



Pivotal Powers and International Security: Toward Flexibility

By Gesine Weber

The distribution of power and influence in international security is becoming increasingly dispersed. The United States uncontestedly leads in terms of military spending¹⁶—\$916 billion in 2023. That is far ahead of China's outlay (\$296 billion) and Russia's (\$109 billion), the next two biggest spenders, and more than ten times the defense budget of each major European state. Does this imply that Washington also has the unique power to shape global security and that multipolarity is nothing but a myth, as some leading US scholars suggest?¹⁷

Not quite. While the United States' military lead will likely continue, a good case for a changing global security order can be made as other states emerge as increasingly relevant actors in circumstances in which Washington is unable or unwilling to act. The role of non-Western states in the wars in Ukraine and Gaza illustrate this trend. In 2022, Türkiye brokered the Black Sea Grain Initiative among the UN, Ukraine, and Russia, which allowed the shipment of food and fertilizer to mitigate the ramifications of the European conflict on global food security¹⁸. Similarly, Brazil started to position itself as a potential mediator with a peace plan, first in a relatively unspecified version in 2023¹⁹ and more recently through a more concrete six-point joint proposal with China.²⁰ Meetings between India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, and other high-ranking members of his government with their Russian and Ukrainian counterparts prompted speculation about another mediation effort.²¹ No less significantly, Qatar became an important player in attempts to reach a ceasefire in Gaza. Add in UN peacekeeping efforts—which, despite all criticism, remain the most significant deployments of international forces—and the picture is even more striking. As of July 2024, European countries and the United States were not among the top ten contributors of uniformed UN personnel, whereas Nepal, Rwanda, Bangladesh, and India are among the leading suppliers of troops.²²

Contributions to UN Peacekeeping Missions

Uniformed personnel as of July 31, 2024

RANK	COUNTRY	CONTRIBUTION
1	Nepal	6119
2	Rwanda	5876
3	Bangladesh	5866
4	India	5427
5	Indonesia	2741
6	Ghana	2626
7	Pakistan	2601
8	China	1801
9	Morocco	1701
10	Ethiopia	1538
16	Italy	989
25	Spain	696
28	France	592
78	United States	25

Source: United Nations Peacekeeping

The growing diversity of power that shapes regional conflicts with global humanitarian or security ramifications is clear. The idea that only the United States can provide the common good of security, often as defined in Washington, is outdated and empirically false. Even the track records of the United States (in Afghanistan and Syria), the EU (around the Mediterranean), or individual European states (such as France in Mali) challenge their credibility and legitimacy as actors in regional security crisis management.

The changing patterns of engagement in addressing regional and global security matters have brought in other states that play key roles—states referred to here as “pivotal powers”. Though there are more, Brazil, India, Nigeria, and Türkiye are particularly relevant examples in the realm of international security. They are playing or attempting to play the role of regional hegemons. They are among their regions’ biggest defense spenders and are involved in shaping regional security. The United States and Europe have doubled down in recent years on strengthening their ties with these countries to address security issues and enhance cooperation on these and other transnational challenges. Listening to pivotal powers’ officials, better understanding their national priorities, and including them as truly equal partners in foreign policy strategies is consequently of paramount importance.

Military spending of Pivotal Powers in 2023

COUNTRY	IN \$, BILLIONS	% of GDP	% of REGIONAL TOTAL	REGION*
BRAZIL	22.9	1.1	45	South America
INDIA	83.6	2.4	57	South Asia and Southeast Asia
NIGERIA	3.2	0.81	13	Sub-Saharan Africa
TÜRKIYE	15.8	1.5	7	Middle East

*as defined by SIPRI
 Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database

Pivotal Powers’ Agendas

Brazil’s Priorities: Transnational and Environmental Crime

Policymakers in Brasilia see border security, drug trafficking, and domestic lawlessness as their greatest challenges. Since the 2016 peace treaty between the Colombian government and the FARC guerilla group, violence committed by those excluded from the agreement, some of which is linked to organized crime, has increased and spilled into neighboring countries. The Brazilian military is consequently occupied with addressing the domestic ramifications of this development. Brazilian security concerns encompass the rest of South America and the broader South Atlantic, but significant involvement there is not currently a Brazilian priority.

Brazil has long sought a highly autonomous foreign policy (the Jair Bolsonaro administration’s aim of aligning with the United States is an exception), though close relations with the American military are important. Cooperation with the United States on important security challenges such as corruption or organized crime, therefore, is a delicate balancing act. In general, the appetite for such cooperation, also with Europe, is limited because Brasilia often sees little to gain from it. Washington has not offered much in return for limiting trade with China. Except for defense sales, Europe is not even seen as a security partner. Other areas of cooperation with the transatlantic partners offer scant benefits, especially when compared with those associated with membership in Mercosur. In addition, Western debates on intervening in the Amazon as part of a global “responsibility to protect” it only raise red flags in Brasilia.²³

India’s Priorities: Border Conflicts and China’s Rise

The security challenges New Delhi perceives as most pressing are a legacy of the past and the result of new geopolitical dynamics in South Asia. Long-festering border disputes with Pakistan and China, which lead to regular clashes, remain a top concern for Modi and his government. But the biggest strategic challenge for India is dealing with China’s expanding regional influence. New Delhi perceives Beijing as a growing political, economic, and military

threat, especially given its policy in the South China Sea. India also deals with humanitarian crises in its immediate neighborhood, most prominently in Myanmar.

New Delhi's assessment of US and European involvement in these crises varies. It has no interest in seeing greater foreign involvement in resolving its border conflict with Pakistan. This is, in part, due to Washington's ties to Pakistan, which unsettle India. Nevertheless, given China's increasingly assertive behavior in the region, New Delhi, especially since a 2020 border clash with Chinese troops, has tilted westwards and enhanced strategic dialogue with the United States.²⁴ Regarding Europe, India welcomes the EU's humanitarian engagement to support civilians in Myanmar or Bangladesh and would appreciate even greater involvement, albeit without the criticism of New Delhi's approach to its own religious minorities. India also encourages increased European interest in the region, whether through the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy or the deployment of naval assets to the Pacific and Indian oceans by individual European states.

Nigeria's Priorities: Overseeing Regional Security

As sub-Saharan Africa's largest country, Nigeria has long seen itself as a "big brother" and a key security provider in the region. From its perspective, stability in the Sahel, coastal West Africa, and the Great Lakes region is critical. The fight against myriad terrorist groups such as al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI), Boko Haram, or the Islamic State group requires significant state resources, but Abuja is content to lead the effort. It is also prepared to oversee the Multinational Joint Task Force that aims to ensure cross-border security in the Lake Chad basin region.²⁵

The United States and Europe have changed their approaches to sub-Saharan Africa in recent years. They have moved from extensive engagement and a large military footprint, such as France's Operation Barkhane with its more than 5,000 troops in the Sahel, to focusing on enhancing capacity-building in the region's countries. For Abuja, Washington's shift to an "African-led and US-enabled" strategy²⁶ and offers of technical assistance and training is a blueprint for successful cooperation. It equips the Nigerian military to address regional security challenges more effectively and provides Abuja with US political support, both of which raise Nigeria's legitimacy as a regional actor. The EU's Coordinated Maritime Presence in the Gulf of Guinea, which Abuja also welcomes, could be similarly enhanced to emphasize mutual security and trade benefits, and to address Nigerian concerns about the risk of European exploitation of regional resources. It could also mitigate animosity in Abuja about French support for military governments that have overthrown West African democracies.

Türkiye's Priorities: Finding Security in an Insecure Region

As a bridge between Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia, Türkiye has a challenging geographic position, one that shapes Ankara's perception of its most important security challenges. In fact, many of the world's most violent, recent conflicts and humanitarian catastrophes were or are located on Türkiye's borders. The civil war in Syria, more than a decade old, sparks fears in Ankara of terrorism from Kurdish and Syria-based groups. Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine brought another conflict to Türkiye's neighborhood,

requiring Ankara, in its view, to pursue a balanced approach to the Kremlin, one conducted through deterrence of and cooperation with it.

Türkiye, despite being a NATO member, has not seen US and European involvement in tackling these challenges as helpful. Washington's support for the Kurdish People's Protection Units' (YPG) fight against the Islamic State group in Syria ignored the concerns of Türkiye, which considers the former to be a terrorist organization. Ankara also views EU insistence on the lifting of antiterrorism laws in return for a more liberal visa regime and progress in the accession process as undermining Turkish security concerns.

No Lecturing or Hectoring

Pivotal powers also often view US and European involvement in regional security challenges as patronizing and the result of double standards. The West may proclaim the importance of the principles of a rules-based international order, but pivotal powers perceive lectures on democracy as meddling in domestic affairs. It is unsurprising, for example, that Western criticism of Modi's treatment of religious and ethnic minorities has not bolstered ties.

Irritation also arises with US calls for alignment with its policies toward China or European calls to do the same vis-à-vis Russia. Such approaches suggest that the transatlantic partners have little consideration for pivotal powers' interests and priorities. These approaches also suggest that the West views pivotal powers simply as leverage in strategic geopolitical competition. The calls ring even more hollow given the increasing popularity of US and European forces sympathetic to Moscow and the West's continuing strong business links with China.

What can Europeans and the United States do to enhance their relevance and credibility as partners for the pivotal powers? One approach is to shift from patronizing to empowering behavior, and the United States and the EU already have practices in place, such as in Nigeria, that can serve as a blueprint for doing that. These efforts, however, should be tweaked so that they are not framed as components of US-China competition but as endeavors to bolster regional security.

Does this imply that Europe and the United States should stop voicing human rights concerns? No, but the transatlantic partners would benefit from a more compartmentalized approach. Rather than imposing conditions or using a carrot-and-stick approach to reach agreements on security cooperation, the transatlantic community would be better served by recognizing pivotal powers' red lines. Furthermore, public criticism of pivotal powers' human rights record or of domestic political developments will erode trust and risk fueling animosity through accusations of neocolonialism. Some matters are best left for private consultation.

Expanding areas of cooperation would also improve relationships between the transatlantic partners and the pivotal powers. Abuja, Ankara, Brasilia, and New Delhi need capabilities to autonomously address regional security challenges, and all are interested in strengthening defense ties with the United States and Europe. If they do not meet that need, the four will only look elsewhere for support. Russia has already supplied Türkiye with S400 missile systems and is India's main weapons supplier, accounting for 36% of that country's armaments imports between

2019 and 2023.²⁷ The Kremlin also exports military equipment to Brazil and Nigeria, albeit to a lesser extent. This is evidence that capability acquisition takes precedence over supplier and Western notions of morality.

But joint development and technology transfer are pivotal powers' ultimate aim, and this provides a critical opening for the United States and Europe. Both should consider the opportunity even if it requires revising policies on weapons exports and defense industrial cooperation. In this regard, US defense cooperation with India could constitute a blueprint for Europe to enhance its ties with New Delhi.

While deepening cooperation would benefit all involved, pressuring pivotal powers to formalize partnerships through alliances would be counterproductive. Each such power perceives the downsides and risks of alliances as clearly outweighing the benefits. Their pursuit of policies that lead to multiple, fluid alignments, or cooperation on a case-by-case basis, is meant to keep their options open and prevent constraints on links to any global power. Pivotal powers also want to avoid becoming trapped in formal relationships that make them vulnerable to coercion to act in ways that contradict national interests or a grand strategy.

An exception among the four pivotal powers in this regard is Türkiye, which, as a NATO member, is formally allied to the alliance's North American and European members. Ankara's relations with the EU, despite many mutual frustrations and the bloc's frozen enlargement process, remain closer than Brussels' ties to other pivotal powers. The 2016 migration agreement is one example of these special links. But they do not constrain Türkiye's interactions with Russia or China, including on military issues.²⁸

The reluctance among pivotal powers to engage in formal alliances requires the West to rethink options for engaging with pivotal powers. For the United States, this means shifting away from framing an increasing number of global security challenges, such as terrorism or regional conflict, as components of US-China competition or a confrontation between a Western-led bloc and a Russia-China-Iran-North Korea axis. A continuation of this approach only solidifies the impression among pivotal powers that Washington's engagement is an attempt to bind them into alliances that boost American leverage over China. For Europe, this means intensifying multilateral cooperation formats and initiatives, especially through the EU, on a broader range of security issues. The increased collaboration would signal that Europe is not forcing pivotal powers and other regional stakeholders to pick a side in the competition among great powers.

A New Approach

Strategic partnerships increasingly characterize the nature of US and European cooperation with pivotal powers and should be strengthened. These relationships are likely to fall short of alliances, but they can take the form of joint research and development projects or contracts for military equipment. Engagements such as these enable pivotal powers to be recognized as equals with individual agency. This approach, which may be perceived as "transactional" from a transatlantic perspective, does not imply that pivotal powers are interested only in ad hoc deals. The transatlantic partners must also find a middle road for security cooperation with pivotal powers that neither formalizes cooperation in alliances nor clings to a short-term mindset. Informal minilateral formats offer a

promising solution. The Quad, which brings together Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, or the trilateral cooperation among France, India, and the United Arab Emirates, are forums that deepen political ties, build trust, and address security challenges without a formal, institutionalized process. In other words, flexibility is key.

A new US and European approach to pivotal powers should start with a recognition that shaping international security need not be a zero-sum game. India expects the transatlantic partners to acknowledge its rise as beneficial for global security. Similarly, Nigeria has a role to play in a region from which the West has been largely ejected. Recognition of these aspirations, and Türkiye's role and political weight at a crossroads of Europe and Asia, would benefit the often-turbulent relationships that the transatlantic partners have with these countries. In addition, the transatlantic partners must adapt their narratives to pivotal powers' histories and domestic politics to ensure that statements and actions are not perceived as neocolonial.

The United States and Europe should see the potential of pivotal powers to shape regional conflicts and to play expanded global roles as opportunities. The past zero-sum logic that sees the rise of some states as necessitating the inevitable decline of others must give way to an approach that offers benefits to all. In other words, the United States and Europe must allow greater involvement of pivotal powers in addressing regional and global security challenges. Ensuring that a greater diversity of voices is heard will enhance an image of the United States and Europe as responsible actors. Their clinging to a unipolar American-led order that no longer exists would serve only to isolate them on an increasing number of issues of global consequence.