



**GEORGE C. MARSHALL**  
EUROPEAN CENTER FOR SECURITY STUDIES

POLICY BRIEF

# Perspectives on Strategic Competition

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## KEY FINDINGS

International politics will not only be shaped by two superpowers, the United States and China, struggling for dominance in different world regions. Instead a number of other states and groups of states will influence the outcome of this **multipolar strategic competition** as well. No matter how plausible the Western focus on the Chinese challenge may appear, such a focus prevents a broader and deeper understanding of other important trends and dynamics that shape strategic competition in different regions of the world. Taking a multipolar constellation into account opens up new perspectives on the political and economic challenges ahead and facilitates the exploration of approaches for bridging the gaps to nonaligned countries and the so-called Global South.

- Depending on the respective region, global security policy developments and global power shifts and diffusion are perceived differently. Therefore, strategies to gain support for Western initiatives need to take into consideration **regional and national perceptions and conditions**. In other words, they need to be tailored to the audiences. The appreciation of regional conditions includes accepting the fact that several countries will have deviating views on certain topics.
- Framing critique regarding Western actions (sometimes depicted as “double standards”) as being part of the “Russian or Chinese narrative” in the context of strategic competition and thereby discrediting it, will lead to further degradation of the prestige of the Political West. Claims need to be considered and addressed. One participant phrased it: **“Do not step into the strategic competition trap.”**
- Participants especially from Africa and Asia are concerned about being pushed or persuaded to “pick sides.” Since they envision a multipolar world order, **picking sides** does not make sense from their perspective. Staying somewhere in the middle between the Political West and Russia and China is in this regard not opportunistic but a logical consequence of their perception (multipolarity vs. bipolarity).
- Countries in the Global South want to be perceived as **equal partners**. Development cooperation should be designed according to this desire and accept local ownership. Relationships should allow growth in the region and give partners the space to find their own way of development (“underplay the normative dimension”).
- Both the United States and EU countries with only a few exemptions, such as France in some parts of Africa, have a neutral or even **positive image in the Global South**. This is a solid foundation to further develop sustainable and fair relationships.
- Nonaligned countries in South and Southeast Asia lack **confidence in US commitments**. This perception is quite understandable against the historical background of the Cold War era. The Political West in general will have to make greater efforts to credibly assure these countries of its firm support in the face of security threats such as those posed by China.
- Participants from the region perceive the **US pivot to Asia** as a strategic approach toward bilateral engagement with China on global dominance. Washington should take into greater account the security interests of the nonaligned countries in South and Southeast Asia. Practical measures by mutual agreement with these countries could strengthen the role and perception of the United States as a reliable partner.
- India perceives itself in a leadership role and as a **“bridge between North and South”** interested in maintaining and further developing a rules-based liberal world order. This self-perception was shared by the participants from South and Southeast Asia. Participants from other regions neither agreed nor disagreed with this perspective. The United States is highlighting this role in its Joint Regional Strategy for South Asia, and the EU has taken steps to develop closer ties with India. But more support for India could also be beneficial to the region and improve the perception of the West in the Global South.

Supporting the development of an **additional pole in South Asia**, thereby fostering the rules-based liberal world order in close cooperation between the United States, Europe, India, Japan, and further interested countries, could help **contain bilateral conflicts** and reduce regional and global tensions.

## OVERVIEW

From January 16 to February 2 2024, the Research and Policy Analysis Department (RPA) of the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies conducted the three-week Future Lab and Research Workshop on “Perspectives on Strategic Competition,” in Garmisch-Partenkirchen. This was the first in a series of workshops devoted to RPA’s 2024 research topic, strategic competition. The aim of the event was to highlight the heterogeneous perspectives on strategic competition of representatives from nonaligned countries and the Global South. RPA had identified the importance of these perspectives at a prior event that scrutinized the normative dimension of strategic competition (RPA Symposium, March 14, 2023, Federal Ministry of Defense, Berlin).

The event was directly linked to the GCMC priority topic strategic competition and the GCMC priority regions: Black Sea, Central Asia, and South Caucasus. The event also proved the value of the GCMC Alumni Network. RPA brought together 21 GCMC Alumni from the wider Black Sea region, the Middle East, South and South East Asia, and Western Africa to discuss regional security challenges collectively and find collaborative solutions.

To foster the discussion in the regional working groups and to learn more about the perceptions and visions of the participants, RPA issued six guiding questions: 1) What are the major threats and challenges for your country or region? 2) What are the implications of the current war in Ukraine and Israel/ the Gaza Strip for your region/country? 3) What are interests of regional and major powers in your region? 4) How does the global competition between the USA and China influence the dynamics in your region? 5) How do regional and major powers influence the regional security architecture and dynamics? 6) What is your vision of a fair global system? **This paper summarizes the discussions and reflects the perceptions of representatives from the regions.** Considering the small size of the study group (21 individuals representing 16 countries) the authors cannot generalize the findings, nor is the group a representative sample. Still, the views of the participants reflect the attitudes and perspectives the authors have perceived in interactions during various GCMC events. They also resonate in regional publications and discourses. Of note, their views do not necessarily represent the views of the authors or of the GCMC. The objective of the event was to systematically gather genuine regional views, not those of the US or German governments.

## COMPETING VISIONS OF THE FUTURE WORLD ORDER

The 2024 Future Lab and Research Workshop revealed that the perception and assessment of current global developments, particularly those in the security policy realm, are very diverse. Differences cannot be attributed to a lack of understanding based on knowledge deficits or opportunistic deliberations. Instead, they exist because of a **fundamentally different perception of the global situation**. Representatives from Western Africa or South and South-east Asia do not share the view predominant in the United States, China, and parts of Europe that the international system is moving toward bipolarity, or even a New Cold War, which would divide the world into East and West again.

From an analytical standpoint, it is remarkable that many Western observers assume the world is **returning to a bipolar system** in which the nonaligned states will essentially play a similar role as they did until 1989. Democratic states are in fact facing authoritarian regimes once again. However, in contrast to the Cold War, there are still no fixed blocks under unified leadership: China is undoubtedly the strongest challenger for the West, but unlike the Soviet Union, it does not have a large alliance system. Even if the United States is still the leading power in NATO, in the Indo-Pacific region, Washington only maintains bilateral security relations with various countries such as Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea.

Another important difference concerns **threat perceptions**. During the Cold War, the situation was quite simple: for the democratic states of Western Europe, the Soviet Union was clearly the most important military threat; the same applied to the United States at the global level. Today, the picture is much more complex. For Washington, China is the biggest threat, but since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Europeans once again regard Russia as the most important threat to their security. As a result, the geopolitical situation today is very different from the constellation during the Cold War.

The same is true with regard to the **distribution of economic power** today and during the Cold War:

Share of Global GDP*	1985	2022
Political West	73%	51%
Political East	9%	20%
Global South	18%	29%

\* GDP share of world, at constant 2015 prices in US dollars  
Source: United Nations Statistics Division, [www.unstats.un.org](http://www.unstats.un.org): Basic Data Selection - amaWebClient (un.org)

From these facts and figures no clear prediction for the future world order can be derived. Nevertheless, the indications should be acknowledged by Western observers. If not only the challenging countries such as China (Political East) have gained more weight, but also the nonaligned countries, then this points to a **development towards a multipolar system** where more than two states hold a preponderance of power, at least at a regional if not yet a global level.

International politics will thus not only be shaped by two superpowers, the United States and China, struggling for dominance in different world regions. There are a number of other states and groups of states that will influence the outcome of this competition as well. Against this background, RPA developed the framework for the workshop. In order to better understand the dynamics of strategic competition, it is important to include the **perspectives of nonaligned countries in different regions** of the world. The following sections summarize the perspectives and findings of the 21 participants from 16 countries and 4 regions.

## WIDER BLACK SEA REGION (BSR)

The ongoing **Russian war against Ukraine** dominated the participants' perception of the security policy situation in their region. Certainly, the outcome of this war will influence the future developments in the region. The group identified different trilemmas (three political goals, but only two achievable) for key actors in the region.

- **Ukraine:** (sovereign response without NATO guarantee) a) Restore 1991 statehood (including maritime); b) Successfully defend Ukraine and deter future Russian attack; c) Secure a viable economic future.
- **Russia:** a) Achieve victory; b) Split the Political West and limit the sovereignty for countries in its sphere of influence; c) Avoid regime change/internal collapse.
- **Türkiye:** a) Weaken Russia but avoid its collapse; b) Assert regional ownership with Türkiye as the dominant power; c) Close BSR to extra-regional powers (West/NATO out).
- **Political West:** a) Restore 1991 statehoods in BSR; b) Avoid conflict escalation, Russian disintegration, or Sino-Russian alliance; c) Enable EU and non-NATO security assurances to avoid future entanglements.
- **China:** (if active involvement in conflict) a) Support Russia as US strategic counterweight while avoiding conflict escalation; b) Maintain and expand global economic presence—stable Middle Corridor route; c) Uphold principle of unitary sovereign state (“One China Policy”).

### Ukrainian/Political West Victory Implications

- A Ukrainian victory would create more instability in Chechnya (a third Chechen war could be the consequence). Russia would compensate a defeat in Ukraine with a division of Georgia, a union (de facto annexation) of Belarus, and increased pressure on Kazakhstan. A potential **leadership change in Russia** does not mean a Russian collapse/revolution or even a change in the political system. A post-Putin Russia is very possible but not inevitable, with a lowest common denominator successor to Putin holding the presidency. However, it is unlikely the new leader would admit defeat in Ukraine. Rather, Russian substate actors would double down on illicit financial flows and BRINK

(Belarus, Russia, Iran, and North Korea) pathway and alternative governance. Finally, Russian grey zone activities would expand globally.

- A victory in Ukraine would also boost the credibility of the Political West regarding its ability to shape and defend norms.

### Russian Victory Implications

- After a Russian victory, parts of Russian Armed Forces would be tied down in Ukraine, and Russia would be isolated from Political West. The **threat of horizontal spillover** along NATO's Eastern Flank would become immanent.
- **Western opposition to Russia** will consolidate due to likely continued Russian atrocities in occupied Ukraine; however, the credibility of the West will be tarnished. Non-NATO and non-EU countries will realize that nonalignment is not viable.
- In this context, **Russia's narrative** that "fair multipolarity" replaces US "global hegemony" gains more traction. Russia's BRINK pathway, "alternative governance," and the notion of Russia as security provider globally are boosted.

### Future Global Order and the BSR

- **Nonalignment will become less attractive.** Lessons from BSR will likely be that nonalignment or strategic autonomy is not viable. National security strategies should advocate either being part of a regional collective defense organization (cooperative alliance) or undertake military build-up to include nuclear weapons. Destabilization will occur in the period of proliferation.
- **China and regional powers will gain influence.** China, Türkiye, and India emerge stronger irrespective of who wins. The China model, which is based on networks and hubs, economic not military coercion, and influence not territorial conquest, could be attractive.

## MIDDLE EAST

The participants perceived the security situation in their region as being dominated by the deeply-rooted, and now **escalating conflict between Israel and Arab countries**. Although Israel was the victim of Hamas' terror attack on October 7, 2023, the perpetrator-victim perception is increasingly interpreted to Israel's disadvantage due to the rising civilian casualty figures caused by Israel's massive military response and the great scale of internal displacements in the Gaza Strip. While the conflict between Israel and Hamas is currently attracting a great deal of attention, **structural problems and extreme fragmentation** between states, religious groups, and ethnic communities have characterized the Arab Peninsula for centuries. The West's view of the Middle East is often somewhat limited; lines of conflict are often more complex than expected, and historical contexts always play a major role. The fact that the region is the birthplace of three world religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) is part of the complexity. Generally, the West overestimates the religious gap and competition between Sunni and Shia. For example, Iran's support for Hamas crosses assumed Sunni-Shia religious delineations.

### Major Challenges

The Middle East presents many challenges, many of them interconnected. These include

- Religiously motivated **terrorism**;
- Large numbers of **displaced populations**;
- Weak governance and corruption in highly fragile states (Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen);
- **High unemployment rates** especially among younger generations;
- **No joint positive vision** for the region and no regional integration framework;
- Growing **influence of Hamas** the longer the Israel counterattack lasts;
- **Iran's pursuit of hegemony** in the region;

- Unsolved (and unsolvable?) conflicts that have deep roots in **geography and history**;
- **Climate change and water scarcity**.

### Opportunities

The **India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor** (IMEC), agreed to at the G20 summit in India in September 2023 by India, Saudi Arabia (S-A), the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Italy, Germany, France, the EU, and the United States, is a **flagship infrastructure project** that brings together an innovative format of different states on two continents (Asia, including India and the Middle East, and Europe). Since the planned corridor passes through Israel, the project has been delayed due to the Israel-Hamas war. The project envisages a sustainable “green” connectivity grid between Asia and Europe made up of rail, undersea cables, and shipping.

Other opportunities are illustrated by the **future visions of several countries** in the region, including S-A (Saudi vision 2030), Oman (Oman vision 2040), and Qatar (Qatar National Vision 2030). These initiatives share the recognition that their countries are in states of transformation, characterized by new technologies, economic—green—transitions, and social change. Assessing the project through the lens of strategic competition, it could surely counter Chinese influence in the region. From a broader perspective and stressing the need for international collaboration to tackle regional challenges, however, it could also serve as a compliment to China’s current regional initiatives.

### Main Regional Actors and Their Objectives

The participants see Iran, Israel, Qatar, S-A, Türkiye, and the Muslim Brotherhood as the main regional actors. The **Muslim Brotherhood** is understood to be the most influential ideological network. It connects Qatar (finance hub and Hamas headquarters), Hamas (in Gaza), and some groups in Syria, Sudan, and Türkiye (the ruling AKP and majority of the population). Iran also has long-standing relations with the Muslim Brotherhood that go beyond supporting Hamas.

### Regional Actors’ Strategies in Time and Space

- **Iran** is assessed as a security challenge because it continues to expand its influence. It exploits investments in proxies (Houthis, Hamas, Hezbollah) to inflict more insecurity in order to destabilize neighboring countries (for example, to prevent foreign direct investments). Although the militarization of its nuclear program allegedly has been suspended through the existing Fatwa, Iran’s nuclear militarization poses a threat to all neighbors.
- **Qatar** is seen, by at least the Jordanian elite, but also Lebanese elites, to be an honest broker and capable mediator in the Middle East, despite the fact it plays host to the headquarters of Hamas and finances its activities.
- **Israel’s** main objective is self-protection. Its current government strives for a Jewish state or even for a Zionist state. Some of Israel’s neighbors suspect expansionist intentions.
- **Türkiye** is reviving the dream of the Ottoman empire (based on Muslim Brotherhood ideology). Turkish politics are oriented toward expansion and the past.
- **Saudi Arabia** has strong ambitions to invest in its Vision 2030, presenting itself as an attractive role model in the transition of a petro-state to a modern, green and innovative economy and society, and a magnet of foreign direct investment. This initiative is accompanied by careful liberalization of women’s rights. NEOM is the showcase project to build a mega city entirely run by solar power and other renewables. S-A is viewed as future-oriented and nonexpansive; it is expected to stay out of conflicts and to try to neutralize its external relations. Jordan is a close partner.

### Global Powers' Influence in the Region

- The **United States**, as the dominant power, is expected to convince Israel to adopt the two-state solution. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the United States is seen as biased in favor of Israel. However, only US leadership is believed to bring a solution in the region! Participants identified US ambitions to contain Iran and China through strategic alliances.
- **China** is seen as a trading partner and perceived as a power with high potential in the future. It is expanding its influence. However, in some countries, Chinese activities are prevented. China's offer to rebuild the port of Beirut was rejected, and China's attempts to enter Jordan through economic means was blocked by the United States.
- **In their competition**, the United States, using its political leverage, and China, using its economic leverage, are seen as trying to secure access to natural resources and seek control over central choke points, including Bab El-Mandeb; the Strait of Hormuz; and the Suez Canal.
- The **EU** is not considered a political power. Rather, it is seen as a soft power contributing to culture, education, agriculture and environment, disaster relief, and humanitarian assistance. The EU's Neighborhood Policy along the shores of the Mediterranean Sea ("Southern Neighborhood") is perceived to function as a buffer zone, to prevent mass migration into the EU by offering life chances in a stable belt around the EU for the large number of youth. Therefore, the EU member states are outsourcing manufacturing plants to the EU neighborhood: in the automotive industry, this is already happening in Morocco where France has invested heavily in the sector, just across from Gibraltar.
- **Russia** plays an active role in Syria and establishes its own military air and naval bases. Its central aim is to preserve its stronghold in the port of Tartus, which is Russia's only access to the warm water of the Mediterranean. It has a strategic partnership with Iran, especially with regard to military technology exchange and the prevention of UN Security Council Resolutions.

- **France** seen as the "mother" of Lebanon, with more declaratory than real power in the region.
- **Germany** has the role of a niche player and mediator. It exerts soft power through donations and local initiatives of political foundations. Germany also attracts the young and capable from the region.

### Importance of Russia's War in Ukraine and Israel-Hamas War

**Gaza:** Proximity matters! Humanitarian disaster and growing instability in the region are the current results of the war. Moreover, the reconciliation process in the region has come to a halt. From the perspective of the participants, **only the two-state solution** can bring stability for the region. Any other outcome of the Israel-Hamas war will lead to a repetition of attacks on Israel like the one on October 7, 2023. Qatar can influence Hamas through funding in the release of hostages. Tensions between Israel and its Arab neighbors are transregional and manifest in populations in third countries. For example, from an Arab or Israeli protocol perspective, the joint attendance of Arab and Israeli participants in the same conference or event is difficult if not prohibited. Therefore, any kind of normalization of relations between Israel and its neighbors would benefit the region and relationships globally. Only an outcome of the Israel-Hamas war that is acceptable for all sides, including Palestinian people, will lead to a more stable situation and normal diplomatic relationships.

**Ukraine:** For the Middle East, the conflict is far away and largely experienced only through the diversion of resources away from the Middle East and its impact on food security and prices.

**Terrorism:** Perceptions differ between the West and the Middle East.

- Terrorist organizations— Hamas, Hezbollah—are not perceived as terrorists within the region.
- There is no differentiation between Hamas and the Palestinian population.

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## WEST AFRICA

The countries in West Africa are mostly nonaligned, but they have had close ties with their former Western colonial powers for a long time. Recently, Western interests in West Africa are being challenged by rival actors. The emergence of a multipolar international order after the Cold War has profoundly changed how Africa interacts with the world. West African states perceive themselves in an era of choice with an increasing number of nontraditional actors, mostly emerging economies from the Global South, including China, India, the Gulf states, and Türkiye. These countries have employed economic and trade diplomacy to build partnerships and project a combination of soft and smart influence. External and nontraditional actors are using internal fragmentation, inequality, inefficient governance structures, and other mechanisms (see “Threats and Challenges”) to influence regional developments.

For the participants, one of the regional key actors is **Nigeria**, which holds significant influence due to its size, population, and economic strength. Nigeria has been actively involved in regional security initiatives, particularly in combating insurgencies and terrorism, such as the Boko Haram insurgency in the Lake Chad Basin region.

**Ghana** also plays a prominent role in regional security efforts, contributing troops to peacekeeping operations and participating in diplomatic initiatives aimed at resolving conflicts.

Furthermore, many of the leading international actors are present or somehow involved in the Sahel region. **France** as former colonial power has been involved in Western African security policy through military interventions and regional initiatives. The United Nations also played a critical role through peacekeeping missions and support for conflict resolution efforts.

### Threats and Challenges

- The impacts of **climate change** are already being felt and will increase in magnitude if action is not taken to reduce global carbon emissions. The impacts include higher temperatures, drought, changing rainfall patterns, and increased climate variability. Due to the predominance of egoistic behavior of global actors preventing collaboration, this fundamental challenge has not been addressed appropriately.
  - While **inflationary pressures** are receding globally, they are persistent in Africa and continue to weigh heavily on the continent’s short-to-medium-term economic performance.
  - In 2022, over 20 million people and at least 10 million children faced **severe food shortages** in Africa due to crop failure and four consecutive dry seasons. Despite the vast and rich landscape, severe food shortage is perpetual.
  - (Perceived) **inequalities** such as structural inequality in political participation and inability to exert influence, legal inequality, unequal distribution of wealth, systemic corruption, or unaccountable decision-makers and leadership are reducing the societal resilience in African countries and are hindering prosperity and development. This challenge is amplified by a lack of people-oriented leadership and accountability. There are close interlinkages between political leadership and judiciaries and legislators, and agencies that fight corruption are often based on ethnic relationships. This exacerbates corruption while undermining the systems of checks and balances that are actually in place.
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- Most African countries are characterized by **dysfunctional governance structures and processes**, characterized by socioeconomic and political division along ethnic and tribal lines across all levels. This has resulted in a prioritization of individual, tribal, and ethnic interests over national interests.
- While **social fragmentation** may even indicate a positive diversity of a system, in this case it leads to division. Main reasons for this are legacies from the colonial era, such as the transplantation of Western concepts of society and nation to the region, as well as the existence of many states within artificial borders and resulting fragmentation of ethnic groups and tribes.
- States in the region continue to **lack the physical infrastructure**, capabilities, and capacities necessary to sustain the basic needs of the population in large parts of their states. This in turn promotes insecurity and inequality within societies and along ethnic and tribal lines.
- Societies lack **shared narratives and visions** to integrate enormously diverse and fragmented societies. This undermines social cohesion.
- From the perspective of the participants, the **United States** does not play a decisive role. America has only a secondary interest in the region, which relates primarily to the area of security with a focus on counter-terrorism.
- **France** is understood to be the main player on the European and Western side, but its intentions are perceived as neocolonial in order to keep the region in its sphere of influence, rather than creating a dynamic that leads to more independence.
- The **EU** is perceived as a fragmented player, and some member states follow France's lead. There are close economic and political ties with the supranational structures of the EU (e.g., the EU Commission). However, all EU support always comes with prerequisites. Additionally, the strong influence of France in the EU structures can occasionally undermine the EU's approach in many West African countries.
- **China** clearly has mainly economic interests. China's capital expansion in Africa has shown mixed results, where some economies are becoming more dependent and even facing a debt trap. China offers an alternative to the West in the short term. But in the long term it may not be a better alternative. Short-term thinking in regional governments and political elites meets strategic patience and long-term strategic thinking in China, which takes over infrastructure, land, and resources.

All these factors and the actions of Islamist and separatist groups cause **both national and human insecurity**.

### Perception of External Actors

For the participants, the Political West supports West African countries not for their benefit, but to pursue Western agendas. **External actors create dependencies** that limit the freedom of governments to develop their own visions. While China and Russia are openly transactional in gaining something in return for their support, the West is perceived as a more dishonest actor in that it ties normative compliance (democracy, human rights, and the rule of law) and structural adjustments as a way to control not only key economic assets such as ports or infrastructure, but the entire political system.

- **Russia** plays a special role in the area of security and military cooperation, with the objective of pushing back Western influence and expanding its own sphere of influence. In some cases, it is filling gaps left open by the West or offering alternative military approaches that appear promising. Historically, many players in the region have always done business with Russia.
- The **Arab states** play an ambivalent role. On the one hand, they are a new player in trade and the economy and in this respect are seen as relatively positive. On the other hand, religious radical currents from the region influence traditional social structures and promote the spread of radical Islamist ideas.



## SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

South and Southeast Asia are very populous regions. The four countries represented in the workshop (Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, and Philippines) are inhabited by approximately 25 percent of the world population. Collaboration in the region is organized in **different organizations mainly focused on economic issues** (for example the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, and the Indian Ocean Rim Association). Some countries are part of mainly bilateral security arrangements, for example, the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement Philippines – US, or so called “mini-laterals.” But there is **no security architecture comparable to the Euro-Atlantic space**. Notably, during the discussion, the participants clearly articulated that there is no intention to create such an architecture. Two reasons for this are the diverse perceptions of the countries regarding security threats and challenges and the sensitive balance of relationships and interests in the region.

### Security Threats and Challenges

- **Borders and territorial claims have conflict potential** in the region. Some countries are able to solve these issues bilaterally or are going to court to settle conflict as in the case of the Philippines and China. Notably, however, China does not accept the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague.
- The ongoing internal **conflict in Myanmar** destabilizes the region for several reasons. First, defecting soldiers cross the border to India and destabilize the adjacent regions. Second, forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals such as the Rohingya cause security issues in countries such as Bangladesh and Indonesia (for example, trafficking of humans and drugs). Finally, **China is using the conflict in Myanmar to gain more influence**. In particular, it seeks the option to build and use infrastructure and to finally gain **uncontested access to the Bay of Bengal**, thereby counterbalancing the US containment strategy and changing the balance of power in the region.
- Religiously and politically (separatism) motivated **terrorism** poses a threat to regional stability.
- **Cyber security** is a challenge for the region. The primary actors are China and North Korea.
- Countries depend on Russian and Ukrainian fertilizers, but not on Ukrainian grain. Due to the war, **food security** has become a challenge.
- **Natural disasters and implications of climate change** already persistently and severely effect the region.
- **Social security and unequal distribution of resources** lead to a high percentage of poor people who are extremely vulnerable to and affected by external shocks such as natural disasters and food shortages.

### Different Actors in the Region

- Participants perceive **China** as an economic opportunity economic development is the major objective for the actors in the region; see challenges such as food security and inequality. Challenges include unequal market access or trade deficits with China. Some countries perceive China also as a security challenge or even a threat as evidenced by its role in Myanmar and border disputes.
- **Japan** is seen as a possible alternative to China in development and economic collaboration.
- **Russia** plays two major roles in the region. Some see its economic potential, providing basic goods such as food and energy to the population is the major concern of the governments. Some stress Russia’s role in balancing Chinese influence.
- The **United States** is recognized as an important partner in various domains such as economic, education, and security. Some participants criticized the US focus on strategic competition with China when dealing with the region. Moreover, the United States is not perceived everywhere as a reliable partner.
- The **EU** is seen as an important trade partner, but its high standards (quality of products, labor conditions, etc.) are causing problems in the process of establishing trade relations.
- **India** has a positive image in the region. It is an important trade partner and a provider of resources. It has no regional competitor. The participants also stressed they would accept a more prominent role for India as a regional power (see below).

- **Australia** provides resources and is a good economic and security cooperation partner, especially when it comes to counterterrorism. It is regarded as a reliable partner in disaster relief and valued as an opportunity for education and intellectual exchange.
- **South Korea** is a quiet partner. But in matters of trade, it could balance the economic influence of other actors.

### India as Regional Power

The participants in all working groups discussed the potential role of India as a regional power and a **bridge between the Global South and the Political West**. While participants from Africa, the Middle East, and the BSR neither accepted nor rejected that idea, the South and Southeast Asia group agreed that a leading role of India would benefit the region more than the influence of external powers. As mentioned above, India's steps to take over this role would be uncontested and not lead to conflict in the region. The group identified three prerequisites for a more prominent role of India. First, India would need external support. Second, it would need to prove its capabilities in actively taking a leading role. Third, India would need to develop and show sensitivities regarding the needs of other countries, for example, Bangladesh.

### Role of the United States and the EU

- Embrace a more inclusive approach to **development cooperation**.
- **Provide alternatives**, including funding, to counter the Belt & Road Initiative and Chinese influence.
- Partner more in **climate change initiatives**.
- Invest in **human capacity building** and fund education opportunities such as scholarships.
- For some: the **United States** should initiate mini-lateral security arrangements.
- The **EU** should allow flexibility for growth and underplay normative dimension.

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