

2015

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Geopolitical competition is the most important driver of global disorder



“The most important driver of global disorder is the reemergence of geopolitical competition in the three regions of greatest strategic importance (Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East) The United States will soon be faced with a choice – to share power with revisionist powers by accepting a spheres of influence order or to compete responsibly to preserve the existing rules based order,” argued Dr. Thomas Wright, Director for the Project on International Order and Strategy at the Brookings Institution.

At a roundtable talk on “The New Global Disorder” held at The Asan Institute for Policy Studies on Thursday, December 3, Dr. Wright addressed the return of geopolitical

competition between the world's major powers and how it impacts globalization and interdependence.

Dr. Wright's analysis addressed four main questions:

1. Why did geopolitical competition go away and then return?
2. What is the nature of the Russian challenge to the international order?
3. What is the nature of the Chinese challenge to the international order?
4. How will globalization affect, and be affected by, geopolitics?

On the reemergence of geopolitical competition, Dr. Wright highlights that the "defining feature of last 25 years has been the absence of traditional security balancing against the U.S." Two factors can explain the absence of balancing: the first is that the U.S. was too far ahead for it to be affective, and the second suggests that the U.S.-led order was beneficial to the rest of the world. He names this phenomenon where other major world powers acquiesced to U.S. leadership as the "Unipolar Concert of Power." Unfortunately, Dr. Wright also highlights two specific risks posed by the liberal order to Moscow and Beijing: the threat of democratization and lack of distinct spheres of influence (by blocking of US).

Ultimately, the U.S. liberal order threatens the interests of Russia and China, pushing them to grow more authoritarian and to balance against the U.S.

The strategies that Russia and China employ to push back against the United States and expand their spheres of influence are very different, reflecting distinct positions of power. As a declining power, Russia resorts to hard power to fight back against Europe, which Putin perceives as a soft power superpower. This has resulted in "a nationalist and aggressive Russia that is determined to use its hard power to revise the European security order." Putin's goals are to secure a failed Ukraine (or a Ukraine aligned with Russia), to gradually erode democracy in Russia's neighborhood by facilitating the spread and rise of populism, corruption, and nationalism, and to undermine the legitimacy of the U.S.-led order and reduce Russia's reliance on the West by building an alternative.

China's challenge in East Asia "is the diametric opposite to Russia's in several respects" as a rising power and the world's second largest economy with an array of non-military tools to achieve its objectives. Moreover, China plays a bigger role than the United States influencing the economic growth of other countries in Asia. Dr. Wright argues that Beijing wants to gradually change the status quo and advance a Chinese sphere of

influence with a wide range of tactics by taking advantage of its rising power status. Such tactics include using its economic power to advance strategic regional objectives, maritime power, and implementing more assertive foreign policies.

The regional competition of great powers also takes place in a global context, and Dr. Wright asserts that “geopolitics will change globalization” as vulnerable nations “will hedge against globalization and reduce their connection to potential rivals. Although the effect [of competition] is regional, the impact is global when countries try to build their own safety nets.” Ultimately, Dr. Wright concludes that the best alternative is to have responsible competition. All global powers (including the United States) need to recognize that in today’s changing environment, greater geopolitical competition hedging against the “too dominant” liberal order is necessary.

Date/Time: Thursday, December 3, 2015 / 2:00 pm – 4:00 pm

Place: Conference Room (2F), The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

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⇒ **Thomas Wright** is a fellow and director of the Project on International Order and Strategy at the Brookings Institution. He focuses on U.S. grand strategy, alliances, the international order and emerging powers, and multilateralism. He is currently working on a book about geopolitical competition in an age of global interdependence.