CSIS BRIEFS

Executive Summary – Fulcrums of Order

Rising States and the Struggle for the Future

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DECEMBER 2025

This brief is part of a larger project on the Global South, led by the Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy. It includes an edited volume entitled Fulcrums of Order: Rising States and the Struggle for the Future. *You can find more about the project* **here**.

The United States has been the world's dominant power for most of a century, and it will remain the world's strongest power for many years to come. Yet, the degree of dominance that the United States and its closest allies enjoy has been diminishing, and it is likely to diminish further. The story is not merely that China has grown; rather, it is a story of broad and steady growth throughout the world. Formerly poor countries have risen into middle-income status, and former colonies have become powers in their own right. Forty years ago, the wealthiest countries in the world—the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)—controlled about **80 percent** of global GDP. The number today is about half that, and it is not going back.

As the global economy grows, many governments seek to deepen their relations across the board, especially with great powers. That, by itself, is no challenge to the United States and its closest partners. The challenge is that China and Russia are seeking to deepen a cleavage between the world's wealthiest countries and the rest. They emphasize a "Global South identity," and they assert that they are an integral part of it while the United States and its allies are its antagonists. In so doing, they seek to reduce U.S. power, undermine global norms, and push the world away from multilateral understandings and toward bilateral ties where China and Russia can more easily dominate.

Eight countries will have an outsized role determining how these Chinese and Russian efforts unfold. Brazil, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates are dissimilar in many ways, but they share much in common. All are thriving economies and regional heavyweights. They have governments with full-spectrum capabilities in diplomacy, military affairs, and intelligence. All feel a sense of precarity and urgency, while they also feel a rising sense of agency. All seek to deepen ties with China and Russia, but they also all see deepening their U.S. ties as vital.

From a U.S. perspective, these countries represent a fulcrum. Their decisions to preserve a global order marked by multilateral engagement and respect for international law will help sustain that order. Because of their strength and regional footprints, each can play a leadership role bringing their respective regions along. In addition, they may even help drive more predictable and constructive Chinese and Russian behavior, boosting global security and economic growth.

These same countries may choose a different course, favoring more transactional relations that provide near-term bargaining power but have the longer-term effect

of eroding universal norms, creating spheres of influence, and fostering more overt contestation. That is likely to be a world of more violence and volatility, less trust, and more trade fragmentation and economic instability.

The United States' approach to these countries should have several components. First, the United States and its partners should also engage directly with the idea of a Global South, ensuring that China's and Russia's motivations to advance their own great power interests do not overwhelm the legitimate efforts of rising powers to have international institutions better accommodate their interests.

The Chinese and Russian approaches have much in common with populist political efforts worldwide. They advance reductionist approaches to complicated issues, rallying the world's nations to reject exploitation by a rich and privileged minority. In the process, they seek to vilify the United States and its closest partners and weaken U.S. soft power.

Yet, for politicians in democratic societies, this is a familiar challenge. Encouragingly, resilient democracies have found ways to engage with, and often accommodate, populist insurgencies, and such an approach is called for here. The priority is to seriously consider the domestic political imperatives of the leaders of the countries highlighted in this project. While all are not democracies, most are, and all of them feel a sharp need to be accountable to their citizens. Greater understanding of their needs, their ambitions, and their vulnerabilities, combined with a commitment to partner with them on achieving success on their own terms, will position the United States and its closest partners to have constructive relationships with them and undermine efforts to divide them from the United States.

A policy built along those lines would have several components:

- Create more ad hoc partnerships that tackle specific issues, deliver tangible results, and visibly benefit participating states. That would put the United States in the position of problem-solver rather than preserver of the status quo.
- Engage with these countries on their priority issues, including climate loss and damage, health, technology, and connectivity. Many of these issues involve knowledge, education, and training, where the United States has world-leading advantages.
- Create clearer rewards for cooperation, and clearer consequences for damaging actions. The Chinese model of tiered relationships could be an inspiration. The U.S. model of naming "major non-NATO allies" has led to a hodge-podge of ties that are resistant to revision and are a better guide to the past than the future.
- Actively amplify voices from the Global South and prioritize reforms that increase representation and buy-in from rising states, while being sure to maintain transparency and donor trust.
- Focus on messaging that embraces the future and puts the United States on the side of positive change that seeks to empower countries in the Global South rather than preserve the status quo.

The result of such a strategy would not be to create a set of relationships that isolate U.S. adversaries, as the United States sought to do in the Cold War. Instead, it would be to grant increased legitimacy to a global system that provides vital predictability, and which thereby enhances security and prosperity. The Trump administration captured part of this when it worked to build support for an agreement that would end fighting in Gaza and bring Israeli hostages home. The U.S. government did not merely work to get UN Security Council endorsement of the deal, and it did not count on helpful efforts from either China or Russia. Instead, in its push to get Hamas to agree to the deal, it courted eight governments of Muslim-majority countries (four of which—Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and Indonesia—are studied in this volume) to win their support. All, it should be noted, had reasons to want to work with the United States, and equally importantly, the United States had reason to want to work with them. It did so successfully, and it should seek to do so again and again. ■

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This report is made possible by general support to CSIS. No direct sponsorship contributed to this report.