

# Do Alliances Still Matter in a Multipolar World?

ROBERT S. BURRELL<sup>1</sup> and JOSEPH E. LONG, DEL<sup>2</sup>

---

## Abstract

This article examines the role of coalitions in U.S. grand strategy and analyzes the extent to which American partnerships influence outcomes in global competition. It also assesses the development of the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) intergovernmental organization, including the implications of the recent accession of Iran, Nigeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates. The expansion of BRICS is considered as a potential indicator of change within the current international order. Through a comparative analysis of competition involving the United States, China, BRICS, and U.S.-aligned institutions such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the essay introduces a data-centric approach using a novel alliance power index composed of fifteen indicators. The article concludes by presenting foreign policy considerations related to the role of alliances in managing strategic competition with China over the coming decade.

---

Keywords: NATO, alliances, diplomacy, BRICS, China, strategy

---

<sup>1</sup> Global and National Security Institute.

<sup>2</sup> Irregular Warfare Initiative Fellow.

## **Introduction**

This article evaluates the role of coalitions (partners, allies, and micro-level populations) in the current dynamics of the international relations environment. It questions if American partnerships offer the best choice for achieving a decisive advantage within an evolving international order. It explores foreign policy approaches in global competition as a leadership problem where great powers compete within coalitions rather than the traditional realist focus on state power. As a superpower, the United States (U.S.) has traditionally leveraged global leadership through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which was previously sufficient for achieving success in the Cold War. Not only did the U.S. develop the most powerful military in history, but their investment in NATO also provided a leadership frame that the Soviet Union could neither militarily, economically, nor diplomatically overcome to attain global domination.

While neo-isolationism presents a tempting alternative in a world grappling with complex challenges, an American leadership frame offers a more compelling and ultimately beneficial approach for both the United States and the global community. As the U.S. experiences a dilemma in balancing previous international interests with increasing costs of interventionism and shifting global power dynamics, with increasing domestic challenges, increased American soft power offers a more nuanced approach to global security and order. Specifically, this leadership frame leverages attraction rather than force to influence global stability by prioritizing diplomacy and economic statecraft while reserving military interventions for specific targeted engagements.

Rather than seeing international influence as a function of foreign entanglements, the American leadership frame speaks to gaining support through influence by setting an example for other states to follow rather than responding to force. By offering global leadership, the U.S. may continue to advance traditional American values and ensure a level playing field for states that wish to modernize. As such, the U.S. can offer the global community stability by maintaining the global order, safeguarding U.S. interests and values, shared strength and burden-sharing through meaningful partnerships, and the ability to engage the world with strategic engagement in order to shape the future rather than responding to or retreating from it. Although escaping from much of the over-extension of American foreign policy might seem appealing in the short term, shrinking from global leadership ultimately represents a dangerous gamble. An American leadership frame, grounded in strategic engagement, partnership building, and a commitment to global stability, offers a more sustainable path to protecting U.S. interests, promoting its values, and shaping a better future for all.

As the Cold War ended and the technological revolution advanced beyond the Industrial Revolution, rising terrorism challenged American unipolar efforts, which led to two decades of expensive counterterrorism-focused conflict. This approach limited American diplomatic efforts and created space for additional great powers to develop their own uncontested partnerships. As this article explains, China and Russia developed a competing leadership body for promoting global stability and influence through the organization of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS). BRICS, along with recent additions like Iran,

Nigeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates, represent a realist-based example of bandwagoning as a significant inflection point in the current international order. In examining competition between the U.S. and China, and therefore NATO and BRICS, this article argues that alliances, as part of a long-term global leadership strategy, are becoming even more relevant in a new era of multipolar competition. After reviewing relevant literature for shaping international relations in global competition as a leadership problem where collective action of macro-level states and micro-level populations is essential for global control, the article provides a detailed analysis of the power of alliances in competition by introducing a novel alliance power index tool. This tool provides a data-centric analysis of the power of alliances using 15 indicators to explore the relative power of changing American and Chinese leadership efforts for maximizing hard and soft power through alliance networks. Finally, we offer foreign policy recommendations for enhancing American global leadership through partners, allies, and populations over the next decade.

## Relevant Supporting Arguments

Although traditional international relations literature focuses on the state as the unit of measure, the arguments for collective action through leadership draw from a broader understanding of human behavior, the future of technology, and the changing nature of warfare. In this section, we first explore the role of soft power in global leadership as the defining indicator of how we must observe the future of global power. Next, we take our leadership arguments to the micro-level to explore how both macro and micro-level leadership are required to promote global stability and better understand the future of war. Lastly, we explain how China likewise seeks to provide global leadership with a similar recognition of the power of alliances.

The work of noted political scientist Joseph Nye supports our argument that partnerships remain a defining factor in comparative international power.<sup>3</sup> He first lays out a definition for power as “the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes you want,” which comes in the form of either coercive threats as “sticks” or inducements and payments as “carrots,” but also in the form of “attraction” or the ability to make “others want what you want.”<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Nye also argues that soft power is the ability to gain desired outcomes using attraction rather than traditional carrots and sticks. Such uses of attraction, Nye argues, were essential in winning the Cold War but have become less of a focus for American foreign policy during the War on Terror – a fact which we are arguing is now becoming a necessary source of global power in future conflict.<sup>5</sup> Partnerships, as a function of soft power, add to the overall power of a state and must be considered critical for American grand strategy. If one argues that hard power (the stick) is necessary for Great Power Competition, then it also follows that soft power (attraction) is also a necessary part of American global leadership efforts for achieving any foreign policy strategy.

---

<sup>3</sup> Joseph S. Nye, 2008, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 616, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25097996?seq=1>.

<sup>4</sup> Nye, 2008, p. 94.

<sup>5</sup> Nye, 2008, p. 94.

Likewise, Nye also promotes attraction as the necessary result of modern technological advances which he aligns with Herbert Simon’s “paradox of plenty,”<sup>6</sup> or the idea that when people, or in this case, communities of global populations within Westphalian state structures, have become inundated with volumes of information making sensemaking increasingly difficult for modern populations.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Nye argues that hard and soft power are necessary for advancing modern global competition whereby success follows from a balance of hard and soft power rather than hard power alone.<sup>8</sup>

Nye’s arguments similarly reflect Joseph Long’s<sup>9</sup> argument about the changing nature of conflict and the role that popular support will play in future military operations. This argument is particularly salient given the belief that a population focus was only necessary during engagements against non-state and sub-state actors, and that such considerations for popular support no longer enhance a strategy focused on great powers. However, from a global leadership perspective, the logic of understanding super-empowered populations as a micro-level version of soft power necessitates an American global leadership style that optimizes the balance between hard and soft power as well as conventional and population-centric conflict. Thus, partners and allies remain foundational for advancing U.S. global power – making American leadership essential for navigating strategic competition.

In addition to his arguments for the rising power of super-empowered populations, Long’s subsequent arguments reflect on the problematic nature of gaining and maintaining popular support for Great Powers involved in population-centric conflicts.<sup>10</sup> The Liberator’s Dilemma (a thought experiment exploring the difficulties of leading micro-level populations) speaks to the paradoxical nature of balancing hard power with soft power when Great Powers overly depend on their military capabilities as mechanisms for exerting hard power. As technology (including artificial intelligence) becomes increasingly accessible for populations to acquire, the value of hard power as a leadership strategy invariably declines relative to relational leadership and soft power. Although Long’s arguments outline the frictions inherent to leading at the micro-level, he paradoxically indicates that macro-level leadership requires optimizing a mixed strategy of hard and soft power to emerge.

As the primary competitor to the United States, China’s understanding of the value of allies, as well as its approach to garnering partnerships, remains imperative. On the one hand, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leverages gray zone activities to extend its traditional influence.<sup>11</sup> As an example, the CCP successfully influenced the Olympic

---

6 Herbert A. Simon, 1998, *An Empirically Based Microeconomics*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 30-33

7 Nye, 2008, p. 99.

8 Nye, 2008, p. 108.

9 Joseph E. Long, “The Future of Conflict: How Super-Empowered Populations will Change Warfare,” *Irregular Warfare Initiative*, 2 June, <https://irregularwarfare.org/articles/the-future-of-conflict-how-super-empowered-populations-will-change-warfare/>.

10 Joseph E. Long, 2024, “The Liberator’s Dilemma: The Paradox of American Leadership,” *InterPopulum Journal of Irregular Warfare and Special Operations*, 12 April, <https://interpopulum.org/the-liberators-dilemma-the-paradox-of-american-leadership/>.

11 Bonny Lin, Cristina L. Garafola, Bruce McClintock, Jonah Blank, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Karen Schwindt, Jennifer D. P. Moroney, Paul Orner, Dennis Borman, Sarah W. Denton, and Jason Chambers, 2022, *Competition in the Gray Zone: Countering China’s Coercion Against U.S. Allies and Partners in the*

committee to ban Tawan’s flag and anthem from the 2024 Paris Olympics.<sup>12</sup> Through these coercive undertakings, the CCP seeks to gain sufficient concessions and agreements from smaller states to revise regional frameworks, without triggering global outrage or violent conflict.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, the CCP compels diplomatic cooperation of nations by funding economic partnerships, particularly in underdeveloped regions where foreign aid and economic investment incentivize cooperation.<sup>14</sup> The CCP’s policy of diplomatic cooperation is proving particularly effective in African states. These economic ties correspondingly serve to expand China’s military ambitions and its information campaigns.<sup>15</sup>

The CCP’s gray zone strategies have proven critical to its foreign policy.<sup>16</sup> As of 2016, China has established partnerships with 78 countries and five regional organizations, around 40% of those in the United Nations.<sup>17</sup> China then exercises those partnerships in three ways: (1) comprehensive strategic partnerships, (2) strategic and cooperative partnerships, and (3) strategic partnerships. Its forty-odd comprehensive strategic partners remain those most vital to China’s interests, including its relations with Russia. Its strategic and cooperative partners include those near its borders, including India. Finally, its remaining twenty-odd strategic partners include important relationships but not determined vital. Essentially, the CCP’s foreign policy aims to create a shield against U.S. influence by promoting increased cooperation and stability along the Chinese border and expanding those relations abroad into a dense network, which correspondingly enhances China’s domestic stability.<sup>18</sup> While the many Sino-tier partnerships may appear complex, their true manifestation is most clearly indicated in BRICS, discussed further in section 6.

## The Alliance Power Index

In developing a proper index to measure alliance power, we considered dozens of factors found critical for defending national sovereignty, defending that of others, and economic, cultural, and military power projection. Of course, existing military platforms on air, land, and sea<sup>19</sup> prove important across all forms of conflict (conventional warfare, irregular warfare, deterrence, and competition), but also the technological generation of such

---

*Indo-Pacific*, RAND, p. v, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA594-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA594-1.html).

12 Chad de Guzman, 2024, “The Olympic Team That Shall Not Be Named: The Politics and History Behind ‘Chinese Taipei’,” *Time*, 8 August, <https://time.com/7009052/chinese-taipei-taiwan-olympics-history-politics-pride-frustration/>.

13 Lin, et al., 2022, p. v.

14 Lin, et al., 2022, p. 25.

15 Lin, et al., 2022, p. 25.

16 Quan Li and Min Ye, 2019, “China’s Emerging Partnership Network: What, Who, Where, When and Why,” *International Trade, Politics and Development*, vol. 3, no. 2, <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/ITPD-05-2019-0004/full/pdf?title=chinas-emerging-partnership-network-what-who-where-when-and-why>.

17 Li and Ye, 2019, pp. 66-7.

18 Li and Ye, 2019, p. 79.

19 Collin Meisel, Jonathan D. Moyer, and Sarah Gutberlet, 2020, “How Do You Actually Measure Military Capability?” *Modern War Institute*, 1 September, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/how-do-you-actually-measure-military-capability/>.

capabilities.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, the number of trained and armed personnel available at the start of a conflict directly impacts initial results, which contributes to both deterrence and projecting influence.<sup>21</sup> These military forces and the corresponding military-industrial complex require energy (coal, natural gas, petroleum, and nuclear) to develop, employ and maintain.<sup>22</sup> All these indicators combined demonstrate the ability to project military power.

Correspondingly proven throughout the past hundred years, science and innovation (not just mass) have decided the outcomes of conflict. Highly educated populations can invent, build, and perfect both economic and military capabilities and also play a role in de-escalating conflict and winning competition through reason.<sup>23</sup> Nations with higher numbers of literate persons can complete more complex requirements to protect their sovereignty. Such populations normally reside in regions with high levels of human development.<sup>24</sup> Some states have cultures that embrace innovation more than others, and these educational attributes can prove critical for violent conflict but also successful international competition, including economic progress.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, while air, sea, and land capabilities are essential, the amount of global influence in orbit (e.g., satellites) can also be a key factor to possible superiority in any military domain.<sup>26</sup>

Irrespective of its starting position in projecting military power at the start of hostilities, each nation retains inherent capacities to build upon and expand its ability to wage war. Annual gross domestic product (GDP) provides a suitable indicator of technology, manufacturing, and service sectors – quite simply, the total value of all goods and services produced. Obviously, GDP matters in all forms of conflict, ranging from competition to total war.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, the size of the available labor force illustrates the potential (and possibly limitations) in supporting national defense during a crisis.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, any sustained conflict requires a healthy financial sector to bankroll subsequent national strategies.<sup>29</sup> Also, the basic function of food security remains paramount in sustaining the entire country, particularly during conflict.<sup>30</sup> All nations, large and small, exert diplomatic

---

20 International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024, *The Military Balance 2024*.

21 Carl David Mildener and Antoine Pietri, 2018, “How does size matter for military success? Evidence from Virtual Worlds,” *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, vol. 154, October.

22 Mark P. Mills, 2024, “The Energy to Prevent and Prosecute Wars,” *City Journal*, 12 March, <https://www.city-journal.org/article/the-energy-to-prevent-and-prosecute-wars>.

23 Nina Chala, Olga Voropai, and Kateryna Pichyk, 2023, “The Role of Universities in Times of War,” *Diplomatic Courier*, 24 February, <https://www.diplomaticcourier.com/posts/the-role-of-universities-in-times-of-war>.

24 United Nations, 2022, “Human Development Index, *United Nations*, <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#/indicies/HDI>.

25 Ze Chen, Qiming Yang, Zhihao Wu, and Jiajun Min, 2024, “A Timely Helping Hand: China-U.S. Trade War, Government Subsidy, and Firm Innovation,” *Managerial and Decision Economics*, vol. 45.

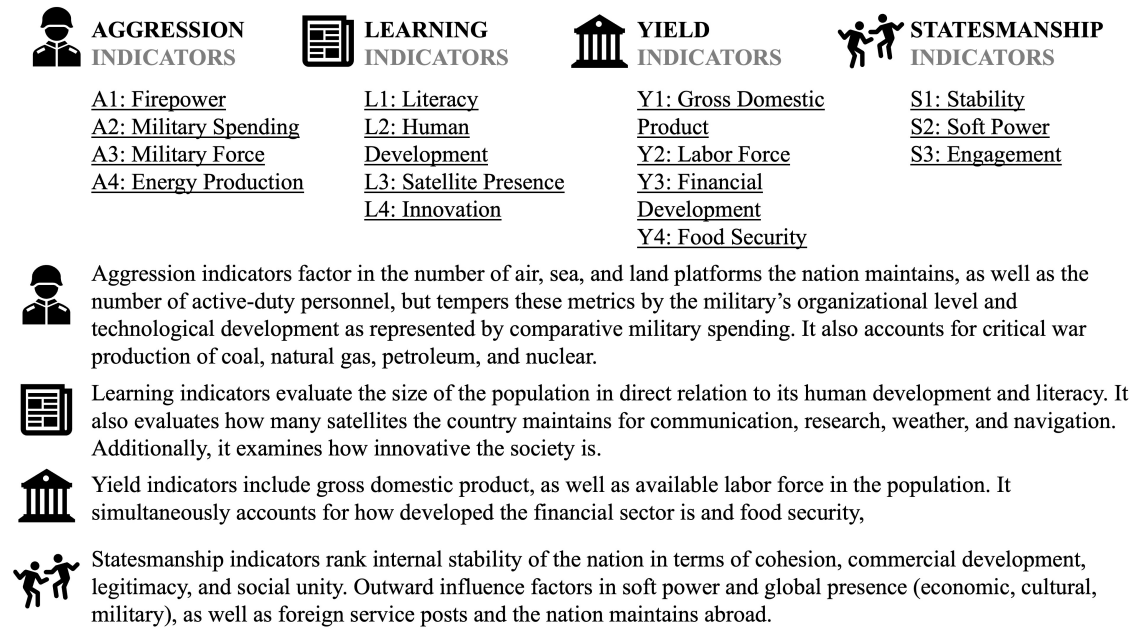
26 Primoz Rome, 2023, “Every Satellite Orbiting Earth and Who Owns Them,” *Dewesoft*, February, <https://dewesoft.com/blog/every-satellite-orbiting-earth-and-who-owns-them>.

27 World Bank, 2023, “Gross Domestic Product,” *World Bank*, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD>.

28 World Bank, 2023, “Labor Force,” *World Bank*, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.IN>.

29 World Bank, 2023, “Financial Development Index,” *World Bank*, 15 August, <https://prosperitydata360.worldbank.org/en/dataset/IMF+FDI>.

30 Economist Impact, 2022, “Global Food Security Index, 2022,” *Economist Impact*,



**Figure 1:** Composition of the ALYS Power Index (source/authors)

influence, some nations far more than others, irrespective of their size. As a starting point, international authority begins with a strong and stable domestic front, including social cohesion, economic stability, and political legitimacy.<sup>31</sup> Over a long period, nations can project soft power on other states. Soft power essentially provides an ability to co-opt other states into adopting foreign policies that align with the partners.<sup>32</sup> Some metrics that indicate potential persuasion include current formal and informal collaborative agreements and continuous diplomatic dialogue.<sup>33</sup>

The following ALYS Power Index (API) is made up of fifteen separate indicators, drawn from multiple sources and organized along four factors characterized as aggression, learning, yield, and statesmanship (acronym ALYS). We selected each ALYS metrics for its influence over the outcomes of strategic competition ranging across national stability, diplomatic relations, military size, technological innovation, and economic capacity. Metrics utilized generally rank each nation’s capacity in comparison with others worldwide with a range that accounts for comparative advantage. The highest rank for each factor is (1) and the lowest is (0). Therefore, the highest alliance power a country could conceivably achieve is (4).

The ALYS Power Index improves upon existing methods for comparing state and coali-

<https://impact.economist.com/sustainability/project/food-security-index/>.

31 Fund for Peace, The, 2024, “Fragility Index,” *The Fund for Peace*, <https://fragilestatesindex.org/>.

32 Iliana Olivie and Manuel Gracia, 2022, “Elcano Global Presence Report 2022,” *Real Instituto Elcano Royal Institute*, n.d., <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/report/elcano-global-presence-report-2022/>.

33 Lowry Institute, “Global Diplomacy Index,” *Lowry Institute*, 2024, <https://globaldiplomacyindex.lowryinstitute.org/>.

tion power. For example, it does not rely solely on military power as an indicator of national strength, as does the commonly utilized Global Firepower index<sup>34</sup> or the International Institute for Strategic Studies index on the same subject (The Military Balance). Likewise, two important indexes measure foreign affairs<sup>35</sup> and soft power comparisons,<sup>36</sup> but have not yet contributed to a comprehensive assessment of comparative power. Similarly, ALYS incorporates human development indicators as essential factors in warfare, which remains quite novel. Finally, the addition of yield indicators, like gross domestic product, as components of conflict and competition between states is more common and traditional but also remains important.

### **Superpower Comparison**

The following figure utilizes the API to compare the world's strongest superpowers with one another – the United States and China. Both countries have similar metrics in terms of military, informational, and economic power. The one outlier remains the United States' sizeable advantage in global influence through engagement, economic statecraft, and diplomacy. While lawmakers and pundits perhaps too often rely on this bilateral contrast to advocate for a stronger U.S. domestic policy to increase resiliency, this comparison does demonstrate how close the competition remains with China. However, the world remains far too dynamic for this bipolar representation, requiring a broader example with the inclusion of allies and partners (which follows).

### **The Indo-Pacific Success Story**

In the Indo-Pacific region, U.S. alliance policies have performed incredibly well in dominating influence across the largest economic zone, which includes 60% of the world's population.<sup>37</sup> The U.S. maintains strong partnerships with Japan, Australia, Republic of Korea, Philippines, and Thailand. Japan, Australia, and South Korea represent economic titans – all three ranked in the top twelve globally.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, China stands mostly alone amidst her neighbors, with an uncertain alliance with North Korea.

The following figure demonstrates these metrics of dominance, with the U.S. alliance wielding three times the power of China in the Indo-Pacific with 9.5361 versus 3.3748. Interestingly, India currently remains neutral but tantalizingly influential, with 1.6845 alliance potential. The inclusion of India into a formalized foursome treaty dubbed the “Quad” (including the U.S., Japan, Australia, and India) could really stack the deck in favor

---

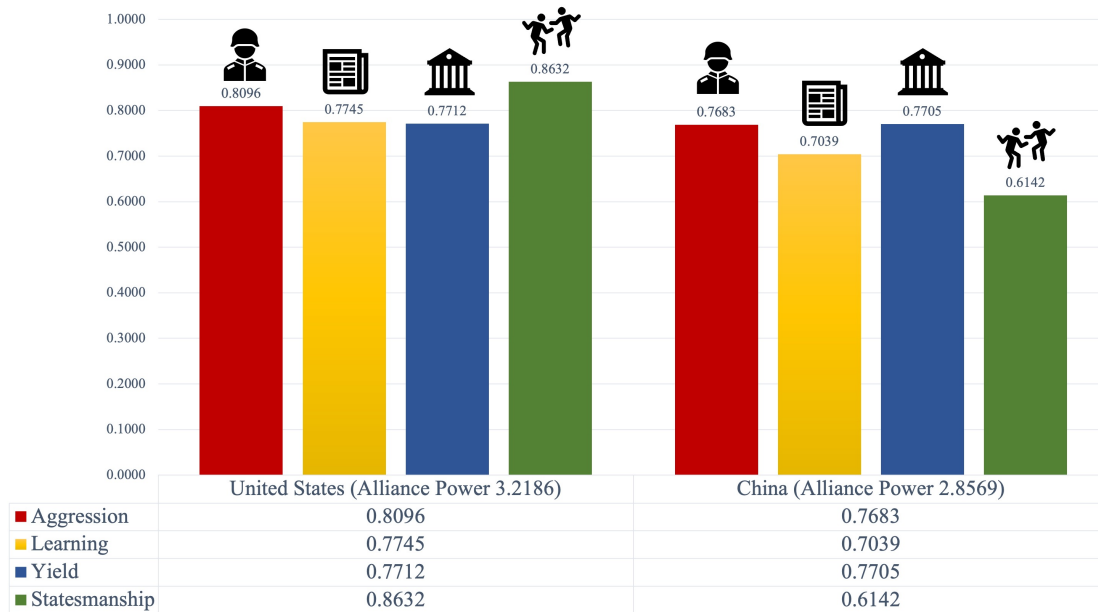
34 Global Firepower, 2025, “2025 Military Strength Ranging,” *Global Firepower*, <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.php>.

35 Lowry Institute, 2024

36 Olivie, 2022

37 U.S. Government, n.d., “USINDOPACOM Area of Responsibility,” *U.S. Government*, <https://www.pacom.mil/About-USINDOPACOM/USPACOM-Area-of-Responsibility/>.

38 Safeguard Global, 2024, “Top 15 Countries by GDP in 2024,” *Safeguard Global*, <https://globalpeoservices.com/top-15-countries-by-gdp-in-2024/>.



**Figure 2:** Comparison of the United States and China in Alliance Power, 2025 (source/authors)

of the U.S. in terms of maintaining alliance power in this critical region.<sup>39</sup> Simultaneously, an Indian partnership with China could make strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific significantly more difficult.

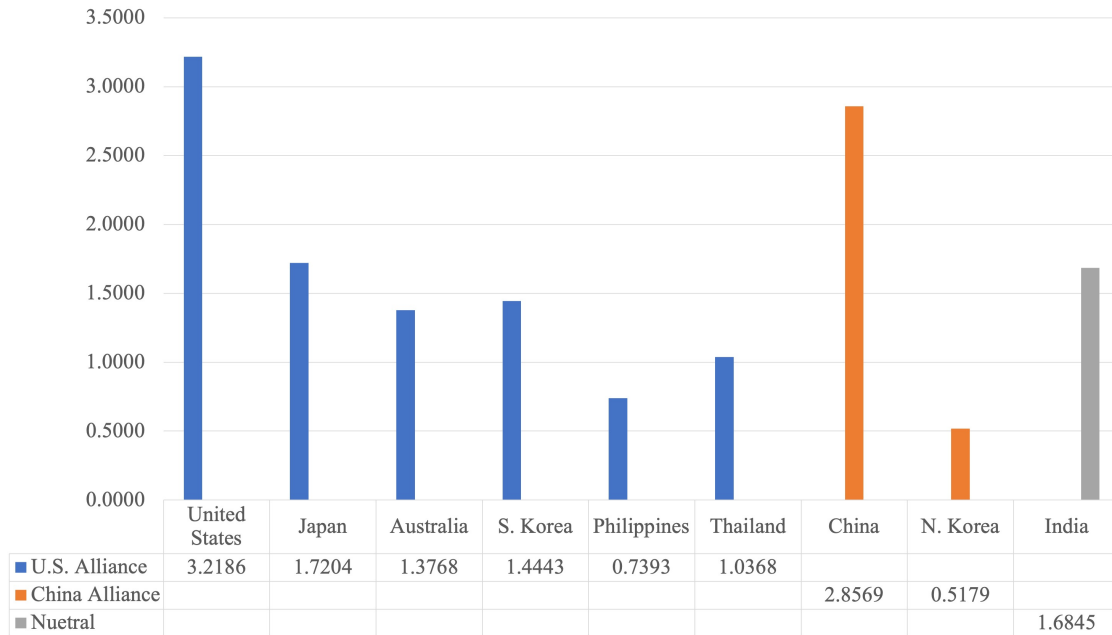
## The Rising Power of BRICS

Originally formed in 2009, BRICS represents “an influential bloc of Global South nations pushing for greater equality in the international system” comprised of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (South Africa joined in 2010).<sup>40</sup> Although BRICS currently remains an informal intergovernmental collaboration, BRICS continues to add new members to include Iran in 2023 and Nigeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates in 2024. Adding to the increasing momentum of BRICS, Indonesia joined in 2025. In the past, BRIC remained rather impotent, but its recent expansion and economic potential make it a rival to the Group of Seven - Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States.<sup>41</sup> As the potential alliance power of BRICS continues to

39 James Jay Carafano, 2024, “The Quad eyeing Indo-Pacific security,” *GIS*, 20 May, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/quad-indo-pacific-security/>.

40 Obiora Ikoku, 2023, “How Real is the BRICS Challenge to Reshuffle the World?” *Inkstickmedia.com*, n.d., <https://inkstickmedia.com/how-real-is-the-brics-challenge-to-reshuffle-the-world/>.

41 Mariel Ferragamo, 2024, “What Is the BRICS Group and Why Is It Expanding?” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 12 December, <https://www.cfr.org/background/what-brics-group-and-why-it-expanding>.



**Figure 3:** Alliance Power of Key Allies and Neutrals in the Indo-Pacific, 2025 (source/authors)

rise, BRICS remains in opposition to the current international order, made obvious by the exclusion of the United States, any European members, or European partners (like Japan and Australia).

One of the international theories supporting the rising coalition of members in BRICS could be bandwagoning for profit.<sup>42</sup> Essentially, the recent addition of Iran, Nigeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates demonstrates an international realignment and trendy alternative to the liberal international order established by the United States and Europe. Other nations are courting BRICS, prominently Malaysia<sup>43</sup> and Venezuela.<sup>44</sup> However, there are an additional three dozen countries expressing interest in BRICS, including Argentina, Algeria, Cuba, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>45</sup> This expanded organization from the original is garnering the term BRICS+.<sup>46</sup>

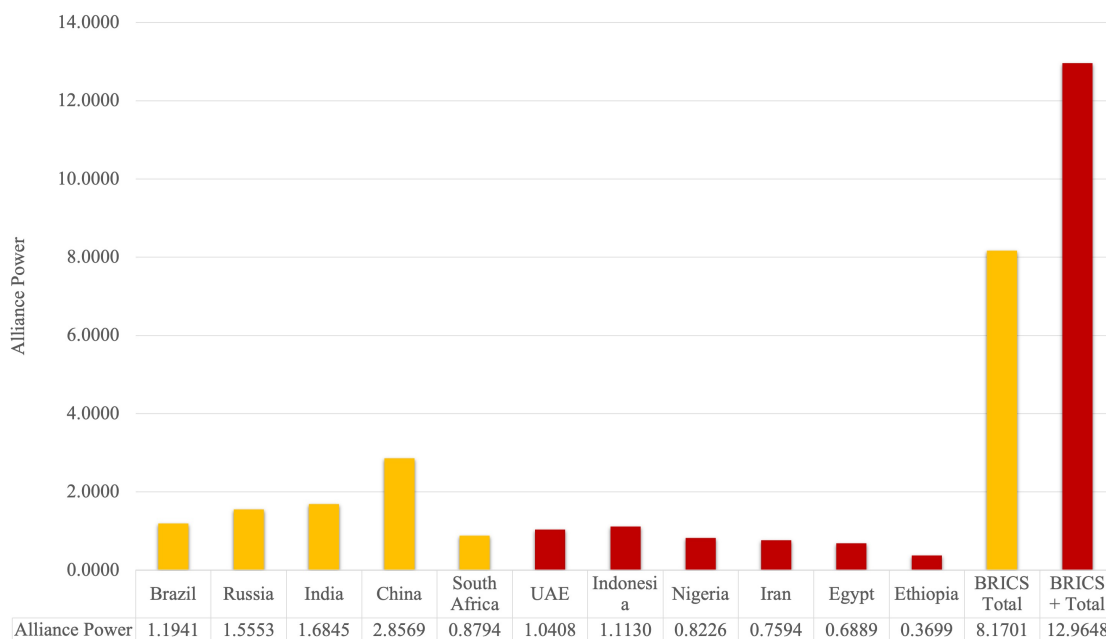
42 Randall L. Schweller, 1994, “Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In,” *International Security*, vol. 19, no. 1, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539149>.

43 Lam Choong Wah, 2024, “Malaysia, bandwagoning with BRICS,” *East Asia Forum*, 12 December, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/12/12/malaysia-bandwagoning-with-brics/>.

44 Hindu, The, 2024, “Maduro vows Venezuela won’t be silenced after BRICS bid blocked,” *The Hindu*, 27 October, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/maduro-vows-venezuela-wont-be-silenced-after-brics-bid-blocked/article68802620.ece>.

45 Reuters, 2023, “What is BRICS, which countries want to join and why?” *Reuters*, 21 August, <https://www.reuters.com/world/what-is-brics-who-are-its-members-2023-08-21/>.

46 Steward Patrick, 2024, “BRICS Expansion, the G20, and the Future of World Order,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 9 October, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/10/brics-summit-emerging-middle-powers-g7-g20?lang=en>.



**Figure 4:** Growth of BRICS Alliance Power in 2025 (source/authors)

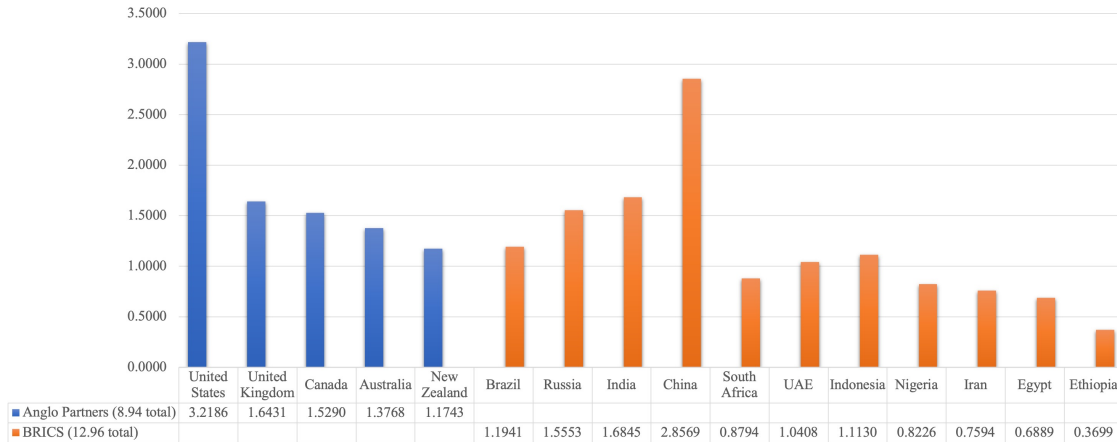
The following figure illustrates the alliance power of the original BRICS members in contrast with the growth realized in 2025. BRICS total alliance power grew by 37% in the last twelve months. Specifically, this equates to 26% growth in aggression capacity, 45% in learning, 36% in yield, and 34% in statesmanship. The current U.S. administration appears most threatened by a BRICS initiative to create a common currency to replace the U.S. dollar on the global market, partly pegged to the gold market and partly on their own domestic currencies.<sup>47</sup> Russia, bogged down under heavy sanctions, would likely be the greatest benefactor of such an idea.

## The Most Dangerous Scenario

The most dangerous strategic scenario remains one in which the United States retracts from its international engagement and loses its advantage in alliance power, while simultaneously China formalizes its unofficial partnerships – possibly through BRICS. following figure illustrates the alliance power of major BRICS countries in comparison with the inner circle of U.S. allies, that with United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand.

In this scenario, as illustrated by the following figure, a China-centric alliance conducted in the absence of U.S. leadership could pose a threat to the current international order. A BRICS alliance would have a 12.96 total alliance power in comparison to an Anglo partner-

<sup>47</sup> Alexej Jordanov, 2024, “Gold-backed Digital Currency Could be a Game-Changer for BRICS,” *OMFIF*, 20 December, <https://www.omfif.org/2024/12/gold-backed-digital-currency-could-be-a-game-changer-for-brics/>.



**Figure 5:** Alliance Power of Anglo Partners versus BRICS Partners, 2025 (source/authors)

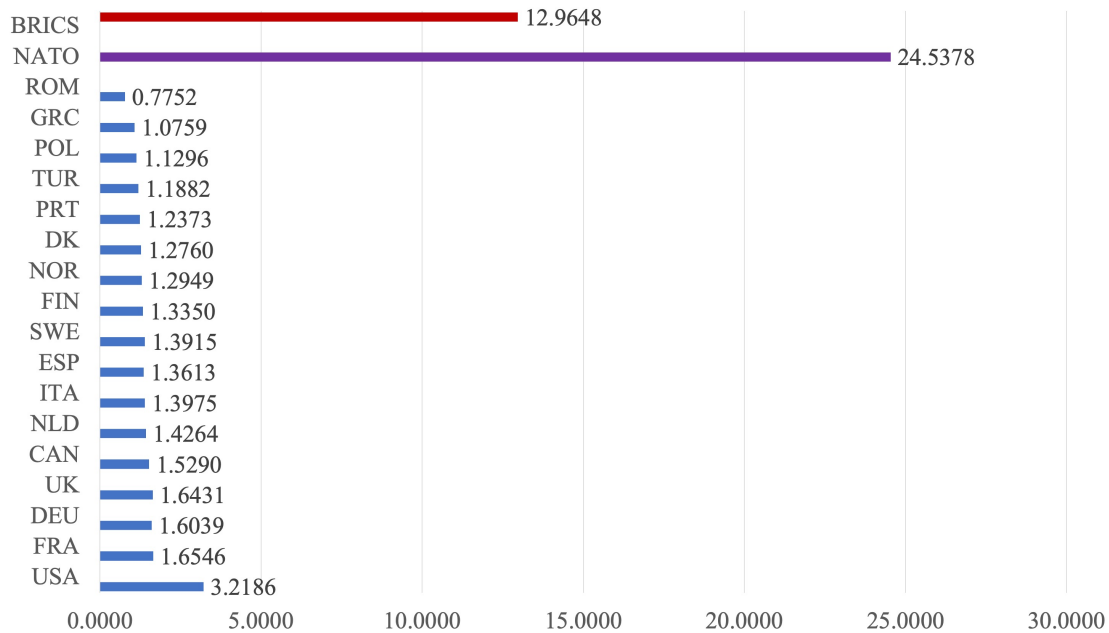
ship of 8.94. This correlates to Anglo partners wielding only 69% in aggression, learning, yield, and statesmanship capacity in comparison. Consequently, the U.S. retracting from its global leadership position likely poses the most dangerous course of action it could take in terms of its national security.

## The Power of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) consists of thirty-two nations, the largest alliance on earth. Initiated in 1949, some have described NATO as “an indispensable component of international peace and the backbone of US national security” (Hooker, 2024).<sup>48</sup> NATO has recently received criticism as thriving under the defensive security umbrella enabled by an alliance with the United States, while not contributing equally per capita toward national military capabilities. This criticism stems mostly from the United States toward Europe, exacerbated by the costs of supporting Ukraine in the face of Russia’s invasion. Despite the controversy, between 2022 to 2024, the European Union allocated roughly \$109.25B in financial, humanitarian, and military aid, while the United States provided \$91.38B.<sup>49</sup>

48 Richard D. Hooker, Jr., 2024, “Why NATO Matters,” *Atlantic Council*, 28 May, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/nato-us-interest-washington>.

49 A. Antezza, K. Bushnell, Y. Dyussimbinov, A. Frank, P. Frank, L. Franz, I. Kharitonov, B. Kumar, E. Rebinskaya, C. Trebesch, S. Schramm, L. Weiser, C. Schade, 2024, “Ukraine Support Tracker Data,” *Kiel Working Paper*, no. 2218, 31 October, <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/publications/ukraine-support-tracker->



**Figure 6:** Alliance Power of NATO versus BRICS Partners, 2025 (source/authors)

The following figure illustrates the alliance power of the seventeen largest nations in NATO. The influence of NATO in terms of its alliance power starkly contrasts with even the notional cementing of a BRICS alliance (including all current members). The combined alliance power of just the largest NATO states equates to 24.5378 and twice that of a possible BRICS alliance at 12.9648 (in fact, the NATO alliance equates to a bit more than 24.5378, as the figure does not account for 15 of the smaller members). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, NATO, more than any other partnership, has greatly influenced the current international order. Maintaining, and perhaps reinforcing, this partnership could result in incredible sway over the future world mode hierarchy.

## Conclusion

America’s global authority remains dependent upon partners, allies, and populations, but its leadership depends on who chooses to accept it. Simply counting current U.S. foreign agreements fails to also indicate the hard realities required to sustain that support. To enhance its own position relative to other great powers, the United States must demonstrate strong leadership, which attracts a coalition – and that effort provides the foundation for a successful grand strategy. Although a return to hard power can also comprise part of national security, so too does a simultaneous and balanced return to soft power remain necessary for sustaining global and economic primacy – particularly during a new era of multipolar competition.

---

data-20758/.

China recognizes this reality. Not only is China engaging in a competition strategy built on a transactional approach for growing and sustaining global support through the One Belt, One Road initiative, but they are also competing directly with the U.S. (and NATO) by sponsoring and leading their own counter-alliance structure. As NATO and BRICS become representative of the relative strengths of U.S. and Chinese leadership profiles across an increasingly shrinking global environment, the impact of relational leadership through soft power and alliance networks becomes foundational for global competition. Of the two emerging superpowers, the one that resists the urge to go it alone and instead invests in expanding and strengthening global stability through networks will win.

The data-centric approach of the ALYS Power Index reveals stark realities. While a bilateral comparison might suggest a close race between the U.S. and China, the inclusion of their respective alliance networks paints a different picture. The substantial power differential between NATO and a hypothetical formalized BRICS alliance highlights the potential consequences should the U.S. retreat from its global leadership role. This power differential is not merely a product of military or economic might; it is a testament to the trust and confidence that America has cultivated through decades of principled leadership.

This analysis underscores the enduring importance of coalitions and partnerships in shaping the future global order – with American global leadership remaining essential to building and sustaining those partnerships. While the U.S. currently benefits from a robust alliance network, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, the rise of BRICS and the potential for a China-centric alliance present a clear challenge to American primacy, a challenge that demands a reinvigorated commitment of American global leadership. The significant growth of BRICS' alliance power within a single year, driven in part by strategic bandwagoning, underscores the fluidity of the current geopolitical landscape and the need for America to rise to the occasion.

The path forward requires a recalibration of American grand strategy, one that acknowledges the limitations of hard power alone and embraces the enduring significance of soft power and strategic partnerships. Strengthening existing alliances like NATO, while simultaneously cultivating new partnerships, particularly with strategically important actors like India, will be crucial in navigating the complexities of a multipolar world. This requires America to lead not through coercion or transactional diplomacy but through the power of its example, its values, and its enduring commitment to a rules-based international order.

The future will be defined not by which nation stands strongest alone, but by which nation leads the most effective coalition. The United States, with its history of alliance building and its enduring commitment to democratic values, is uniquely positioned to lead. However, the American leadership frame must be claimed, not assumed. It demands a strategic, decisive, and unwavering commitment to shaping a future where American values and interests are advanced through robust and enduring partnerships on the global stage. Since President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1940s, the United States forged a new global order – a mighty oak that respected national sovereignty, promoted democracy, and established free trade. While China and other adversaries are successfully attacking the roots of that tree, walking away accepts defeat and leads to an uncertain future.

Alternatively, the United States can assemble a coalition to protect what was built. While the international order is certainly changing, only through the protection of its historic partnerships and building new ones can the United States compete with its challengers.

## **Authors**

Robert S. Burrell is a senior research fellow at the Global and National Security Institute at the University of South Florida. He is a resilience and resistance interdisciplinary scholar using data-driven and human-centric methodologies to analyze intrastate conflict ranging from nonviolent protest through belligerency. He has a PhD in history from the University of Warwick and master's degrees from San Diego State University and the U.S. Naval War College. In 2025, he served as a fellow at the Irregular Warfare Initiative.

Dr. Joseph Long is the director of the Irregular Warfare Initiative's SOF program. He serves on the board of directors for the Leadership Transition Institute (LTI) and the advisory board of the Special Operations Association of America (SOAA). A retired Green Beret officer and leadership scholar, Dr. Long currently serves as a senior policy analyst supporting the Assistant Secretary of War for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict's Office of Information Operations Policy (OIOP). He is a former Leadership and Ethics Professor at the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) and a 2025 IWI non-resident fellow. His research focuses on leadership, ethics, and partner force development in irregular warfare.