

Essay

## In a New Age of Empire, Great Powers Aim to Carve Up the Planet

After World War II, nations pledged to create a more equal and law-abiding world. Now Russia, China and the U.S. are returning to an older model in which powerful countries impose their will.



Illustration: Kyle Ellingson

By [Yaroslav Trofimov](#)

Jan. 17, 2025 9:00 pm ET

In 1945, the victorious Allied powers gathered in San Francisco to draft a charter for the United Nations, the foundation of a new global order that would make another world war impossible. The charter proclaimed that all countries had equal rights and would no longer resort to “the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state.” President Harry Truman told the assembled delegates that “the responsibility of the great states is to serve, and not to dominate, the peoples of the world.”

Today, these lofty principles look quaint, if not outright irrelevant, as the world returns to what was presumed to be the natural law of statecraft since the dawn of history: The strong do as they please and the weak suffer as they must. Russia, one of five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, is three years into a war of conquest in Ukraine, annexing parts of the country and seeking to eliminate the independence of the remainder. Russian leaders openly talk about their designs on other neighboring states, including members of the European Union and NATO.



President Harry Truman greets the foreign minister of Saudi Arabia at the United Nations conference in San Francisco in 1945. Photo: Fox Photos/Getty Images

China, another permanent member of the Security Council, supports the Russian war machine and is preparing for a war to take over Taiwan, while bullying the Philippines and other countries with its claims on the South China Sea. And in the U.S., President-elect [Donald Trump](#) has begun to indulge in imperialist rhetoric of his own, repeatedly threatening to absorb Canada, Greenland and the Panama Canal zone.

Smaller countries are following the great powers' lead. Turkey and Israel are expanding their military presence in Syria following the collapse of the Assad regime. Azerbaijan is threatening to wipe out Armenia, which it claims was established on historic Azeri lands.

“We’re entering a new age of conquest,” said Sumantra Maitra, director of research at the American Ideas Institute, a conservative think tank in Washington, D.C. “Great powers are the ones calling the shots again. Some countries have realized it early, and some have not, but they will soon too.”

The current revival of imperialist thinking represents an abrupt reversal of the post-Cold War order of the last three decades. After the fall of the Soviet Union, it seemed possible that humanity could finally learn to live by a set of universally recognized rules, with a few nasty exceptions on the periphery.



Ukrainian troops on patrol in the Kharkiv region, Dec. 15, 2024. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is part of what one expert calls ‘a new age of conquest.’ Photo: ROMAN PILIPEY/Agence France-Presse/Getty Images



A Philippines vessel spots a China Coast Guard ship in disputed waters of the South China Sea, Aug. 26, 2024. Photo: jam sta rosa/Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

Today the concept of a rules-based international order looks more and more utopian—and the survival of the United Nations increasingly uncertain. “It’s a real question to ask, 80 years after the end of World War II, whether that structure can be saved, what it would take, and whether it would be replaced,” Norway’s Foreign Minister Espen Barth Eide said in an interview.

“You have a few of us who think the rules should always apply, and I would say my country is one of them,” he said. “We have those who say they should apply most of the time, but not when it would really hurt their allies.

And then we have many countries who say we would rather not have these rules because without these rules the world would be easier for them.”

Many strategists and diplomats see the world returning to something like the Concert of Nations that emerged in Europe after the Napoleonic wars of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Under that system, praised by the late Henry Kissinger for preventing global war for nearly a century, empires recognized each other’s spheres of influence worldwide, including the right to oppress and dominate less powerful countries and peoples within those spheres.

The Monroe Doctrine of 1823 was the American version of this idea, proclaiming U.S. hegemony over the Americas and a refusal to get involved in European wars. This month Mike Waltz, Trump’s incoming national-security adviser, described the president-elect’s vision as “Monroe 2.0.”

Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#)’s frequent pronouncements about a multipolar world reflect a similar nostalgia for 19<sup>th</sup>-century imperial power. The idea of multipolarity appeals to many people in the developing world eager to shake off American domination, but in practice it would take even more power away from the weaker nations, said German diplomat Volker Perthes, a former U.N. Undersecretary-General.

“You will have a couple of poles on the global level, and then regional poles, who will all make deals among themselves at the expense of the majority of people,” he said. “This is a much more inequalitarian and dangerous world.”



Donald Trump Jr. arrived in Nuuk, Greenland on Jan. 7, after his father said he wanted the U.S. to take control of the autonomous Danish territory. Photo: Emil Stach/Ritzau/Zuma Press



Israeli tanks on the Syrian side of the border fence in the Golan Heights, Dec. 11, 2024. Photo: Kobi Wolf/Bloomberg News

The idea of dividing the globe once again into spheres of influence isn’t something that smaller nations are likely to welcome. “The chaps who are supposed to be part of them, they don’t like it,” said Indian foreign-policy strategist Raja Mohan, a fellow at the Asia Society Policy Institute in New Delhi. “That’s why there is a



problem of Ukraine today, or the problem in Latin America. You can say Monroe Doctrine, but the question is how do you manage it? It can only be done on the basis of seduction and accommodation rather than the force of arms.”

There is widespread agreement around the world that the U.N. system is increasingly out-of-date. The U.K. and France, both Allied powers in World War II, were made permanent members of the U.N. Security Council in 1945 and so have veto power over its decisions. Much larger countries do not, including India, Germany, Brazil and Japan. Attempts at reform have been thwarted since the 1960s.

“The United Nations system was formed when most of the countries of the world were not sovereign entities, and whether we like it or not, it cannot reflect a true representation of the world’s current realities,” said Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley. “If we want to hold on to the past, we better get eyes in the back of our head rather than on the front of our head, because we are seeing the dying of the current world order.”

#### Advertisement

During the Cold War, the U.N. was used by the two rival superpowers—the U.S. and the Soviet Union—as an instrument of cooperation in areas where their interests aligned. That included curbing infectious diseases, safeguarding cultural monuments and containing local conflicts that neither Washington nor Moscow wanted to escalate.

In the 1990s, as the U.S. emerged triumphant from the Cold War and the arc of history appeared to be inevitably bending toward freedom, the U.N. had significant successes, ending many regional conflicts and creating tribunals for war crimes in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. At a U.N.-organized conference in Rome in 1998, some 120 nations signed the statute establishing the International Criminal Court.



Barbados Prime Minister Mia Amor Mottley, seen here addressing the U.N. General Assembly in September 2024, says ‘we are seeing the dying of the current world order.’ Photo: mike segar/Reuters

But when the ICC touched on conflicts of vital importance to the great powers, its limits became evident. In 2023 the Court indicted Putin for war crimes in Ukraine, but that didn’t stop the Russian president from being feted with honors in China, Vietnam and Saudi Arabia. Last October, even the Secretary-General of the U.N., António Guterres, posed for the cameras as he smiled and shook hands with Putin in the Russian city of Kazan.

Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, indicted by the ICC last year for war crimes in the Gaza Strip, has also continued business as usual. In Washington, the Republican-controlled Congress is working on American sanctions against the ICC.

Cooperation among the great powers at the U.N. began to unravel following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, and ground to a halt after Russia’s full-scale war on Ukraine in 2022. Now the Security Council is deadlocked on all major issues, making the world body largely irrelevant.

“We are not the United Nations. We are the divided nations,” said Sen. James Risch of Idaho, a Republican, who chairs the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Yet it's too early to write off the world body completely, said Michael Keating, executive director of the European Institute of Peace and a former senior U.N. diplomat in Somalia, Afghanistan and the Palestinian territories. "People may come back to the U.N.—or something very like it—having been through the pain of realizing that the U.N. may be terrible, but the alternative to it is even worse," he said.

"I just don't know what the alternative is, other than a dog-eat-dog world."