

Session 3

The Return of Geopolitics: Rivalries and Re-alignments in the New Century



Moderator

Yusuf Erim, Presenter, TRT World

Speakers

Dr. Bruno Maçães, Former Secretary of State for Europe in Portugal

Dr. Vali Nasr, Majid Khadduri Professor of International Affairs and Middle East Studies, Johns Hopkins-SAIS; Non-Resident Senior Fellow, Atlantic Council's South Asia Center

Dr. Charles A. Kupchan, Professor of International Affairs, Georgetown University; Senior Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations

Key Takeaways

- There's a discernible shift in global power dynamics, moving from unipolarity to a mix of bi-polarity and multipolarity, with power transitioning from the West to the East and from the North to the South.
- The transition from the industrial age to the digital age is reshaping power dynamics, accelerating redistribution while challenging established social contracts, particularly in leading industrialised nations.
- Globalisation appears to have reached a peak, evidenced by economic decoupling, supply chain repatriation, and the gradual fragmentation of the global economic system.
- Concerns arise over a potential reversal in the historical trend towards greater freedom within liberal democratic societies, signalling challenges to liberal democratic values and institutions.
- Regional actors like Türkiye demonstrate significant capabilities in various conflicts, emphasising the importance of maintaining strong ties with the West to sustain their bridging role between East and West.
- NATO grapples with pressing issues such as determining next steps in regional conflicts, developing a cohesive transatlantic strategy towards emerging powers like China, and ensuring political stability within member states.

Summary of the Session

The session titled “The Return of Geopolitics: Rivalries and Re-alignments in the New Century” delved into the multifaceted nature of the contemporary geopolitical landscape and the challenges it presents to global stability. The moderator initiated thought-provoking discussions by prompting panellists to reflect on their initial thoughts regarding the resurgence of geopolitics and the potential implications for global order. This led to insightful exchanges highlighting the complexities of contemporary geopolitics.

The panellists explored various dimensions of this resurgence, addressing issues such as the redefinition of shared values on regional levels, the blurring of borders leading to potential territorial disputes, and the evolving role of international law, which some perceive as becoming optional. There was also a deep dive into the shifting dynamics of

power, particularly the United States' transition from a leading role to one of following or playing alongside other global actors, as well as the phenomenon of democratic backsliding within the U.S. and its repercussions on international perceptions and reactions.

Of particular focus was the ascent of China as a major economic powerhouse and its impact on the global economic and political landscape. Questions were raised about how the international community, including U.S. allies, may respond as China's influence continues to grow, potentially surpassing that of the United States. This discussion underscored the intricacies of managing relationships between major powers in an increasingly interconnected world.

Furthermore, the session delved into the strain on resources that may be contributing to the

resurgence of geopolitics, as well as the emergence of new trade corridors and initiatives reshaping global commerce. The role and future trajectory of NATO in response to these geopolitical shifts were also examined, particularly regarding its adaptability and effectiveness in navigating the complexities of the current geopolitical landscape.

The session concluded with a hypothetical scenario, prompting reflections on advisories for

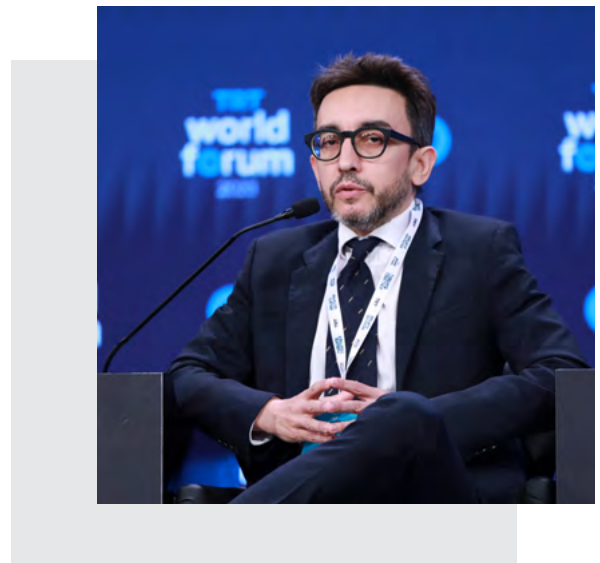
leaders in navigating the return of geopolitics. If advising Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, panellists contemplated strategies to prepare for and navigate the challenges posed by this evolving geopolitical landscape. Overall, the session provided valuable insights into the complexities and challenges of the contemporary geopolitical landscape and the need for adaptive and forward-thinking approaches to global governance and diplomacy.

Highlights

Bruno Mações

PhD; Former Secretary of State for Europe in Portugal

Bruno Mações is a senior advisor at Flint Global and a columnist for the New Statesman. The author of 'Belt and Road'; 'History Has Begun'; and 'The Dawn of Eurasia', he advises some of the world's leading companies on geopolitics and technology. His latest book is *Geopolitics for the End Time*.



- We're undergoing a transformation where normal rules no longer apply. When I reflect on this notion of the disappearance of normal rules, the pandemic comes to mind. It marked a moment of profound change, where everything seemed to shift into an extraordinary state. While there may not be an apparent link between geopolitics and the pandemic, leaders like Putin and Xi Jinping have drawn connections between the pandemic and a heightened sense of geopolitical competition. Post-pandemic, we witnessed the resurgence of conflicts in regions like Ukraine, the

resurgence of genocidal rhetoric, and significant refugee movements towards Europe. Events such as those in Gaza underscore the feeling that anything is possible, and the unimaginable or unthinkable could become tomorrow's reality. For those of us who strive for a more detached perspective beyond daily headlines, it signifies the unravelling of the existing order.

- When the existing order unravels, we regress to a state akin to the natural order, where physical force holds

greater significance than any other factor. Military conflict becomes a constant presence. Geopolitics, as understood traditionally, is a term coined about a century ago to denote the struggle for control over territory, a contest between distinct ethnic groups or nations vying to assert dominance over one another, potentially leading to their mutual destruction. It appears that this is the world in which we currently reside.

- What I find striking about this moment [in Gaza] is that it appears to mark the end of hypocrisy. The statements from US officials no longer carry a veneer of hypocrisy; instead, they offer a straightforward, unabashed alignment with Israel, pledging unwavering support regardless of its actions. For instance, in a recent interview, spokesman John Kirby was asked whether the US would cease its support for Israel if it violated international law. His response was unequivocal: the US will continue to support Israel regardless. While expressing a preference for Israel to adhere to international law, Kirby's statement underscores an extraordinary shift in policy.
- It's not merely a return to a world where military force reigns supreme. Behind the scenes, another game is unfolding—one centred on technology, the economy, and trade, with China at its forefront. From my recent experiences in China, it's evident to me that China is strategically engaged in a long-term endeavour to reshape the global system from within. This involves not only establishing key structures governing the world economy, trade patterns, and routes but also asserting dominance in technological innovation. China aims to supplant the United States as the primary technological trailblazer, consistently leading the way in advancements. This pursuit of technological preeminence serves as a significant source of power on the global stage.
- There's a common misconception that the Belt and Road Initiative primarily revolves around physical infrastructure like trains, but this perception is misguided. The essence of the initiative lies in more intangible processes such as technology transfer, development, and the intricate networks of supply and value chains that span the globe. It's about identifying strategic nodes within these chains where significant

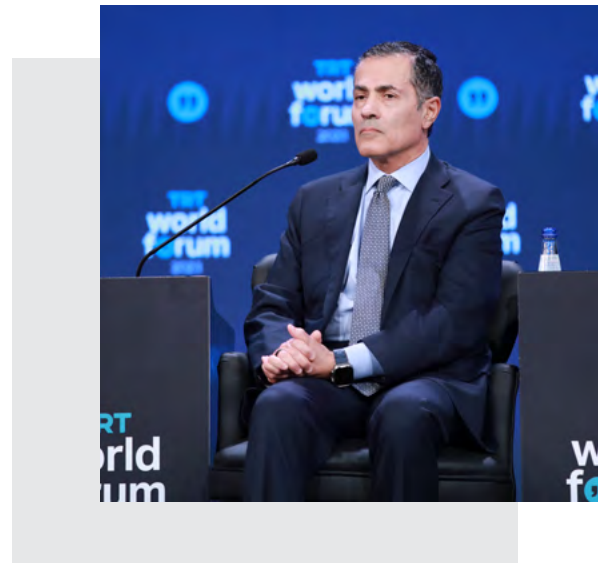
power can be exerted. Therefore, we shouldn't become overly fixated on geography. Recent events in Ukraine and Gaza haven't disproven the notion that we've largely transcended geographical constraints. China appears to be acutely aware of this paradigm shift.



Vali Nasr

Majid Khaddouri Professor of International Affairs and Middle East Studies, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS)

Vali Nasr is a Professor of International Affairs and Middle East Studies at Johns Hopkins-SAIS, and a Non-Resident Senior Fellow at Atlantic Council's South Asia Center. He served as the Dean of the school, and as Senior Advisor to the US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Ambassador Richard Holbrooke. He is the author of several books and articles, notably *The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat*; *Forces of Fortune: The Rise of a New Muslim Middle Class and How it Will Change Our World*. Nasr is a member of the World Economic Forum's Global Action Council and has been the recipient of grants from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, The Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, and the Social Science Research Council. He earned his masters from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy in international economics and Middle East studies in 1984, and his PhD from MIT in political science in 1991.



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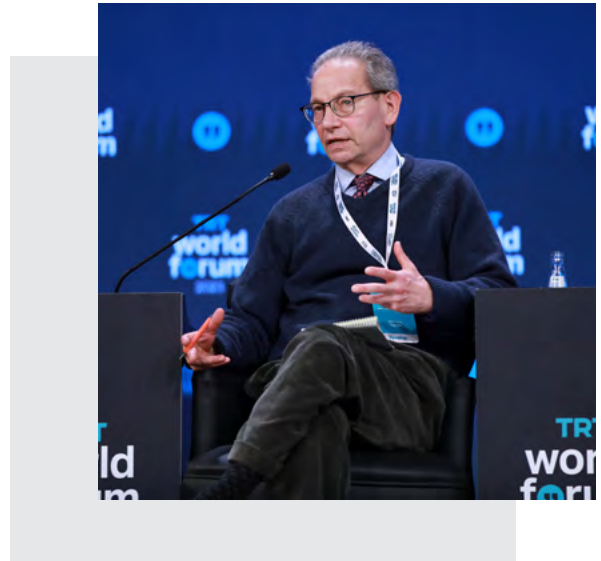
- The resurgence of geopolitics is evident not only on a global scale but also within the Middle East in new and unexpected ways. Globally, there has been a recognition since the era of three American presidents, starting with President Obama, that the era of globalisation is waning, marking the end of American unipolar dominance in the world order. The rise of China, particularly as a non-democratic, nationalistic power challenging American hegemony, has underscored this shift. This realisation has prompted a shift in focus from combating Islamic militants to geopolitical competition among major powers. It's now evident that economic factors alone will not unify nations into a cohesive global entity. Instead, the primary concern is the rivalry between these emerging great powers.
- The rise of China in the Middle East is not merely speculative; it's a palpable reality. Chinese economic interests, particularly in energy, have significantly expanded in the region. Moreover, China's presence in trade, technology, and economic development has become increasingly vital for Middle Eastern countries. Despite their substantial purchases from the West, the region relies on China for essential technologies and manufacturing capabilities necessary for their
- economic growth. Without forging connections with China, achieving their developmental goals would be unattainable.
- For a considerable duration, the credibility of the United States' rules-based order in the Middle East has been questionable. Many in the region do not believe that the United States consistently upheld its professed values, as evidenced by its support for authoritarian regimes and controversial military interventions, such as the invasion of Iraq. Additionally, its unwavering support for Israel has been a source of contention in the Arab world. However, despite these discrepancies, the Middle East still looked to the United States for maintaining order. There was a belief that the US possessed the capability to establish and safeguard an order in the region, irrespective of its adherence to a rules-based international order.
- Türkiye has skillfully navigated the geopolitical landscape, positioning itself as a significant power bridging East and West. Its strategic positioning in the Middle East, coupled with its engagement in Europe and its relationship with EU and NATO, exemplifies its multifaceted approach. While Türkiye's actions may not always align with NATO's expectations, particularly from the perspective of Washington, it epitomises the emerging powers striving to assert their influence and great power status in the evolving global environment.

Charles A. Kupchan

Professor of International Affairs, Georgetown University;
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Charles A. Kupchan is a Professor of International Affairs in the School of Foreign Service and Government Department at Georgetown University and a Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. From 2014 to 2017, Kupchan served as Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for European Affairs on the National Security Council in the Obama White House. He was also Director for European Affairs on the National Security Council during the first Clinton administration. His most recent books are *Anchoring the World: International Order in the Twenty-First Century* (2021), *Isolationism: A History of America's Efforts to Shield Itself from the World* (2020), *No One's World: The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn* (2012), and *How Enemies Become Friends: The Sources of Stable Peace* (2010).

- Firstly, there's a notable shift in the global distribution of power, transitioning from west to east and from north to south, marking a move from uni-polarity to a mix of bi-polarity (particularly between the US and China) and multi-polarity. Secondly, there's a transition from the industrial age to the digital age, accelerating the redistribution of power while also challenging the social contracts established during the industrial era, particularly in leading industrialised nations. Thirdly, there's evidence suggesting a peak in globalisation has been surpassed, with signs of economic decoupling, supply chain repatriation, and restrictions on technology exports to China, leading to the gradual fragmentation of the global economic system. Finally, there's a concerning trend of stumbling within liberal democratic societies, which have historically seen progress towards greater freedom since the French and American revolutions until around 2005, but now face a reversal in this trend, posing unexpected challenges to liberal democratic values and institutions.
- I believe there still exists a rules-based order, albeit not universally applicable. As we observe daily, even hourly, this order is subject to ongoing contestation. Throughout history, the United States has endeavoured to navigate a world where it seeks to uphold a set of rules, yet at times, these rules may encroach upon sovereignty or impede the pursuit of its national interests. This perpetual tension persists to this day.
- Ultimately, it all boils down to economics. The advent of the digital age has significantly reduced the earning



power of many working Americans, leading to widespread economic insecurity. This insecurity creates fertile ground for identity politics and grievances. Therefore, my top priority is ensuring our own houses are in order. I firmly believe that the world would benefit from the existence of models of liberal democracies that effectively serve their citizens. In the ongoing competition between democracy and autocracy, democracy will ultimately prevail due to its superior performance. However, at present, democracy is failing to demonstrate its historical capacity to deliver.

- Firstly, the situation in Ukraine demands careful deliberation. With a military stalemate in the East, NATO must contemplate the next steps. Is it prudent for Ukraine to persist in fighting, or should efforts be redirected towards rebuilding the regions under Kiev's control and facilitating diplomatic negotiations? Secondly, there's a pressing need for a cohesive transatlantic strategy towards China. While some alignment exists, significant disparities remain between the two sides of the Atlantic. Thirdly, we must prioritise the task of getting our own houses in order, particularly concerning my own country. However, concerns also extend to the political stability of the centre in France and Germany. The longevity of the political centre in these nations is a matter of concern.
- Türkiye has demonstrated its capabilities in Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Syria, underscoring its importance in regional dynamics. However, if Türkiye intends to maintain its role as a bridge between East and West, it should prioritise maintaining strong ties with the West. This not only ensures Türkiye's voice in Western forums but also provides the leverage necessary for its future endeavours.