

The Mirage of Autonomy and the Dread of a Vacuum: West Asia in the Labyrinth of the Post-Hegemonic Order

A Critical Assessment of the Regional Security Architecture and the Paradigm Shift in the Engagement of Eurasian Powers

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Introduction: Navigating the Transition Era

The collection of articles compiled in this special issue represents an ambitious, multifaceted, and commendable endeavor to dissect the security architecture of West Asia amid the decline of United States unipolar hegemony. The dominant and shared premise across various chapters of this volume is an emphasis on a fundamental proposition: a security model reliant on the presence, intervention, and guarantees of an extra-regional power (the United States) faces a structural and irreversible crisis. In contrast to this reality, the authors emphasize normative concepts such as collective security, indivisible security, institutionalized multilateralism, and the necessity of indigenous responsibility among regional states (themes addressed in Chapters 11 and 25).

Nevertheless, a critical and integrative reading of this volume against the backdrop of overarching geopolitical developments through late 2025 raises a pivotal question: does West Asia possess the geopolitical agency and will to transition from an “order reliant on foreign hegemony” to a “region-centric security architecture”? This paper argues that while the authors have excelled in articulating “normative objectives” and demonstrating the dysfunction of the preceding order, they have succumbed to a degree of reductionism in charting the “institutional pathway” required to realize these goals, as well as in analyzing the contradictions inherent in the roles of alternative powers—particularly Russia in an era of comprehensive confrontation with the West. “After hegemony” does not mark the conclusion of the crisis; rather, it signals the region’s entry into a phase of unregulated rivalry wherein

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the purported autonomy of regional states remains inextricably intertwined with new dependencies spawned by great-power competition.

1. The Theoretical Appeal of “Regionalism” and the Trap of the Security Dilemma

From a theoretical vantage point, the appeal of a “region-centric security” framework is undeniable. The experience of past decades demonstrates that resolving regional dilemmas through the military preeminence of a single actor, ruinous Western military interventions (from Iraq to Libya), or the disregard of key actors’ security concerns fails to produce durable stability. Stressing that genuine security must be comprehensive, inclusive, and cognizant of all regional stakeholders’ interests offers an appealing paradigm—particularly for Iranian foreign policy discourse—as it aligns closely with the notion of diminishing reliance on external powers.

Yet it is precisely at this juncture that the profound rift between the “normative ideal” and “practical feasibility” manifests itself. West Asia confronts a textbook “security dilemma”: an action deemed defensive and deterrent by one state (e.g., Iran)—such as missile program development, an asymmetric deterrence network, or nuclear advancements—is interpreted as an offensive threat by its neighbors. Conversely, those neighbors seeking refuge beneath foreign security umbrellas completes this cycle of mutual threat perception.

The volume explicitly acknowledges in Chapter 25 that the proliferation of security dilemmas constitutes the primary impediment to durable arrangements; yet merely proclaiming the principle of “security for all” fails to elucidate how conflicting threat perceptions can be translated into credible institutional arrangements. This problem grows even more intricate under the shadow of global power dynamics outlined by Dmitri Trenin in Chapter 1. In Trenin’s estimation, the world is entering an era marked by the ruthless resurgence of Realpolitik—an era where four principal actors (the United States, China, India, and Russia) define the future order. In such a turbulent international landscape, the nations of West Asia cannot simply forge indigenous arrangements within a geopolitical vacuum, as great-power competition inevitably spills into the region via proxy wars, economic corridors, and defense pacts.

2. Moscow’s Paradox: From “Neutral Balancer” to “Committed Actor”

A fundamental critique of this volume lies in the ambivalent definition of extra-regional powers' roles in the emerging order. Across various chapters, the United States is rightly criticized for its unilateralist approach and failure to resolve conflicts (most notably the Palestinian issue); conversely, the Russian Federation is portrayed as an advocate of a more balanced order and the proponent of initiatives such as "Collective Security in the Persian Gulf".

However, a critical appraisal compels us to ask: if the envisioned future order remains dependent on Russia's presence as an "indispensable balancer," are we truly witnessing a "post-hegemonic, region-centric" architecture, or merely a transition from a single Western hegemony to a multipolar Eurasian-American balance of power?

But here, a much more fundamental question must be boldly raised: Where exactly does Russia intend to position itself within the architecture of these unfolding regional transformations? To move beyond the current geopolitical impasse, it is absolutely imperative that Russia actively assists in the construction and consolidation of a "non-Western regional order"—a definitive and independent framework under which all its future communications, interactions, and strategic engagements with Iran and other regional actors are clearly defined and institutionalized.

Only through such a commitment could the erosion of US dominance signify genuine autonomy for regional states, rather than a mere realignment of power and new dependencies. Furthermore, developments across 2024 and 2025—particularly those expertly dissected by Andrey Kortunov in Chapter 9—demonstrate that Russia's capacity for intervention and engagement in the Middle East is fundamentally subordinate to Moscow's vital global priorities.

Following Donald Trump's return to the White House in 2025 and the pivotal Alaska Summit in August of that year, it became evident that the Kremlin's foremost priority remains the durable settlement of the Ukrainian conflict and managing existential confrontation with the collective West. Under such circumstances, contrary to the volume's idealized portrayal of Russia as an entirely neutral facilitator in the Middle East, Moscow has in practice been forced to abandon "passive neutrality".

To withstand comprehensive Western pressure, Russia has adopted a more pragmatic and committed posture toward the "Global Majority," including West Asian actors. Deepening strategic and defense cooperation with Iran and forging synergies with the Gulf monarchies no longer merely serve the classical role of a mediator; rather,

they are aimed at consolidating Russia's sovereign posture and generating strategic depth against NATO. Therefore, the Middle Eastern security architecture cannot rely solely on Moscow's capacity to de-escalate regional tensions, as Russia itself has become a central axis in the reconfiguration of the global order.

3. The Collapse of Arms Control Regimes and the Middle Eastern Nuclear Impasse

No discussion of West Asian security architecture is complete without addressing the dilemma of weapons of mass destruction. Chapter 26, focusing on the Iranian nuclear file, lucidly illustrates how the absence of an effective diplomatic framework (post-JCPOA collapse) risks pushing the status quo to the precipice of full-scale warfare or cascading proliferation. Yet to grasp the magnitude of this peril, the analysis must be synthesized with the stark warnings issued by Vladimir Orlov and Sergey Semenov (in Chapter 3) regarding the grim prospects of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).

The non-proliferation regime is currently engulfed in an unprecedented crisis. Fractures among the five nuclear-weapon states (the Western troika versus the Sino-Russian axis) have effectively reduced NPT review conferences to arenas for political score-settling. In this toxic climate, the long-standing aspiration of establishing a "Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone (WMDFZ) in the Middle East" (emphasized in Chapter 11) appears increasingly utopian.

As Orlov underscores, instrumentalizing non-proliferation to pursue self-serving agendas (e.g., Western and Israeli military strikes against nuclear infrastructure) sends a perilous signal to threshold states: "Only hard deterrence guarantees survival." From Tehran's vantage point, a region-centric order is meaningful only if its own security is recognized as equally legitimate to that of its neighbors. However, given the paralysis of international institutions and the disintegration of arms control regimes, where are the credible guarantees that could persuade states to constrain their defense capabilities to originate? The volume articulates normative goals with precision, yet the institutional roadmap to realize them in a post-NPT world remains missing.

4. Multilateralism and BRICS: A Solution or a Transformed Dependency?

The volume proves significantly more adept at delineating the virtues of multipolarity than at scrutinizing its associated costs and vulnerabilities. This tendency is readily apparent in Chapter 20 (Sergey Ryabkov's interview on BRICS).

BRICS is undoubtedly a vanguard phenomenon and a symbol of the “Global Majority’s” resolve to divest from Western-dominated institutions. Successes such as advancing the digital economy, progressive de-dollarization, and membership expansion have demonstrated the bloc’s allure for nations like Iran, the UAE, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia.

Yet, through a strategic lens, excessive optimism must be guarded against. Diminishing the US monopoly does not automatically translate into genuine autonomy for Middle Eastern states. Membership in BRICS or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) affords considerable diplomatic and economic maneuverability, but it cannot substitute for an “indigenous security pact.” As Trenin posits, the world is shifting toward a polycentric system—one in which Middle Eastern states still tend to leverage transactional approaches to play global powers against one another. However, crises such as Washington’s economic ultimatums (under the Trump administration) revealed how fragile this balancing act can be. BRICS can function as a “political-economy shield,” but resolving security dilemmas across the Strait of Hormuz or the Levant requires mechanisms that can only emerge organically from within the Middle East itself.

Conclusion: Navigating from Mirage to Institutional Reality

The paramount contribution of this collection to the West Asian security discourse lies not in offering panaceas or definitive answers; rather, through a critical reading, it reveals the central, painful contradiction of the regional order with unmatched clarity: regional states desire greater autonomy and emancipation from Western hegemony, yet they remain reliant on external umbrellas or alliances with extra-regional powers (whether the US or Eurasian giants) to counter intra-regional rivals.

Iran and Russia have succeeded in making substantial strides toward fracturing Western unilateralism and have generated alternatives by gravitating toward frameworks like BRICS. Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that a “region-centric security” will only materialize when regional actors can formulate predictable rules for coexistence, verification, arms control, and crisis management without relying on an extra-regional superpower’s veto in the UN Security Council or the deployment of foreign naval fleets.

In this light, the term “after hegemony” should not be viewed as an accomplished feat or an end state. The retreat of the United States and the strategic metamorphosis of Russia have merely laid the groundwork. The more arduous undertaking in the decade ahead is constructing an order in which the “hegemonic vacuum” does not

degenerate into anarchic competition and arms proliferation. This volume serves as an exceptional prologue to navigating this arduous path; however, its operational roadmap still demands sobering realism and political courage from the actors of West Asia themselves.