



Power and Paradox: **Understanding Grand Strategy** **in the 21st Century**

19th - 20th October | 2021

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”” Day 1

Session 1

The Future of Sovereignty in an Interdependent World

Since the end of the Second World War and the dissolution of European empires, the nation-state has become the universalised and dominant form of political organisation and the primary holder of sovereignty. The dominance of the nation-state was reinforced as it came to be seen as the best vehicle for achieving economic development and modernisation, otherwise known as 'nation building'. From this point forward, strategic outlooks have, in theory, been the exclusive purview of the state. However, as the world has become increasingly interdependent through regional trading blocs, military alliances, and international organisations, the sovereignty of the nation-state has increasingly been diluted. While the world has seen a resurgence of nationalism and the re-emergence of large-scale state intervention in the economy in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the distribution of sovereignty within and between states has been fundamentally altered particularly as subnational actors, including mega-cities, continue to rise in economic and geopolitical importance, and in some cases, are set to overshadow their central governments. Moreover, the increasing power and influence of large multinational corporations, particularly in the technology sector, continue to challenge our state-centric notions of sovereignty.

Amid increasing interdependence and devolution of power, the nation-state, wedded as it is the notion of sovereignty and independence, is set to find it more and more difficult to navigate in an increasingly complex and diverse global power dynamic. This session will address the issue of sovereignty both today and for the future world while exploring how our understanding of sovereignty can be adapted to an ever-increasing interdependent world.

Discussion Themes

- **How will nation-states look to address the increasing tension between traditional notions of sovereignty and global challenges? Does the future of state sovereignty necessarily involve giving up powers that have been the traditional purview of central governments?**
- **How will the rise of mega-cities and the concomitant calls for more local control affect how sovereignty is distributed? How will central governments account for this while forming their strategic outlooks?**
- **How will the continued growth of regional integration through the construction of regional institutions and economic agreements impact state sovereignty in the future?**
- **How might increasing distrust and economic competition limit the extent of sovereignty-sharing within regional blocs and international institutions?**
- **How do or should discussions around issues such as 'digital sovereignty' and 'data sovereignty' factor into strategic planning?**

Session 2

Climate and Global Health Crises as Strategic Threats

With the social, political, economic and public health impact of the Covid-19 pandemic still reverberating around the globe, strategists are already thinking about how to guard against the next pandemic. As the scale of the economic and human costs of Covid-19 become further apparent, the threat posed by infectious disease to the strategic interests of states is no longer in question. From supply chain disruptions to massive economic shocks, the consequences of another pandemic similar or worse than Covid-19 have put infectious disease squarely on the threat radar of decision-makers around the world. Global health crises have also demonstrated their disruptive effect on the global strategic balance, particularly as certain actors have sought to use the pandemic as an opportunity to advance their strategic interests. Moreover, climate change continues to threaten both human and economic security on a global scale. Arguably representing an existential threat to humanity, climate-related issues, including extreme weather, climate action failure and human-led environmental damage, present some of the direst risks to strategic interests over the following decades.

The scope, scale and speed that characterise global crises today are leading to new ways of thinking strategically about the world and the nature of strategic threats. No longer are nuclear weapons and energy access the only concerns of strategists; forces beyond human control, including natural disasters, climate events and global health crises, are increasingly making their strategic impact apparent.

Discussion Themes

- **How has the threat perception of crises such as pandemics and climate-related events changed since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic? How are the long-term threats of these types of events being incorporated into strategic outlooks?**
- **How can governments balance between managing public health crises and mitigating economic contraction while working to generate key opportunities to advance their respective societies?**
- **While carbon emissions dropped significantly during the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, as economies re-open, there are concerns that emissions will rise significantly. Given this, how can governments best incorporate strategic planning to deal with the long-term impacts of climate change while dealing with short-term but severe economic shocks?**
- **How are governments around the world responding to the threat posed by climate change inaction? What are the challenges of convincing populations of the merits of climate change mitigation strategies in the face of economic hardships?**
- **Given that climate change impacts are likely to play out disproportionately across countries, how will climate-related issues be incorporated into the strategic outlooks of different countries? Might some countries seek to use disparate climate change impact as strategic leverage against rivals?**

Session 3

Global Governance and the Challenges and Opportunities of Multipolarity

In an interdependent world characterised by global challenges, the question of how we should govern the world and build systems of governance designed to address both present and future challenges have come to the forefront. The legitimacy and effectiveness of existing multilateral institutions continue to be called into question due to the perception that they no longer reflect the changing global balance of power. Moreover, even if existing institutions begin to better reflect today's world, there are questions as to whether they will be able to adequately address growing global challenges in the future.

The increasingly multipolar nature of the international order adds both challenges and opportunities to an already complicated picture. Return of great power and competition in addition to competing for regional powers and the ever-present potential of incompatible strategic outlooks leading to conflict represent challenges to finding viable solutions to questions of global governance. However, the potential for a concert among both emerging and established powers could enhance the work of existing institutions as well as lead to new approaches in tackling global challenges.

Discussion Themes

- **How are global problems and challenges relating to global governance being incorporated into the strategic outlooks of states? What challenges and opportunities confront a growing interdependence and an international system, which is increasingly characterised by multipolarity?**
- **How can states transcend their historic inability to deal with the challenges presented by unprecedented levels of global interdependence? How are global-level issues being incorporated into the strategic outlook of countries?**
- **How can approaches to dealing with global crises at both the supranational and local levels be re-imagined? How should systems of governance be designed to align with changing realities and new understandings of the nature of our interdependence?**
- **Does increased regional integration present a hinderance towards global governance or a model of a way forward?**
- **How does increasing scepticism towards the legitimacy of existing multilateral institutions impact the threat perception of potential global crises? How can this scepticism be overcome?**

Session 4

International Economic Development: A New Age of Global Inequality?

As the long-term socio-economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic threaten to undo years of progress made on global poverty reduction and inequalities, there has been a renewed focus on developing equitable and sustainable models of economic development, particularly in the world's poorest countries. What has been referred to as the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution', which involves increased digitisation, automation, e-commerce, and remote learning and work, risks exacerbating existing and creating new inequalities. However, it also has the promise of significant benefits, including the potential of increased equal-opportunity work for knowledge workers around the world.

Given the potential for runaway inequality to foment social fragmentation, retard economic growth and stall inaction on global threats such as climate change, finding viable solutions to closing the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' has become a strategic imperative for governments the world over. As economic engines restart in the wake of the pandemic and consistent growth returns to the global economy as a whole, the challenge for states and international organisations alike will be to ensure an equitable distribution of benefits. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, governments and strategists will continue to look beyond their borders in an effort to anticipate problems with the potential to impact them at home. Economic opportunities and the threat of inequality, particularly in the wake of the pandemic, is set to increasingly be on the strategic radars of even the wealthiest states.

Discussion Themes

- **How can governments, regional bodies, and international organisations mitigate the strategic challenges presented by widening inequalities and disparities in health outcomes and employment opportunities resulting from the pandemic?**
- **What are the potential knock-off effects of inaction on inequalities and social division both within countries and globally? What are national governments doing to prepare for these potentials?**
- **Why should the issue of global inequality be considered a strategic concern for even the wealthiest of states?**
- **How does the issue of digital inequality stand to exacerbate existing economic inequalities as what has been referred to as the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution' moves forward?**
- **Intergenerational inequalities have been identified as particularly problematic, with limited educational and economic opportunities set to exacerbate youth frustration. How is this issue informing strategic outlooks, and how can the problem be conceived globally in a way that accounts for strategic interests?**

”” Day 2

Session 1

Digital Governance: Policymaking and Statecraft in the Digital Age

Former US President Donald Trump may have been the first 'Twitter President.' However, the phenomenon of the digitalisation of governance and policymaking goes beyond the question of 'policy-by-tweet' and include pressing issues related to governance and state capacity in an era of misinformation campaigns, digital infrastructure vulnerabilities, machine learning and big data. The issues of the 'digital divide' on the state level and whether governments are adequately prepared for the complexities of the digital age remain open questions. Moreover, the increasingly powerful societal presence of 'big tech' has altered political calculations, Donald Trump's use followed by a subsequent ban from Twitter being a case-in-point.

The ability of technology to cut across borders also raises important questions for the state sovereignty, particularly as large tech corporations operate in zones where state oversight is often fuzzy. Furthermore, the protection of privacy and citizen rights, increasingly challenged by the whole-sale data harvesting by both government and private interests, and proliferation of misinformation remain fundamental challenges to governance to statecraft and governance in the digital age.

Discussion Themes

- **How are notions of political authority, accountability and statecraft being re-configured in the era of big data, machine learning and unprecedented digital engagement?**
- **How are governments and political systems more generally, adapting to the realities of an increasingly digitalised society?**
- **How can effective policies be developed that promote an open digital environment while guarding against the challenges and threats of issues ranging from fake news, misinformation and 'deep fakes' to data security and the threat of cyber-attacks?**
- **How are governments responding to the challenge of digital governance, particularly as it relates to the regulation of 'big tech' and the increasingly political role of major social media platforms?**
- **What are the implications of politically based censorship undertaken by tech giants? How can these decisions be regulated, and who ultimately calls the shots?**



Session 2

The Trans-Atlantic Relationship and the Future of the 'West'

Europe-US relations have been through their ups and downs over the last few decades, particularly since the end of the Cold War and the accompanying convergence of strategic interests. More recently, the Brexit saga and the turbulence of the Donald Trump era has led to questions about the future of the relationship. While the Biden administration has raised hopes that a re-set in transatlantic relations is on the agenda, including increasing strategic cooperation to counter China, today's global dynamics arguably ensure that the nature of the relationship will be different than in decades past. From scepticism towards the continuing relevance of NATO, the rhetoric in Brussels regarding strategic autonomy for the EU and the renewed US focus on the Asia-Pacific to the issue of 'Westlessness', questions continue to be raised by decision makers on both sides of the Atlantic about the future of trans-Atlantic relations and the meaning the West. Moreover, the prospects of EU expansion or contraction in the wake of Brexit and the role to be played by a post-European UK in trans-Atlantic relations remain open questions.

At the same time, issues including the continued rise of China, a resurgent Russia, the emergence of powerful regional blocs in SE Asia and the increasing global relevance of emerging powers provide numerous potential avenues for the maintenance of a strategically coherent Western community.

Discussion Themes

- **How is multipolarity redefining the traditional relationship between Western powers? How is it impacting their respective strategic outlooks towards each other?**
- **What are the common strategic interests between Europe and the United States in particular? Are they sufficiently important to maintain a sense of strategic unity among Western powers?**
- **How does the China and Russia question factor into the strategic outlooks of the United States and the EU respectively?**
- **How will increased regional integration in Europe and North America impact the dynamics of trans-Atlantic relations?**
- **How will Europe's quest for strategic autonomy impact trans-Atlantic relations?**

Session 3

Great Power Rivalry and the Future of the Middle East

Over the course of the last year, much attention has been paid to the 'Abraham Accords' as representing a fundamental alteration of the strategic environment in the Middle East. While the agreement has been upheld by its signatories and supporters as a 'game changer' for the region, it also caused significant backlash amongst Palestinians and beyond. However, the political immediacy of the agreement, ongoing macro shifts in global power dynamics continue to deeply impact the strategic value of the region for external powers as well as the strategic outlooks of regional actors. Perhaps the most important involves what amounts to a strategic demotion of the region for Western powers, most notably the United States, coupled with the emergence of East Asia as the largest export market for the region's oil and gas. Increasing energy self-sufficiency in the US resulting from fracking and other technological developments as well as a focus on renewables in Europe means less and less Western interest in energy from the region.

Many regional states have ongoing east-ward facing campaigns underwritten by a combination of macro-economic trends and strategic considerations based on doubts over long-term US commitments to regional security. Thus, strengthening ties with Asian powers is all about securing long-term interests. Perhaps most importantly, the growing complexity of ties between Middle Eastern and East, South and South East Asian states serves to illustrate how much less US-dependent the regional system is becoming and countries seek to establish a more diverse array of partners. In this context, the strategic orientation of regional and external actors alike is set to shift in the coming years.

Discussion Themes

- **How, if at all, have the Abraham Accords impacted the geopolitical dynamics in the region? If so, how have regional states adjusted their strategic outlooks to accommodate this new reality?**
- **How has the United States' so-called 'pivot to Asia' impacted its strategic perception of the region? How have regional actors adjusted to this shift, and what are its likely impacts in the future?**
- **What impact are shifting energy demands likely to have on the region's strategic position? How are regional energy producers adjusting to this reality and how are they planning a world of diverse energy sources?**
- **How is the turn to Asia altering strategic planning of regional powers and how is East Asia's – most significantly China's - increased involvement in the region impacting these developments?**
- **How are regional flashpoints such as the Palestinian issue, the war in Syria, sectarian tension in Lebanon, the Iranian question and intra-Gulf competition likely to be impacted by developments?**

Session 4

The Rise of Eurasia and the Remaking of the World Order

The notion of the 'West' has largely defined our understanding of global political, economic, and cultural life for centuries. It has played a prominent role in describing the bipolarity of the global order during the Cold War, as well as the subsequent hegemony of Western power following the fall of the Soviet Union. Strategic outlooks have been shaped by this dynamic ever since. However, following the end of the colonial period and the division of the Cold War, the geopolitical gravity of the Eurasian continent has begun to shift. Generally speaking, this shift involves the restoration of the centrality of Asia as part of a slow reversal of the historic rise of the West. It is expected that by 2030, Asia will have surpassed both North America and Europe in terms of GDP, population size, military spending and investments in technology. While China and India will be the largest and most significant of this lot, others, including Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan, Philippines, Turkey, South Korea and Vietnam, will make this shift even more pronounced.

Key regional actors that once considered their Asiatic political and economic orientations to be secondary to those of the West have increasingly embraced their place in a broader Eurasian system. From Turkey and Russia to the Arab states on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean and the Arab Gulf States, dependency on the West is being loosened while they look to Asia to build their strategic ties.

Discussion Themes

- **As what could be best termed as the 'Asianization' of the strategic orientation of states from Turkey and Russia to Iran and the Gulf States continues to unfold, what impact will this have on the world system that has had its centre in trans-Atlantic relations?**
- **How does a Eurasian strategic orientation affect the strategic options available to states beyond either a pax-Sinica or pax-Americana?**
- **Where does Europe see its place in this Eurasian awakening, economically, politically and culturally?**
- **How will the United States position itself vis-à-vis these developments? How does it fit into their pivot-to-Asia strategy?**
- **Where does Turkey, the traditional bridge between Asia and Europe, see itself with regards to its Asian geography? How have shifts in global power dynamics altered its strategic outlook?**
- **What role is China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) set to play in re-shaping and rise of Eurasia and what are its potential impacts on the global balance of power?**

Session 5

The Responsibility to Protect: Human Security as Statecraft

The United Nations describes the responsibility to protect as embodying a political commitment to end the worst forms of violence and persecution, seeking to narrow the gap between member-states' pre-existing obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law and the reality faced by populations at risk of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. Emerging out of the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide and the atrocities in the Balkans - the most prominent being the Bosnian genocide - which the international community failed to prevent, the international community engaged process to decide how to react to gross and systematic violations of human rights. Decades later, the atrocities in Syria, Yemen, against the Rohingya and other minorities have once again seen the international society largely standing on the side lines.

While governments around the world have pledged to protect their own populations from such atrocities and to take timely and decisive action according to the UN Charter when state authorities fail to do so, the fact that crimes against humanity continue to take place on a massive scale is indicative of an institutional break down on the international level. Given the failure to take decisive action through the relevant international bodies, the onus to act has been put on individual states or alliances. This session examines the issue of the moral responsibility of both national governments and the international community to account for human security in strategic planning and explore ways to strengthen the international consensus on the responsibility to protect.

Discussion Themes

- **What does a human-centric foreign policy entail on the ground? How and why should notions of human security be incorporated into national strategic outlooks?**
- **Why have man-made (human-made/artificial) humanitarian crises, such as those in Syria, Yemen, Myanmar and elsewhere continued seemingly unabated? Are existing agreements and institutions sufficient for addressing these issues? If not, what are possible alternative mechanisms to effectively deal with massive human rights abuses and crimes against humanity?**
- **What types of changes need to be made to existing institutions and agreements in order to prevent future humanitarian crises? What lessons have been learned, if any, by the international community through ongoing humanitarian disasters?**
- **How are climate-related events and public health crises projected to impact humanitarian situations around the world? How are these potentials being incorporated in the strategic outlooks of states?**
- **How can governments strike a balance between the need to respect national sovereignty while ensuring basic universal standards of human dignity are respected? Beyond culturally relativistic arguments, are there a set of minimalist human rights that are amenable to all societies? If so, how can they be protected in cases where national governments either fail to do so or actively persecute elements of their own populations?**

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