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Last week, senior students at the Naval War College presented their Final Exercise briefs. In assessing [how the world of 2030 will take shape](#), many drew on the [National Intelligence Council's report](#), "Global Trends 2025: A World Transformed," particularly its assessment -- as a "relative certainty" -- that "a global multipolar system is emerging with the rise of China, India, and others."

This is the future everyone expects, but in order to determine what steps the United States should take now, in 2010, to mold and nudge how this future will unfold, we need to answer a fundamental question: What sort of multipolar world do we want?

At first glance, the Obama administration appears to have ruled out the "concert of powers" approach to managing multipolarity. The United States instead remains committed to a 21st-century version of the "Open Door" policy, rejecting anything that would recognize "spheres of influence" or "zones of privileged interests" in the geographic neighborhoods of the other great powers. As [Vice President Joe Biden reiterated](#) in Kyiv in July 2009, "We don't recognize, and I want to reiterate this, any spheres of influence." Nor is it likely the current administration would embrace an updated version of Nixon's "regional policemen" idea -- having a major power assume the lead for ensuring stability and security in a specific region of the world.

On the other hand, is the United States going to invest the time and resources needed to create "balancing coalitions" against each of the rising and resurgent powers? The so-called GUUAM experiment in the Eurasian space -- the attempt to knit together Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Moldova into a coherent economic and political bloc capable of pushing back against Russian influence -- seems to be a complete failure, especially in the aftermath of the 2008 Georgian war and the 2010 Ukrainian elections.

Neither is the United States in any position, if it was so inclined, to encourage states like [Colombia](#) and Argentina to counterbalance Brazil, due to Washington's desire to confront

[Venezuela's rising influence](#)

in the Western Hemisphere. And over the last several years, a concerted diplomatic effort by Beijing has worked to blunt efforts to encourage Japan, Korea, Australia and the ASEAN states to band together against China. Indeed, if China adopts some elements of the German strategy – putting some voluntary limits on the expression of its power in East Asia – it might even be able to lead the process of regional integration and the creation of an East Asian community of nations. As

[Jonathan Manthorpe pointed out](#)

in a column this week, "To a greater or lesser extent, most of the countries of Asia have hedged their bets to cover China's rise."

U.S. policy seems predicated instead on expecting the rise of other powers to be interrupted, or even reversed. There is some rationale for this approach, because each of the rising and resurgent powers has an Achilles' heel – whether it's demographics, uneven economic development, or unresolved domestic political equations. So why make compromises now if you expect a resurgent power to collapse over the long term (e.g. Russia), or if you predict that a rising power will ultimately buy into your leadership and global agenda (e.g. China)? Consider

[Sen. John Thune's position](#)

on the START Treaty negotiations: "The United States should not pay for what is free. Russia's nuclear numbers will decline dramatically in the coming years with or without an arms control treaty. The United States should not make important concessions in return for something that will happen in any event."

But what if instead of collapsing, Russia is able to achieve its economic development goals, as outlined in its 2008 strategy – becoming one of the top five economies of the world by the 2020s? What if Beijing adopts the line taken by Col. Liu Mingfu in his recently published work, "The China Dream," calling for China to actively displace the United States as the "global champion"? After all, [the global economic downturn](#) of 2008-2009 did not bring down the Russian government, nor did it do much to dent China's own progress. Nor did the crisis make either Moscow or Beijing more receptive to U.S. policy proposals. The "reset" with Russia has not borne particularly fruitful results, and I'm not optimistic that the visit of Deputy Secretary of State Jim Steinberg and NSC Director Jeffrey Bader to Beijing will clear the obstacles that have accumulated in the path of smoother Sino-American relations.

I also don't sense that the United States is making the dramatic effort needed to "woo" the [global "independents"](#)

: those emerging powers that are aligned at present neither with the Euro-Atlantic West nor with China – particularly

[Brazil](#)

and India.

[The relationship with Brazil](#)

does not seem to be a top priority, and despite

[attention lavished on India](#)

, the working relationship between Washington and New Delhi has been characterized by

[awkwardness and mistrust](#)

since the Obama administration took office. The day-to-day construction of long-term relationships with both countries would be greatly enhanced by high-level working groups along the lines of Al Gore-style "commissions." Instead, there seems to be an assumption that at the end of the day, both will be "with us," particularly an India bordered by an emergent China. But is that belief grounded in a sober analysis, or is it wishful thinking? I'd be much more sanguine if we indeed had a "Biden-Mukherjee Commission" laying out the groundwork for a U.S.-India strategic partnership, or a "Biden-Alencar Commission" in place for Brazil.

Multipolarity is the future, says the U.S. intelligence community, and many serious students of foreign policy tend to agree. But policymakers in Washington don't seem eager to embrace change, or to make the strategic choices that would be needed to guarantee continued U.S. global leadership.

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