



The Gorchakov Fund

Between Technology, Energy, and Crises: South Asia in a New World

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Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund

Report

Between Technology, Energy, and Crises: South Asia in a New World

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Introduction: Polycentrism and the Problem of Perspective

Articles and books on international relations increasingly treat the gradual transition to multipolarity, or polycentrism, as a given.¹ This system differs fundamentally both from the familiar bipolar order of the Cold War and from the unipolar moment that emerged after its end. To show that multipolarity is possible in principle and does not necessarily lead to global conflict, scholars and commentators usually turn to the era of the “Concert of Europe”, when several great European powers coexisted peacefully for almost a century, interrupted only by wars of relatively limited global significance.

This approach appears artificial and overly simplistic. By invoking the “Concert of Europe”, it implicitly suggests that multipolarity is a specifically European concept and practice, alien to Asian countries, which supposedly have traditionally viewed the world through a hierarchical lens. This, in turn, encourages skepticism about the political and economic prospects of Asian countries, which are presumed incapable of competing with a West that dominated the world for the past five hundred years. This approach draws on a wide range of once-popular but now outdated theories and assumptions, ranging from openly racist ideas to more pseudo-scientific ones, which suggest that Asian peoples can only imitate the achievements of others rather than create anything genuinely new.

This is a mistake caused by a selective Eurocentric perspective. Europeans have written most of the modern history of international relations, with only limited contributions from representatives of the Global South who often work within a Eurocentric paradigm. In reality, a natural form of polycentrism has always existed, and until the mid-eighteenth century Asian societies often surpassed European ones in economic and military terms. Even after Europe pulled ahead and went on to conquer or subjugate much of the rest of the world,

1 Dynkin, A. A., and N. I. Ivanova, eds. *Russia in a Polycentric World*. Moscow: Ves Mir, 2011; Zsuzsa, A. F. “Towards a Multipolar World: The Path Ahead in 2025.” Observer Research Foundation, 8 January 2025. URL: <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/towards-a-multipolar-world-the-path-ahead-in-2025> (date of access- 02.09.2026); Mthembu P. South Africa and BRICS in a multipolar world – towards a diffusion of power and ideas? // *Africa Insight*. 2018. Vol. 48. № 4. Pp. 39–55; Sahakyan M. *China and Eurasian Powers in a Multipolar World Order 2.0: Security, Diplomacy, Economy and Cyberspace*. Routledge, 2023

Western dominance over many regions remained largely nominal or depended on complex arrangements with local elites. Countries that had long served as centers of power and regional leaders retained that role under European rule. India, for example, became a sub-imperial power that supported British expansion across the Indian Ocean region, while China and Japan remained independent. Relations between colonizers and colonized peoples involved more than domination and subordination. **Eastern societies adopted Western technologies and gradually adapted Western institutions to their own needs while preserving their identities.**

This natural polycentrism persisted throughout the Cold War. We tend to view that period as an era of rivalry between two superpowers, whereas for many states and societies, that rivalry was little more than a distant drama with no direct bearing on their lives. They were more concerned with the pressing challenges of settling post-colonial borders, promoting domestic development and combating poverty. The United States and the Soviet Union provided valuable sources of technology, funding and humanitarian assistance, but little more. After the Cold War ended, this **polycentric character of the international system became impossible to ignore.**

This approach offers a different way of viewing **the current rise of Asian countries:** as the natural continuation of centuries-long historical processes and a return to global leadership after a relatively brief and increasingly uncertain period of Western dominance.

I. Civilization-states

Such a return requires conceptual reframing. The social and political discourse of Asian countries no longer fits comfortably within the paradigmatic framework of contemporary political thought, which recognizes only one “normal” form of statehood: the nation-state.

The concept of the nation-state, along with so-called “Westphalian sovereignty”, took shape in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries². This framework therefore forces non-European nation-states to follow in the wake of Western political discourse. Yet Western countries themselves hardly represent model nation-states. They routinely violate the sovereignty of other countries and continually seek to reconceptualize the nation-state: in the European Union, by delegating some powers to bureaucrats in Brussels and rethinking the very idea of statehood through concepts such as a “Europe of the Regions”; in the United States, by simply rejecting some of the norms associated with the traditional nation-state.

In this context, **Asia’s leading countries are seeking new ways to define themselves**. The nation-state framework feels increasingly restrictive, yet the idea of empire also raises serious problems. Any empire implies practices of control and coercion, while people across the Global South associate empires with the painful historical experience of colonial rule. **A civilizational state** offers a discursive alternative to both the **nation-state** and the empire.³ The concept emphasizes a shared cultural space and centuries-old practices of interaction and coexistence rather than direct or indirect control. At the same time, it allows different local cultural, economic and political arrangements to exist within a single civilization.

Moreover, it points to the antiquity of social institutions and suggests that the civilization-state possesses a range of other features that distinguish it from the nation-state. **In this sense,**

² See: Anderson B., *Imagined Communities*. Moscow: Kanon-Press-C, Kuchkovo Pole, 2001; Hobsbawm E., *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*. St. Petersburg: Aleteya, 1998.

³ Mawdsley E. Introduction India as a ‘civilizational state’ // *International Affairs*. Vol. 99. Iss. 2. March 2023. Pp. 427–432; Xia G. China as a ‘Civilization-State’: A Historical and Comparative Interpretation // *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*. Vol. 140. August 2014. Pp. 43–47; Indonesia Promotes ‘Civilizational State’ Vision Through Cultural Diversity // *Voice of Indonesia*. 22.05.2026 .URL: <https://rri.co.id/en/national/2434192/indonesia-promotes-civilizational-state-vision-through-cultural-diversity> (date of access: 02.09.2026).

the idea of the civilization-state serves as a kind of anchor, allowing the new leaders to keep their footing on historical ground amid the turbulent waters of postmodernity.

At the same time, the idea of the civilization-state is far from universally accepted within Asian countries themselves. The term “civilization” is generally associated with right-wing and center-right movements and tends to provoke a negative reaction from left-wing and liberal political forces, whose ideologies are grounded in the idea of progress. At the same time, the political forces in power and the expert communities of Asian states are actively studying and adopting the latest developments in European sociological thought, particularly the **concept of discursive hegemony**.⁴ Where domestic consensus has yet to emerge, governments seek to introduce these ideas into domestic political discourse through methods of social engineering. Where such consensus already exists, these methods are placed at the service of the state and used primarily in the foreign-policy arena.

4 Howarth D. Power, discourse, and policy: articulating a hegemony approach to critical policy studies // Critical Policy Studies. 2010. Vol. 3. Iss. 3–4. Pp. 309–335.

II. The Battle for Technology: Dividing Spheres of Influence

Whereas a powerful heavy industry was once seen as the key to economic survival and development, **access to new technologies has now become a crucial factor**, putting the issue of technological sovereignty firmly on the agenda. Clearly, technological sovereignty and technological autarky are impossible in the strict sense. **The main task for states today is to secure their companies the strongest possible positions in global production chains and turn their countries into nodes in the wider production and technology network.** For civilization-states seeking to serve as cultural, political and economic centres, such a role seems only natural.

These chains and networks are taking shape amid fierce competition and growing political and economic confrontation between China, on the one hand, and the United States and its allies, on the other. **Two competing technological systems are emerging**, each built around a particular set of standards and solutions. These systems seek to expand: **for the technological patron powers**, bringing new countries into their systems means expanding their markets; **for client states**, it means gaining privileged access to cutting-edge technologies. At the same time, client states are forced to sacrifice some of their technological sovereignty. Once they become embedded in one of these systems, they must abide by the rules set by the patron power. And the more extensively they adopt advanced technologies within that system, the harder it becomes to break free from this dependence.

In this situation, **states have two options**: either try to build their own technological system or balance between the existing ones by adopting technologies from both systems and developing their own products that are compatible with them.

The first option is extremely difficult to implement. Building an independent technological system requires enormous and sustained investments of resources and effort, as well as a guaranteed market for its products. One way to address this problem is through the joint efforts of several players, but this creates new challenges of its own: ensuring the continued commitment of all participants, maintaining the uninterrupted operation of planning bodies, and

coordinating between government agencies in different countries.

The second option may seem preferable at first glance: it does not require building a market or competing for existing ones. However, it also presents certain challenges. A balancing player loses some of the benefits that patron countries offer their clients. Moreover, the longer the competition between technological systems continues, the more their standards and solutions tend to diverge. This makes it increasingly difficult to develop and implement technologies that combine the advantages of both systems. Furthermore, this option is possible only if the patron countries are willing to turn a blind eye to the existence of such a balancing player, whether for economic or political reasons.

The current AI boom offers a chance to improve one's position on the global technology map. Just as China once secured rapid economic growth by becoming the world's factory, while India turned itself into the world's call center and pharmacy, **the AI boom could serve as a springboard for a leap forward in high technology and related sectors of the economy.** AI entered our lives unexpectedly, and its widespread adoption could still have far-reaching consequences that remain difficult to predict. It has already driven up the prices of computer components. AI is now widely used in high technology, decision-making, science and education, as well as public oversight and security, and its impact cannot be considered positive in all these areas. There are good reasons to doubt that AI alone can revolutionize the methods and means of production on the scale of the industrial revolutions of the past. Yet it can clearly act as a multiplier, greatly amplifying the effects of innovation.

The AI boom means that **having a home-grown set of AI models is increasingly seen as an essential component of technological sovereignty**, including from the perspective of the civilization-state. It is argued⁵, that large language models trained on texts produced by people from another culture not only fail to live up to expectations but may also pose a national security risk if deployed in critical sectors. Each civilization-state should therefore rely on its own large language models and ensure the security of its citizens' data.

5 Tuteja A. Does India Need Its Own Large Language Model (LLM) // INDIAai. 29.08.2024. URL: <https://indiaai.gov.in/article/does-india-need-its-own-large-language-model-llm> (date of access: 02.09.2026).

III. The Energy Transition and Development Challenges

Another **important component of national security and development is energy**. Civilization itself depends on our ability to obtain and use energy, whether it comes from fossil fuels, plants or directly from the Sun. At present, the largest share of global energy generation, more than 30%, comes from oil products, followed by coal at around 27% and natural gas at around 24%.⁶ In electricity generation, however, coal ranks first at 34.4%, followed by natural gas at 22%.

Thus, **despite all efforts to introduce renewable energy technologies** and move away from “dirty energy”, **the global economy still rests on oil, coal and gas**. Yet energy policy is shaped not only by purely economic considerations but also by questions of international status, which are closely intertwined with environmental concerns.

For Asian countries, this situation is a classic example of a problem that also presents opportunities. The main problem is that most of them still rely heavily on coal for electricity generation.⁷ Coal is not only cheaper; the technologies and processes involved in its extraction, processing and use have long been well established. Moreover, **the coal industry is socially significant**: when related sectors are taken into account, hundreds of millions of people across Asia depend on it for their livelihoods. Phasing out coal mining could trigger major social unrest while also reducing economic autonomy, something that is unacceptable for foreign-policy reasons.

On the other hand, even in the best of times, centralized systems of energy generation and distribution did not cover all territories or populations in many Asian countries. In India, for example, just over 50% of the population had reliable access to electricity in 1995.⁸ Moreover, **the dynamism of growing economies allows Asian countries to conduct bold experiments** that would be difficult to undertake in developed economies. Finally, the climate across

⁶ Ember. Yearly Electricity Data. URL: <https://ember-energy.org/data/yearly-electricity-data/> (date of access: 02.09.2026).

⁷ World Bank Group. Electricity production from coal sources (% of total) – South Asia (IFC classification). URL: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EG.ELC.COAL.ZS?locations=C8> (date of access: 02.09.2026).

⁸ Macrotrends. India Electricity Access. URL: <https://www.macrotrends.net/datasets/global-metrics/countries/ind/india/electricity-access-statistics> (date of access: 02.09.2026).

Asian regions, with strong winds in some areas and abundant sunshine across almost all territory south of Siberia, creates favorable conditions for the effective use of renewable energy. All this is encouraging Asian governments **to increase the share of renewables in energy generation**. For them, adopting “clean energy technologies” is not merely a way to reduce dependence on hydrocarbon imports while demonstrating concern for the climate and responsibility towards future generations. These projects also offer clear and tangible benefits: they help bring energy to remote villages and settlements while supporting domestic businesses. In large part thanks to such projects, India has managed to almost completely eliminate the problem of access to electricity.

The economies of Asian countries, therefore, **are caught between two stools**: on the one hand, they rely on **traditional and environmentally harmful energy production**; on the other, they are actively developing **green technologies**. This duality is also evident in the foreign policies of these states. They oppose attempts by developed countries to impose requirements to reduce the use of traditional methods of electricity generation, while at the same time not only expressing their readiness to develop green energy but also seeking to take the lead in this field. Examples include China’s additional commitments to accelerate its transition to carbon neutrality and the International Solar Alliance, promoted by India with French support.

IV. The Vulnerability of Hydrocarbon Import Routes

However impressive the progress of “green” energy may be in Asian countries, **oil products still underpin the normal functioning of their economies**. Yet oil and gas resources are unevenly distributed across the world. While some Asian countries, above all, the states of the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula, have them in abundance, others have little or none, or their production and reserves are insufficient to meet the needs of their economies. As long as global trade routes remain open, this uneven distribution does not pose an existential problem. But if one or more conflicts break out and disrupt maritime transport, the situation changes dramatically.

At present, we are witnessing two armed conflicts: the war in Ukraine and the war involving Iran, the latter being far more significant for Asian countries. The effective blockade of the Strait of Hormuz imposed by Iran and the United States, together with strikes on Iranian and Arab Gulf oil infrastructure, **makes it impossible to maintain the full supply of cheap Middle Eastern hydrocarbons**. While the global market has stabilized relatively quickly thanks to increased oil and gas production in the United States, which has reached a historic high, the picture looks far less positive for Asian countries: **they have been hit hardest by the blockade of the strait**. Ukrainian drone strikes on Russian refineries, pipelines, terminals and tankers further exacerbate the situation.

In this situation, **Asian countries have two options** for achieving a measure of energy security: **switch to alternative forms of transport**, such as electric vehicles and vehicles powered by biofuels, to reduce their dependence on scarce hydrocarbons, **or diversify their supply chains as widely as possible**. Most Asian players **seek to combine these two approaches**, but the current situation **exposes the fragility of the entire oil and gas supply system**. In effect, keeping petrol prices in Asian countries under control has only been possible because the two conflicts, in the Gulf and in Ukraine, happened to coincide in time, and because the redirection of Russian hydrocarbon exports helped avert shortages and price spikes in petroleum products that would have hit Asian economies hard.

Clearly, both conflicts will end sooner or later. But **it remains unclear when, or even whether, a return to the familiar normality will take place.** Attacks on tankers and blockades of chokepoints in global trade have demonstrated that **the era of free seas is over.** The security of maritime routes once again has to be guaranteed by force, putting the construction of a powerful naval fleet capable of countering a new range of threats firmly on the agenda.

V. Societies on the Eve of Future Crises

Clearly, **the world that emerges from the current crises will no longer be “flat”**. It will be a world of fierce competition, sustained in part by non-economic means; rising security spending by state and quasi-state actors; and cuts in unproductive expenditure.

All of this will inevitably affect certain social classes and groups in both the West and the East, but **Asia is more vulnerable in this respect than Europe**. Decades of globalization have led to the rapid expansion of the middle class and the emergence within it of a distinct group: people with experience working for multinational corporations, who are often more closely connected to their peers in other countries than to the societies in which they live, and who reside in gated compounds with their own security systems. At the same time, this group serves as a benchmark for the lower middle class, which aspires to attain the same level of income. The position of the middle class, in turn, is an object of aspiration for people from rural areas living on the verge of poverty. To a large extent, **the stability of Asian societies rests on this hierarchy of aspirations**, whose credibility is sustained by high rates of economic growth. Yet a succession of crises and changes in the global economy could cause this model to begin to unravel.

Over the past few decades, **Asian societies have undergone profound changes**. Urbanization, rising literacy rates and the media revolution have led **younger generations to become increasingly aware of their political agency** and to seek a more active role in social processes.

This raises an important question: ***will governments be able to meet these demands while maintaining high rates of economic growth, and if not, could this lead to growing public discontent and social unrest?***

Conclusion: South Asia and Russia

Against this backdrop, Russia's relations with the countries of South Asia are now developing, first and foremost with **India, Russia's largest and most important partner in the region**. Before the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, **Russian-Indian relations were stagnating and gradually declining**, with political ties significantly outpacing economic ones. However, the events in Ukraine completely changed the situation. Cut off from their traditional Western markets, Russian exporters rapidly reoriented towards the East. This led to a dramatic increase in trade between Russia and India: over three years, bilateral trade grew more than fivefold, largely driven by oil.⁹ A temporary and fragile trade model has emerged, one that is likely to persist only until Western sanctions are either eased or tightened to a critical level. This, in turn, means that **a new form of economic cooperation must be found, taking into account both the challenges facing Asian countries and Russia's interests**.

During the years of the conflict, the Russian economy has built up significant innovation capacity, mastering new technologies and developing domestic production of a range of goods that cannot be imported under the sanctions regime. This potential cannot be fully realized until the conflict ends. But once it does, with the necessary investment in production, it could become a driver of deeper cooperation between Russia and the countries of South Asia.

Even now, **it is necessary to prepare for the new post-conflict realities**. Russia remains a key partner for South Asian countries **in the field of nuclear energy**: the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant is operating successfully, while the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant is under construction. The construction of another nuclear power plant in north-western India could provide clean and affordable energy to Gujarat, Maharashtra, Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.

Russia can also contribute to **border security in South Asia**. The experience gained during the conflict in Ukraine in using the latest

⁹ TAdviser Summit 2026. Year in Review and Plans for 2027: Russia-India Trade. TAdviser, 27.02.2026 URL: https://www.tadviser.ru/index.php/%D0%A1%D1%82%D0%B0%D1%82%D1%8C%D1%8F:%D0%A2%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%BB%D1%8F_%D0%A0%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%B8_%D0%B8_%D0%98%D0%BD%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%B8 (date of access: 02.09.2026)

technologies, above all UAVs, is invaluable. Although the Russian defense industry is currently focused primarily on the needs of the front, it is ready to share its technologies and establish drone production in India.

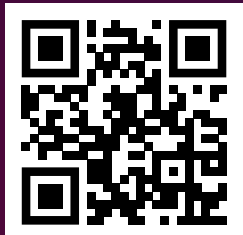
The Ukrainian and Middle Eastern crises have demonstrated the vulnerability of established trade routes running through the Black and Baltic Seas and across Iranian territory. **The safest route, the Chennai-Vladivostok corridor, needs to be developed,** which will require substantial investment in both port infrastructure and the Trans-Siberian Railway.

There is a wide range of promising projects and areas for cooperation, but one obstacle to their implementation remains the lack of mutual understanding of each other's capabilities and interests. The joint project of the Gorchakov Fund and the Observer Research Foundation, along with projects undertaken by other think tanks, is intended to help address this problem.

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