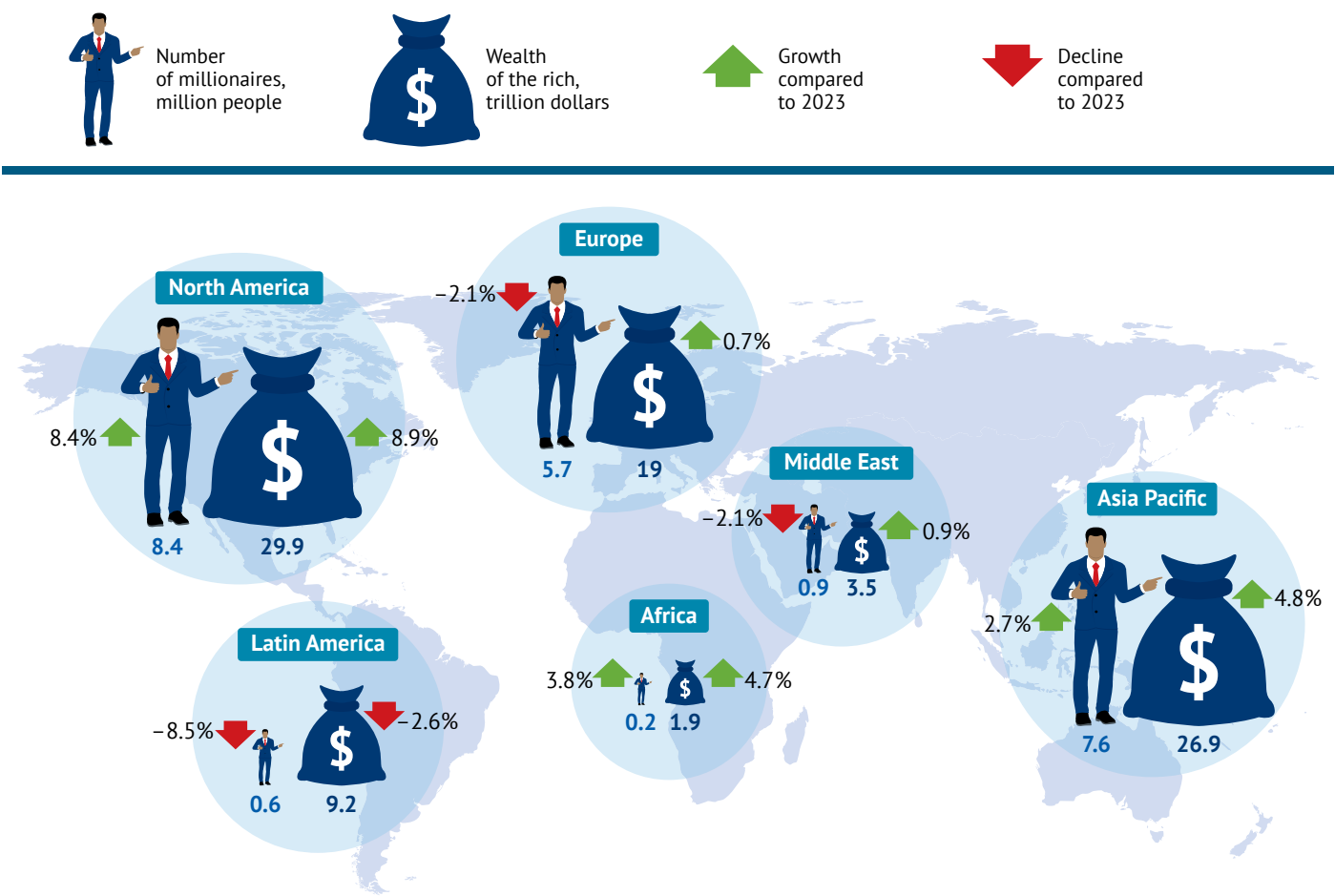
Donald Trump offers a case in point when it comes to discussing the potential for radical change around the world. The notion of the so-called second American revolution has been gaining traction among his supporters in the United States. The 47<sup>th</sup> President does have a lot of influence on international relations, and the whole situation may appear to be quite prone to a revolution considering the abrupt steps he has made – and especially in view of his declared intentions. But what kind of a revolution could this be if the impulse comes from a person who already de facto rules the world? After all, the United States remains the world's biggest power, even if it may have lost some of its might. Taken in its classical form, the revolutionary theory as defined by Marxism-Leninism makes it abundantly clear that only the exploited groups, those suffering from oppression, have the right to be revolutionary. Under this logic, a hegemon's revolt against international rules it had shaped cannot be designated as a revolution. Marxists use a different language for describing these aspirations by calling it an effort to divide the world against the backdrop of mounting differences between imperialist powers.<sup>5</sup> Nothing new on this front, either.

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<sup>5</sup> One can find a classic description of these differences in Vladimir Lenin's article *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. Written in the spring of 1916 in Zurich, it was published in Petrograd in April 1917.

POVERTY AND WEALTH SIDE BY SIDE

The number of rich people and their wealth in 2024



## GDP per capita (2020-2025, %)



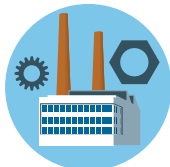
**Decline  
by 1.8%**

39 fragile and  
conflict-affected  
states (FCS)



**Growth  
by 2.9%**

Other  
developing  
countries



## GDP per capita in 2025, \$ per year

Virtually  
unchanged  
since 2010

**\$1,500**

39 fragile and  
conflict-affected  
states (FCS)

**\$6,900**

More than  
doubled  
since 2010

Other  
developing  
countries

## Number of people living on less than \$3 per day in FCS countries



**421  
million  
people  
2025**

More than  
the rest of  
the world  
combined

**435  
million  
people  
2030**

almost 60%  
of the world's  
poorest  
people

## Extreme poverty level

**40%**

FCS

**6%**

Other  
developing  
countries



## FCS



**In 21** of the  
39 countries currently  
classified as FCS,  
conflicts are active,  
making poverty  
eradication goals  
more difficult



## Affected by conflicts and instability

**More than 70% of people**  
affected by conflict and  
fragility are in Africa.  
Half of the countries facing  
conflict or fragility today have  
been in that situation  
for 15 years or more



## Life expectancy

**64 years**

FCS

**71 years**

Other  
developing  
countries



Sources:

<https://www.capgemini.com>,  
<https://www.worldbank.org>,  
news agencies

Trump's willingness to carve out a new path for the United States' development is attributable to the fact that the country is facing too many challenges. By and large, the White House's foreign policy agenda can be viewed as an extension of domestic politics and economics. Having enjoyed the status of a global hegemon, the United States views this situation as a turning point, even if it amounts to acknowledging, whether knowingly or instinctively, that even the world's greatest power has to face certain constraints and limitations. Today, the United States is not seeking to transform the world but rather to benefit from the processes unfolding internationally. Its goal is to preserve the ability to resolve any international matter, which the United States views as having principled importance, on its own terms.

In other words, if this is a revolution, it is half-baked. Instead of shattering the old order for the sake of building a new one, it seeks to get rid of anything, which required additional spending or effort from the United States without going any further. This is all there is to it. Trump and his team seem to focus on national interests without giving much thought to the international order and its categories. As representatives of the world's biggest power, they have opted for treating other countries in an arbitrary fashion with multiple variables. It all comes down to the extent to which the United States has an edge over the specific countries it deals with. In this regard, so far it has been able to preserve this competitive advantage in its relations with almost all other countries, even if this edge relies among other things on the waning liberal world order and its tools.

Today, the White House professes radicalism, albeit with a slight liberal aftertaste. This way, it is the opposite of the radical behaviour by Trump's predecessors with their post-Cold War radical globalist agenda. Still, this does not amount to an international effort to revise the social and political pillars of this system. What we see is an attempt to address the increasingly flagrant distortions resulting from the fact that the United States greatly enhanced its international standing in the 1990s when there was no one to counter these aspirations and maintain balance.

Trump's ideological anti-globalist zeal is appealing to many in different countries after decades of the dogmatic imposition of liberal schemes, which have not only degenerated into demagoguery but have also become a threat. This sympathy is largely emotional. The global hegemon, which claims to be reshaping world politics, is acting alone against the whole world (take



Trump's global trade war, for example). This is because its primary aim is to dismantle the elements of order (institutions) that allowed other countries to somewhat compensate for the force of its hegemony.

Even if we view Trump as a revolutionary determined to break the global order apart, replacing it with an order offering greater justice and better representation is not on his agenda. Trump's foreign policy is designed to do everything to enable the United States to further increase its economic might and use all the available resources around the world for domestic development.

As for other countries, they seek to have a wider range of tools for countering US pressure, including by selectively supporting some of the elements of the old order while also building up their own potential. They will also form ad hoc coalitions with other countries for defending their converging interests, and can also engage in separate, one-on-one deals. What the United States and most of its partners and opponents share in common is their focus on momentary considerations. This has become a new normal.

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## Uncompromising confrontation

The nature of military operations and the objectives of participants today stand in stark contrast to those of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A defining aspect of strategic thinking in the previous century was the acceptance of the total defeat and capitulation of an adversary as a means to resolve systemic contradictions and lay the foundations for a new world order. The intricately connected First and Second World Wars constituted a pivotal historical experience, with the Allied Powers achieving total victory by militarily annihilating their opponents (Germany in Europe and Japan in Asia) and comprehensively reshaping the political systems within those territories.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> To be sure, total defeat applied solely to the principal adversaries – Germany and Japan. Only in these two instances did post-war occupation become a factor determining these nations' developmental trajectories to this day, a fact that underscores the unprecedented durability of the victory achieved in 1945. Regarding their satellites, the victorious powers acted with flexibility and selectivity.

Returning to George Orwell, in 1984, his seminal dystopian novel, the superpowers understood the primarily deterrent role of nuclear weapons only *after* exchanging strikes. Fortunately, in reality, humanity reached this conclusion without apocalyptic experimentation. Nuclear weapons gradually – but irrevocably – transformed perceptions of achieving total victory in confrontations between great powers. They became a tool to dissuade nations from instigating global wars. Conceptually, however, they merely intensified the resolve to pursue either complete annihilation or defence against it. “The attacker who strikes first dies second” – this principle underpinned nuclear deterrence. It remains the foundation of the relationship between the United States and Russia as nuclear superpowers.

The Cold War, an inherently ideological confrontation, was similarly imbued with the ethos of existential struggle. Both sides initially aimed not merely to prevail over their opponent but to fundamentally alter its social, political, and economic system. While eschewing unconditional military victory, the adversaries sought to defeat each other on other fronts – whether ideological or economic. In the USSR, Nikita Khrushchev was the last leader committed to this notion of total victory, whereas in the United States, the idea of fighting to the bitter end never faded. Consequently, the Cold War’s conclusion was perceived there as an outright triumph over the Soviet Union. The belief of late Soviet leaders that they were *ending* rather than losing the Cold War, and the conviction of post-Soviet Russia’s first leaders that they had joined the *winning side*, did nothing to alter Western perceptions. The fate of the USSR and its military and economic alliances resembled not a military rout but an ideological and political collapse.

This sense of triumph fostered the illusion that an ideal world could be constructed – one where the universally correct principles of liberal democracy prevailed, and nations on the “right side of history” could dictate the destiny of others. Military interventions were now driven not by the containment of geopolitical rivals in distant theatres but by claims of universal moral imperatives. The use of force was framed as a battle between good and evil – a struggle permitting no compromise, only unconditional victory. The absence of any counterbalance to Western power for a quarter-century bred the temptation for its arbitrary application. The examples are well known.

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## Back to the future

The logic of existential confrontation, justified during the Second World War, came to be applied to local conflicts that would have been deemed trivial by Cold War standards. It was only in this atmosphere that institutions such as the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia – inspired by the Nuremberg and Tokyo War Crimes Trials – and the International Criminal Court could emerge. At the dawn of the new millennium, the same rationale crystallised in concepts like the “war on terror,” “rogue state,” and “axis of evil.”

The Ukraine crisis represents the culmination of a process that began with the end of the Cold War. Its essence lies in NATO serving as a tool to preclude any alternative solutions in European security affairs. In other words, it became a means to inflict a definitive political defeat upon Russia, which – having failed to secure a respectable place within the proposed system – became its adversary. After February 2022, the notion of *political* defeat transformed into that of *military and political*, even *strategic*, defeat. The Atlantic community operated on the assumption that such an outcome was achievable.

Donald Trump was the first leader to recognise the contrary and state it openly. He initiated negotiations with Moscow regarding Ukraine, demonstrating a fundamental willingness to compromise – thus shifting the process from the moral sphere, where bargaining is inappropriate, to another category altogether. A deal on Ukraine, even if achieved, would be unlikely to resolve the underlying contradictions. Recurrences would be virtually inevitable. However, the realistic objective would no longer be total defeat but rather the continual adjustment of the status quo (using all available means) and the situational extraction of more favourable terms for the immediate future.

Should this model become systematically entrenched in international relations, we might witness a peculiar renaissance of 18<sup>th</sup>-century foreign policy practice. That era’s history is replete with bloody wars, yet these typically stopped short of completely annihilating the adversary. When making peace, parties prepared for renewed conflict – but upon re-engaging,

they sought more advantageous peace terms rather than the opponent's destruction. One crucial distinction is that three centuries ago, Europe was the epicentre of world politics. Today, such approaches are becoming universal.

What of the nuclear factor? It will hopefully deter nations from large-scale nuclear exchanges. Yet, as events demonstrate, it cannot prevent the outbreak of major conventional conflicts. Moreover, within this new paradigm, the possibility of tactical nuclear weapon use – considered unthinkable during the mature Cold War – cannot be entirely discounted.

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## The end of universality

Contemporary discourse often treats diplomacy as a relic of the past, lamenting the disappearance of the diplomatic craftsmanship that characterised the previous two centuries. Commentators observe that we have entered an era of short-term strategies dominated by provocative foreign policy manoeuvres designed for immediate public impact – actions requiring neither diplomatic agreements nor complex negotiations.

This assessment holds only partial validity. More accurately, what is fading is the universality of international approaches. Institutions, resources, and frameworks that, until recently, were considered global commons are being transformed by the United States into instruments of unilateral advantage. As the principal architect and sponsor of these structures, Washington believes it possesses the exclusive right to define criteria of justice whenever American interests are at stake.

The hypocrisy has diminished: where the proclaimed universality of norms once served as a façade for the unilateral actions of the powerful, the current bluntness of US policy – openly prioritising national advantage – has surprised many while providing others with a new reference point. The US actively strengthens its national resources, including at its allies'

expense. Washington displays not a hint of embarrassment, and remarkably, the international community has rapidly acclimatised to accepting such conduct as normal.

This transformation of American hegemony (whose primary driver, as noted above, stems from the recognition of capability constraints) has not produced anything resembling the clear balance of power that emerged following the Second World War. That earlier era saw the three principal victorious powers establish a system of mutual diplomatic consultations, which formed the bedrock of international order.

The axes of military and political tension are easy to identify: the USA–China, Russia–NATO, India–Pakistan, India–China and Israel–Iran. Each resembles a coiled spring, capable of triggering sudden eruptions, whether synchronised or asynchronous. Recent events provide ample evidence: the military crisis between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan; attacks by nuclear powers Israel and the USA against currently non-nuclear Iran; all unfolding against the backdrop of the ongoing Ukrainian conflict involving Russia directly and NATO countries through intensive proxy engagement.

In most scenarios, particularly those involving major powers, accurately gauging the true balance of potential in advance proves challenging. Military confrontations – inherently unpredictable by their very nature – become even more so. Securing a strategic victory over an adversary appears unattainable even for major powers, while the cost of any attempt to achieve it surpasses what any party is prepared to pay. Israel, among others, has learned this lesson first-hand: not only during its nearly two-week war with Iran, which raised numerous questions and failed to achieve its strategic objectives, but also in its confrontation with Hamas, where no clear endgame is in sight. Following several days of intense military crisis, India and Pakistan similarly chose to step back, recognising that further escalation would precipitate catastrophic outcomes.

The impossibility of securing a strategic victory over an opponent likewise renders a profound resolution of these crises unfeasible. Yet this does not negate the entire spectrum of interstate practices and diplomatic mechanisms, which retain their efficacy.

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## Classical diplomacy in a new environment

Well-known from the history of Ancient Rome, the **patron-client relationship** is a widespread practice that interaction between the United States and its partners exemplifies with sufficient clarity. A patron guaranteed his clients' social status, safety, legal rights, and economic wellbeing. In response, they were in duty bound to participate in protecting and enhancing his prosperity by providing on request services, brawn, votes, and material resources.

A client in Rome had yet another duty that implied kowtowing to the patron (*salutatio*) in his house on the daily basis. After a brief hesitation, the European allies of the United States gave up the illusion of democratic equality and began mastering the communication method so beloved by Donald Trump by giving him royal honours and using flattery. Ukraine is one of the weakest clients in this patron-client network, but Washington cannot leave it to its devices without losing its status and respect from the clientele.

This patron-client network is stable and will persist as long as the United States is committed to what its clients see as basic terms of mutual relationship. But what the Americans regard as a mere readjustment (primarily financial) of patron-client relations is the biggest shake-up in generations and a motive to revise the substance of these relations for many of their clients.

**Ideologically grounded international solidarity** is the second widespread type of diplomatic practice. Ideological solidarity is the most effective variety, but it requires constant ideological sublimation and an effort to keep up enthusiasm, while failing to offer immediate advantages. It was easy to maintain ideological unity amid a systemic conflict, such as the Cold War, since there was no need to explain the reason for it and who it was directed against.

But the erosion of structuralised confrontation interfered with this neat model and the Ukraine crisis demonstrated its instability. Since late 2021, confrontation with Russia has emerged as the ideological basis of solidarity between Europe and America. The Old World was bearing the brunt of its cost, but the discomfort was smoothed by the factor of ideological kinship (an unqualified moral condemnation of Russia and a firm confidence

in the West's superiority) and identity of aims. In 2025, the United States changed its position, distancing itself from a direct involvement. Europe in this situation felt the need for an ideological solidarity scheme of its own, with opposition to the "Russian threat" as its foundation. The strategic plan behind it is still the hope for Russia's possible defeat, if Ukraine is provided with every kind of assistance. What can be read between the lines is the European intention to prolong the Ukraine conflict and create, within four to five years, a domestic armed force, capable, as they believe, of deterring Russia from a military invasion.

**Friendly diplomatic solidarity against a common enemy** is the third type of diplomatic practice in an epoch characterised by a crisis of the international order. The EU countries are using this scheme against Russia – but Russia, in fact, is falling back on it as well. For example, Russia-China cooperation, though officially not directed against third countries, is geared to coordinating moves against synchronised Western pressure brought to bear on Russia and China. There are other countries joining this cooperation arrangement on their own terms and for different reasons, mostly on account of mounting US economic pressure, mixed with certain political motives. Some recent cases in point are Washington's attacks on Brazil and South Africa (with the US President's personal attitudes clearly transpiring in the matter). The geography of sympathies and rivalry is being expanded. For example, Pakistan, Indonesia, or, for that matter, South Africa were not indifferent to the Israeli actions in Gaza.

Indirect **diplomacy between adversaries linked in a balance of strength** is the fourth type of diplomatic activity. Being in this state means that there are no chances for a military victory and attainment of strategic aims via direct confrontation. This type is present in different ways between the US and China, and between India and Pakistan; individual elements thereof could be found in relations between Israel and Iran.

Following Donald Trump's takeover, this approach has become apparent in relations between Russia and the United States, the latter realising that no amount of military aid to Ukraine will enable it to gain the upper hand but can involve the United States even deeper into crisis and create risks of a nuclear war. Donald Trump, however, is refusing to think in terms of a balance of power and is avoiding (at least, for the time being) profoundly structuralised talks offered by Russia. His ultimate goal is making peace on the quick, halting military operations at the line of contact, announcing a huge diplomatic success, and focusing on something else.

Finally, **solidarity of countries united by a common economic interest** is the fifth type of diplomatic activity. The scheme of cooperation in this regard should be sufficiently simple, equitable and clear to everyone. It also must yield obvious material results that are acceptable to all sides and support implementation of agreements. A case in point is OPEC+: despite the heterogeneity of its members, it has made it possible to coordinate actions by the main energy suppliers for years.

The member countries of the Eurasian Economic Union are guided by the same principle. Although their political vectors are not identical, the obvious economic advantages of cooperation outweigh all other considerations. This is also the basis of non-public talks on new economic settlement methods based on national currencies, crypto currencies, as well as other assets and arrangements, whose range widens as the United States uses the dollar and its national financial system to persecute opponents. Discrete deals with pragmatic outcomes can unite numerous countries keen on development and prosperity and will over time bring closer the emergence of a new system of financial and economic relations.

But the **fundamental diplomatic practice** is here to stay, too, creating and maintaining structuralised relations between major countries, as we can see in the case of Russia and China as well as at the Eurasian Economic Union, BRICS, the SCO, and other organisations.

The abovementioned types – fundamental diplomatic practice between equals, pragmatic discrete deals, ideological solidarity diplomacy, opportunistic “short-term strategies,” and patron-client relations – exist in parallel and constantly mutate.

The full-blown grand diplomacy is distinct from its surrogates in that it lacks a predetermined finale. This seems to be implied by itself. Talks are what is meant to lead to a mutually acceptable compromise based on concessions from all parties. But in practice, this has become highly infrequent after the end of the Cold War, especially where big and momentous conflicts are concerned. It was believed that there was the “right” outcome that the opponents should reach, an outcome determined by the leading Western nations’ concept of fairness. The most notorious example is Yugoslavia at various stages of its disintegration. There were attempts to apply the same pattern to Syria. Other instances are also available.



In itself, this does not necessarily mean the existence of ill intent, but this approach proceeds from the premise that there are those in the right and those in the wrong in a conflict. A settlement should be in favour of the former, while the latter could only hope for slightly more lenient terms, no more than that. Needless to say, the guilt or otherwise was identified based on concepts inherent in the international liberal order. No other interpretations were allowed. It is for this reason that many people saw Donald Trump's approach that he was not taking sides in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and simply wanted to assist in ending the hostilities as revolutionary. In fact, however, this is nothing more than a return to the usual practice.

Diplomacy has more room for action in an epoch of crumbling order and constantly emerging new seats of contradictions. However, its task is not to solve these contradictions, but to maintain them at a level permitting to avoid fatal manifestations of conflict and achieve at least a minimum of required cooperation.

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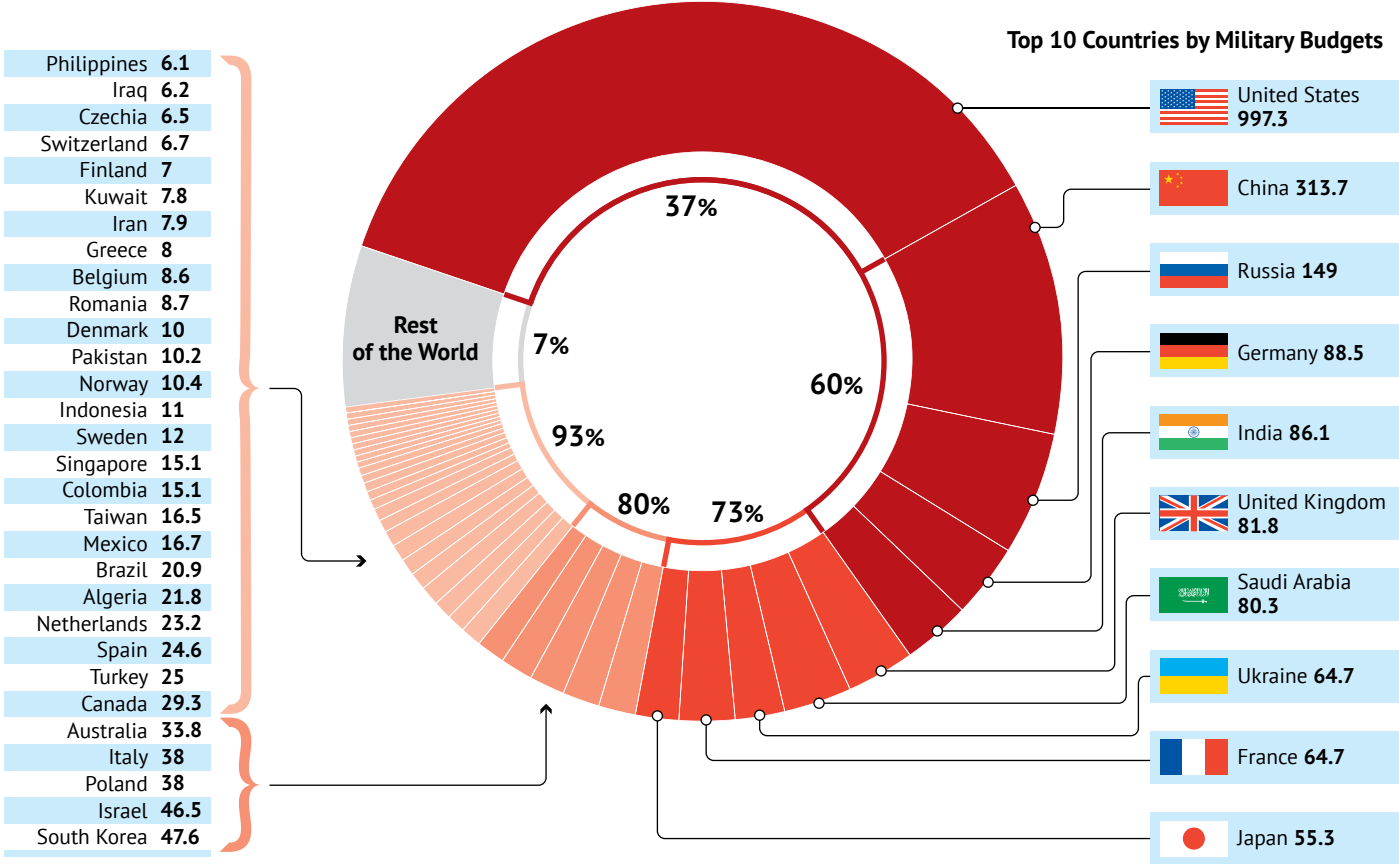
## The changing purpose of wars

A polycentric international system, underpinned by checks and balances, has failed to materialise. No single actor is now capable of maintaining order in regional and local crises. The United States, until recently the self-appointed military guarantor, now proves insufficiently powerful to manage multiple concurrent crises. At present, its capabilities are limited to lightning-fast military or diplomatic interventions aimed primarily at declaring an outcome.

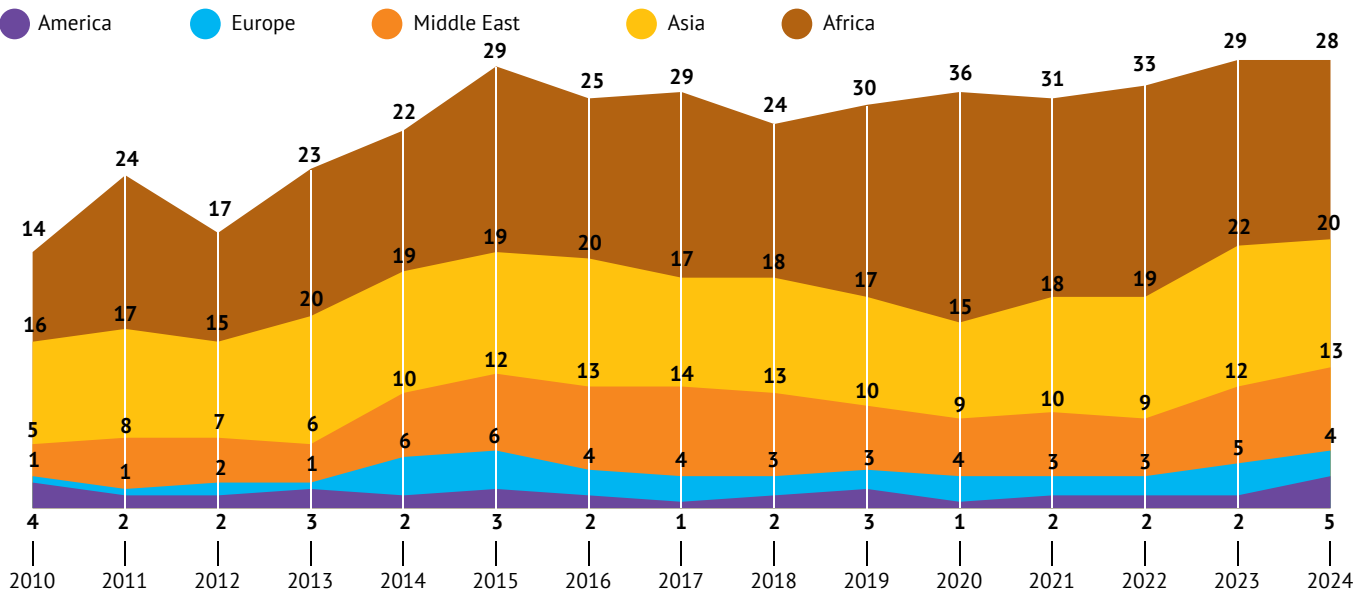
A world with no apparent rules or enforcers creates a feeling of discomfort. While order is by no means the historical norm in international relations, the overwhelming majority of people alive today grew up under a certain order; it is familiar. It would be odd not to have any order whatsoever.

That said, what is the origin of the rules shaping any international order? They have all been produced through intra-Western conflicts over the course of several centuries – a period when the West not only stood at the vanguard of, but essentially embodied, world politics. The relations within the West and with the West are only part of today's world politics – sometimes

MILITARY EXPENDITURES OF STATES IN 2024 (\$ BILLION)



Stable Tensions: States' Participation in Armed Conflicts (2010-2024)



Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP)

more and sometimes less important. The rest of the world does not share the same concept of rules as the West understands them. So, what would be the source of the shared rules necessary to establish a world order?

For four hundred years, military conflicts have been waged to determine the rules of the game – including the principle that a dominant power can systematically impose self-serving conditions on others. This prolonged struggle has failed to produce a desirable outcome. After three decades of US supremacy, it has become obvious that this supremacy is impossible despite the United States' giant overbalance in its aggregate power. The biggest challenge to hegemonic policy now originates from within American society itself, which no longer sees the benefits of this status for the United States.

Goals arising from conflicts of a different nature, such as internal conflicts or wars over disputed territory, may be more hypothetically achievable. One recent example is Azerbaijan's restored control over Karabakh. The past decades show that secessionism and irredentism do work, given certain factors, while projects to revamp existing states through liberal democratic principles by means of armed intervention do not.

Yet, it is impossible to calculate the costs of any campaigns accurately. Just as it is impossible to determine the price that society is willing to pay for success. Neither states nor societies have an internal demand for gambling with victory in an armed confrontation. The United States realises that it can no longer exploit its global supremacy as it once did, and any attempts to fully defend it would incur enormous costs. Russia would not risk its own socioeconomic stability for a decisive victory in a military conflict. One exception is direct full-scale aggression, but the probability of such an action against a nuclear superpower is close to zero. In fact, domestic problems constitute the only real threat to the existence of major nuclear powers. India and Pakistan are unwilling to jeopardise their development for the sake of resolving their territorial issue. However, they will continue this conflict as part of their broader diplomacy.

Perhaps the purpose of wars has changed. The contemporary objective may no longer lie in victories – wherein one party achieves all its goals – but rather in maintaining a balance necessary for a period of relative peaceful development. This represents another reference to fairly remote historical eras.

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# The substitution of institutions

The current system is not excessively unfair to any of the major players; in other words, it is not so flawed as to require revolutionary solutions. The world has experienced numerous social and political upheavals on its path to self-awareness, learning to manage nature and control the most destructive socio-political processes. This capability has now reached a significantly high level.

It appears that the era of grand ideas, overarching theories, comprehensive programmes, and great expectations is over. A fragmented and highly heterogeneous world is no longer conducive to sweeping generalisations or one-size-fits-all projects. Nevertheless, the current global structure is unlikely to change in the near future. Countries differ in the clarity of their future plans, with the Global South leading in this regard, as it remains firmly focused on securing maximum opportunities for development. It is followed by China, Russia, and the United States, which also prioritise internal prosperity as a decisive factor, yet are further compelled by the additional imperative of maintaining their great-power status. Bringing up the rear is Europe, which has devolved from the flagship of the liberal world order into an outlier in this new polycentric world. Be that as it may, national plans – even the most ambitious – are based on existing opportunities and realistic, accessible means of expanding them; they do not require a fundamental restructuring of the global order.

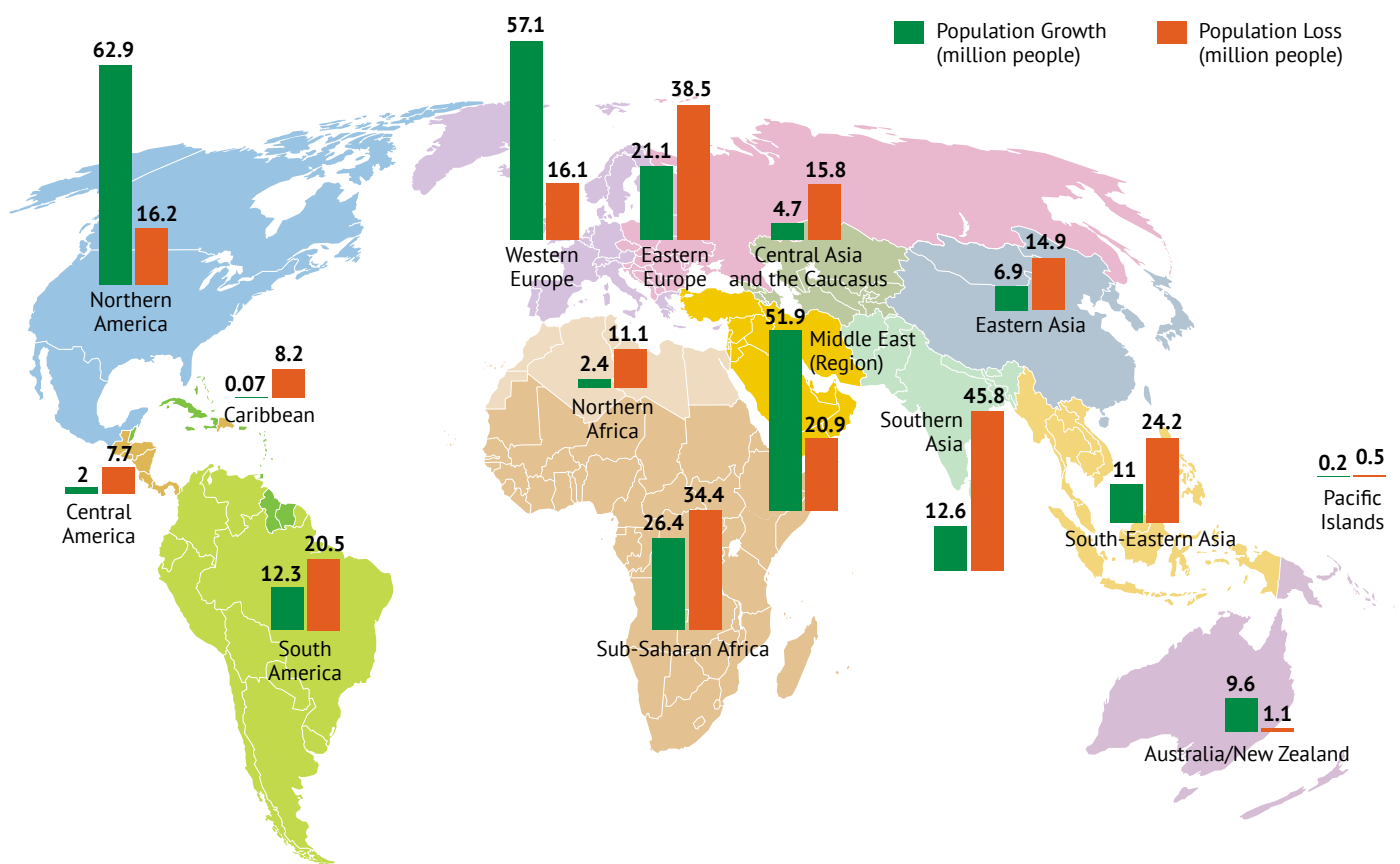
Yet, the political and economic system constantly generates new mechanisms for adaptation to manage social and economic life, preventing random factors from triggering major systemic tragedies. Artificial intelligence, a tool operating at a qualitatively new level, is poised to accomplish this task in the future. Historically, technological progress has never diminished the authority of reason. The printing press, for instance, made it possible to reproduce vast amounts of nonsense, yet at the same time it increased the demand for literacy and the skills needed to master increasingly complex technologies. We hope the same will apply to artificial intelligence.

The impossibility of revolution in world politics inhibits major changes, reducing them to matters of discourse rather than practice at both national and international levels. This has prompted a spontaneous, ongoing search for new substitute solutions, designed not only to avoid the accumulation of a critical mass of problems but also to forge a different reality. This primarily concerns the sphere where the economy intersects with the state's main

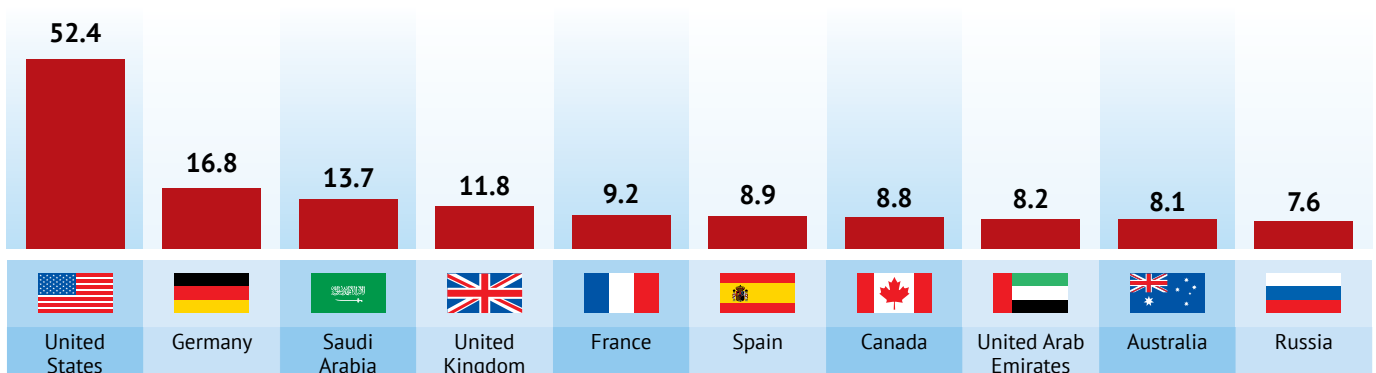
instrument of governance: social policy. However, such substitutes are also emerging in the domain of international relations, where the mediation of great and middle powers is replacing declining international institutions (see above – on diplomatic practices).

The reality now being shaped by these substitutes may prove profoundly different from the ideals derived from the experience of previous eras. This divergence spans all spheres of public policy – from the management of the global economy to rules and behavioural norms

## INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION 2024



## Top 10 Countries by Migrant Sources (million people)





Source: UN DESA International Migrant Stock 2024

(values), and the ways of resolving inevitable conflicts and finding solutions (diplomacy). Gradually, these substitutes are forming the new fabric of global politics, a system likely to prove far more durable in the face of challenges and threats than the rigid architectures of the past. The primary merit and mission of earlier systems was, after all, to embody and justify the balance of power among leading states. Modern processes may instead lead to a situation where a shifting balance becomes less critical, and the existing global rules become *de facto* more democratic.

The fundamental problem of injustice, stemming from the differing power capabilities of states, remains ultimately unresolvable. Nevertheless, the present system is fairer than its predecessors – whether imperial, bipolar, or the brief unipolar period in international relations. This is attributable, at least in part, to the current model that exhibits greater global-level resilience to challenges arising from internal problems experienced by societies and their spontaneous external behaviour. For example, the world managed to overcome the global pandemic crisis, albeit at considerable cost; the international system has adapted to sanctions, trade wars, and conventional conflicts. Most tellingly, a world majority – one that avoids participating in conflicts, refrains from taking sides, yet remains ready to cooperate with all – has emerged as a significant new phenomenon.

Consequently, the modern world is proving surprisingly resilient to the challenges generated by the very engines of its development. This sustainability does not represent an attempt to cling to old relations or preserve obsolete opportunities as the Western-created international system phases out. Instead, it stems from a more fundamental shift in both the global structure and the internal development of states. These changes are not “the biggest since...” – they simply represent a new era that does not need to be compared to any other.

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СОВЕТ ПО ВНЕШНЕЙ  
И ОБОРОННОЙ ПОЛИТИКЕ

