

# ST.GALLEN SYMPOSIUM

## Global Essay Competition 2025

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### Title:

#### **The Multipolar World Ahead: Reinventing World Order in An Era of Uncertainty**

### Essay:

As the Trump administration assumes office in early 2025,<sup>1</sup> the world enters its most perilous moment since the Cold War. A new age of profound uncertainty has dawned. Decades of peace render memories of World War II distant and abstract for new generations. As the imminent threat receded, the old balance of power and deterrence ceased to anchor major power relations. As the U.S.'s relative influence in global affairs wanes, power is shifting from a unipolar, American-led order toward multipolarity.<sup>2</sup> Emerging economies are reshaping the distribution of international power. America's dictatorial drift and retreat into isolationism erode multilateral governance frameworks, granting authoritarian regimes greater strategic leverage. The old bipolar deterrence system is giving way to a more complex tripolar contest, ushering the world further into what many call the third nuclear era.<sup>3</sup> Asian, Eastern European, and Middle Eastern actors assert their identities and demand a voice independent of the existing global order. Existing international laws and multilateral institutions are fragmenting or becoming incapacitated. Nationalism and protectionism deepen cultural divides. Where multipolarity will lead is a question.

### What is Multipolarity?

Understanding polarity defines good strategy. Before assessing it, we must clarify whether multipolarity is an established reality or an aspirational construct. Has the world already formed distinct poles, or is it trending toward polarization? Is multipolarity a real structural shift or a self-deceptive illusion? Who promotes it, and to what end? Why? The classification of polarity describes the distribution of power and its evolution regionally or globally. How this discourse functions and where its limitations lie must be examined.

Multipolarity is widely proclaimed as the future by leaders, CEOs, and pundits,<sup>4</sup> yet, as Bekkevold sharply noted, "it is simply a myth that today's world is anywhere close to multipolar."<sup>5</sup> Only the U.S. and China possess the economic scale, military strength, and global

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<sup>1</sup> Payne, Daniel. "Trump's Agenda Is about to Remake Everything from Immigration to Taxes to Education - Politico." *POLITICO*, 20 Jan. 2025, [www.politico.com/news/2025/01/20/donald-trump-presidential-agenda-00198167](http://www.politico.com/news/2025/01/20/donald-trump-presidential-agenda-00198167).

<sup>2</sup> Wilkinson, David. "Unipolarity without Hegemony." *International Studies Review*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1999, pp. 141–72. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3186383>.

<sup>3</sup> Trachtenberg, David J. "US Extended Deterrence: How Much Strategic Force Is Too Little?" *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, vol. 10, no. 5, 2016, pp. 62–92. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26271623>.

<sup>4</sup> Rosecrance, R. N. "Bipolarity, Multipolarity, and the Future." *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 10, no. 3, 1966, pp. 314–27. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/173003>.

<sup>5</sup> Bekkevold, Jo Inge. "No, the World Is Not Multipolar." *Foreign Policy*, Foreign Policy, 9 Sept. 2024, [foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/22/multipolar-world-bipolar-power-geopolitics-business-strategy-china-united-states-india/](http://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/22/multipolar-world-bipolar-power-geopolitics-business-strategy-china-united-states-india/).

influence to constitute true poles. This view dismisses that middle powers could emerge as independent poles in the system.

However, this bipolarity assessment doesn't fully capture today's landscape. Multipolarity does not require equal powers—only that “significant power is concentrated in more than two states”. Scholars highlight that the U.S. no longer holds Cold War-era dominance, and China falls short of the Soviet Union's past strength.<sup>6</sup> From Japan to India, middle powers' growing economic and strategic weight is now impossible to overlook. Multipolarity is not fully realized but is emerging.

What drives the fervent embrace of multipolarity between competing visions of the global order? Multipolarity, as a rhetorical tool, reflects a deep desire for a more equitable distribution of global power, but its appeal may blur the realities of geopolitical competition and risk. First, belief in a multipolar world—despite its tenuous empirical basis—serves as a propelling vessel for broader hopes and dreams from various continents.<sup>7</sup> For many, it is a normative concept—a way of proclaiming or yearning for Western dominance to end and for power to be diffused. Equally influential is a struggle for discursive power, often as part of a broader power play, with states reshaping the narrative to their advantage (which, however, obscures the epistemological issues at stake). Furthermore, multipolarity offers an intellectual escape from the unsettling prospect of an all-encompassing and polarizing U.S.-China rivalry. European and African leaders embrace multipolarity as a “preferred alternative to bipolarity”<sup>8</sup> in a world that increasingly values transactions over alliances.<sup>9</sup>

Multipolarity is, fundamentally, an epistemological question about how we perceive the global order—one that determines the success or failure of strategy. A bipolarity narrative fuels U.S.-China rivalry<sup>10</sup>, rooted in the longstanding misleading common belief that unipolarity or bipolarity is safer for the U.S.,<sup>11</sup> implying resistance to multipolarity. In contrast, a multipolar perspective envisions a world with less nuclear brinkmanship and no existential dread of superpower confrontation. Each order carries different geopolitical risks; a mistaken strategy is costly.<sup>12</sup> How do we weigh the severity of the risks of each? The lesser of two evils should be chosen.

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<sup>6</sup> Emma Ashford, Evan Cooper. “Yes, the World Is Multipolar.” *Foreign Policy*, Foreign Policy, 10 Nov. 2023, [foreignpolicy.com/2023/10/05/usa-china-multipolar-bipolar-unipolar/](https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/10/05/usa-china-multipolar-bipolar-unipolar/).

<sup>7</sup> De Keersmaecker, Goedele. *Multipolar Myths and Unipolar Fantasies*. Egmont Institute, 2015. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep06618>.

<sup>8</sup> Burrows, Mathew J. *Western Options in a Multipolar World*. Atlantic Council, 2017. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep16818>.

<sup>9</sup> Beres, Louis René. “Bipolarity, Multipolarity, and the Reliability of Alliance Commitments.” *The Western Political Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 4, 1972, pp. 702–10. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/446797>.

<sup>10</sup> Brooks, Stephen G., and William C. Wohlforth. “The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century: China's Rise and the Fate of America's Global Position.” *International Security*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2015, pp. 7–53. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43828561>.

<sup>11</sup> Wohlforth, William. “Unipolar Stability: The Rules of Power Analysis.” *Harvard International Review*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2007, pp. 44–48. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43650187>.

<sup>12</sup> *Theories of risk underpin all these arguments.*

Wide-ranging academic debates offer no consensus on which system is more likely to generate stability,<sup>13</sup> but there is agreement that the transition between systems can be intensely destabilizing. “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born.”<sup>14</sup> The most perilous aspect of such transition is the epistemological and strategic instability it causes. The clash between the previous (if not saying outdated) bipolar framework and the values driving a multipolar order can lead to strategic contradictions and inconsistency, resulting in realignments and abrupt shifts among states navigating the co-existing old and new orders.

Fear always shapes strategy. The Biden administration’s bloc-based approach to contain China’s rise stemmed in part from fears of multipolarity.<sup>15</sup> It risked weak partnerships with minimal common interests and failed to manage a more complex, multipolar world. At its core, U.S.-China bipolarity is framed through “hegemonic stability theory,”<sup>16</sup> exemplified by the so-called “Thucydides Trap” assumption during power transitions,<sup>17</sup> echoing Biden’s policies—both are continuations of Cold War mindset.<sup>18</sup> This bipolar mindset fosters the false belief that others’ (China’s) gain must come at one’s (American) expense.<sup>19</sup>

The true danger of the “Thucydides Trap” does not lie in the inevitability of conflict or the historical ostensible similarity of a precarious situation where a rising power threatens to displace a ruling one,<sup>20</sup> but in the fact that any disruption of equilibrium introduces immense systemic instability. It is Sparta’s fear of Athens’ rise that led to war—misreading balance shifts

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<sup>11</sup> See Midlarsky, Manus I., and Ted Hopf. “Polarity and International Stability.” *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 87, no. 1, 1993, pp. 171–80. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2938964>. SEE also Deutsch, Karl W., and J. David Singer. “Multipolar Power Systems and International Stability.” *World Politics*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1964, pp. 390–406. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009578>.

<sup>14</sup> Gramsci, Antonio, and Joseph A. Buttigieg. *Prison Notebooks*. Columbia University Press, 1996.

<sup>15</sup> Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger thus described the Cold War as a modern Peloponnesian War, with the Soviet Union as Athens and the United States as Sparta. But Graham Allison who coined this term misread the story.

<sup>16</sup> Kohout, Franz. “Cyclical, Hegemonic, and Pluralistic Theories of International Relations: Some Comparative Reflections on War Causation.” *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2003, pp. 51–66. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1601329>.

<sup>17</sup> Allison, Graham T. *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> De Buitrago, Sybille Reinke. “Threats of a Different Kind: China and Russia in U.S. Security Policy Discourse.” *Sicherheit Und Frieden (S+F) / Security and Peace*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2016, pp. 165–70. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26428997>.

<sup>19</sup> Christensen, Thomas J. *No New Cold War: Why US-China Strategic Competition Will Not Be like the US-Soviet Cold War*. Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 2020. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep26078>.

<sup>20</sup> Graham Allison coined this term to describe power shifts, but in doing so, he overlooked the historical nuances of contingency, the multiple factors and actors behind the disruption of balance, Sparta’s initial strategic ambiguity, systemic complexity, and agency. Many classicists and international relations scholars reject this interpretation, seeing it as a narrative shaped by the logic of bipolarity rather than a genuine historical lesson.

See Hanania, Richard. “Graham Allison and the Thucydides Trap Myth.” *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2021, pp. 13–24. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48638049>. SEE also Michael A. Peters, Alexander J. Means, David P. Ericson, Shivali Tukdeo, Joff P. N. Bradley, Liz Jackson, Guanglun Michael Mu, Timothy W. Luke & Greg William Misiaszek. (2022) “US–China Rivalry and ‘Thucydides’ Trap’: Why This Is a Misleading Account.” or [The China-threat discourse, trade, and the future of Asia. A Symposium](#). *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 54:10, pages 1531-1549.

creates massive risks in any system, not just bipolarity. History does not have to repeat itself. The “Thucydides Trap” is not a predetermined fate but a warning against mismanaging power transitions, which applies to any challenge to equilibrium, including a shift to multipolarity.

Multipolarity hinges on recalibrating power, equilibrium, and governance while managing transition costs. At its core is the balance of power—the foundation of geopolitical security and systemic stability. The real test is not the reconfiguration of alliances but whether it can foster an order. Its success depends not on any single hegemon but on the world’s ability to forge an equilibrium—or a renewed governance framework—that mitigates risk, sustains resilience, and prevents competition from spiraling into destruction.<sup>21</sup>

### **America as the New Rome: The Parallels and Implications for Multipolarity**

An equilibrium based on power is hardest to sustain, especially in a revolutionary era following a long peace. Like Rome, America has been both the architect and arbiter of its order,<sup>22</sup> yet its unipolar dominance now teeters. Ancient historians liken Trump’s rise to a “*Caesarian shift*”,<sup>23</sup> positioning him as an American Caesar in a New Rome,<sup>24</sup> thereby illustrating the internal and external pressures driving the global power shift.

Internally, U.S. politics mirrors the late Roman Republic. Julius Caesar did not dismantle Rome’s republican institutions overnight but catalyzed their transformation into a principate. Likewise, Trump embodies a disruptive force—not abolishing institutions but reshaping them through populist defiance.<sup>25</sup> This upheaval reflects deeper societal fractures in a globalized world, reflected in a divide between tech oligarchs and nationalists emphasizing populist sovereignty.<sup>26</sup>

As global power shifts, more of the world operates in a grey zone. America’s deterrence deficit exposes a deeper problem: the weakening legitimacy of the existing order. Once upheld by

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<sup>21</sup> Dean, P. Dale, and John A. Vasquez. “From Power Politics to Issue Politics: Bipolarity and Multipolarity in Light of a New Paradigm.” *The Western Political Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 1, 1976, pp. 7–28. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/447581>.

<sup>22</sup> Brands, Hal. “American Grand Strategy in the Post–Cold War Era.” *New Directions in Strategic Thinking 2.0: ANU Strategic & Defence Studies Centre’s Golden Anniversary Conference Proceedings*, edited by RUSSELL W. GLENN, ANU Press, 2018, pp. 133–48. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv47wfp.17>.

<sup>23</sup> This concept was coined by Antonio Gramsci. See the analysis below and <sup>Note 25</sup>. Ranalli, Brent. “Trump and Caesar: Two Men above the Law.” *The Globalist*, 29 Jan. 2025, [www.theglobalist.com/united-states-donald-trump-roman-empire-julius-caesar-2020-us-presidential-elections-democracy/](http://www.theglobalist.com/united-states-donald-trump-roman-empire-julius-caesar-2020-us-presidential-elections-democracy/).

<sup>24</sup> Elliott, Tim. “America Is Eerily Retracing Rome’s Steps to a Fall. Will It Turn around before It’s Too Late? - POLITICO.” *POLITICO*, Mar. 2020, [www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/11/03/donald-trump-julius-caesar-433956](http://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/11/03/donald-trump-julius-caesar-433956). SEE also Downey, Matthew. “American Caesar: Positioning Trump and Pence in a New Rome.” *Open Canada*, 11 Dec. 2024, [opencanada.org/american-caesar-positioning-trump-and-pence-in-a-new-rome/](http://opencanada.org/american-caesar-positioning-trump-and-pence-in-a-new-rome/).

<sup>25</sup> Heino, Brett. “Donald Trump and American Caesarism.” *Progress in Political Economy (PPE)*, 23 Oct. 2023, [www.ppesydney.net/donald-trump-and-american-caesarism/](http://www.ppesydney.net/donald-trump-and-american-caesarism/).

<sup>26</sup> Michael Scherer, Ashley Parker. “The Tech Oligarchy Arrives.” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 22 Jan. 2025, [www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2025/01/tech-zuckerberg-trump-inauguration-oligarchy/681381/](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2025/01/tech-zuckerberg-trump-inauguration-oligarchy/681381/).

alliances, rules, and hard-soft power, its authority is eroding.<sup>27</sup> The Trump administration's improvisational, at times reckless, approach—oscillating between brinkmanship, retreat, and abdication—fuels uncertainty, weakens U.S. standing, and accelerates disorder. The blend of localized wars and unstable alliances recalls the interwar period.

This power vacuum creates opportunities for nations willing to provide security, economic aid, and governance infrastructure. Nigeria's then-Vice President Yemi Osinbajo observed, "China shows up where and when the West will not."<sup>28</sup> Yet Beijing's "win-win" rhetoric comes with conditions.<sup>29</sup> Its ability to uphold legitimacy, maintain order, and shape rules as a responsible great power in post-American chaos will define its rise and impact on equilibrium.

Multipolarity inevitably compels each region to assert its own legitimacy. America understands its global leadership rests on consent. "Countries don't want to choose, and we don't want them to," said Jake Sullivan.<sup>30</sup> Yet will multipolarity lead to equilibrium or chaos? Rome did not fall in a day but several centuries. Its decline did not yield a stable multipolar Mediterranean but a fragmented, war-prone power vacuum in the West for nearly a thousand years,<sup>31</sup> though the global power reorganization took much longer. Overconfidence, born from long stability, led Rome to mistake unipolar inertia for security. The U.S., steeped in post-Cold War hubris, risks the same miscalculation—failing to recalibrate for a new geopolitical reality.

Multipolarity does not guarantee stability. A weakened hegemon seldom gives way to equilibrium but to intensified rivalry to fill the void left. Without a central stabilizing force, the world risks escalating regional conflicts.

## The New Nonaligned

As the American-led order fractures and economic decoupling accelerates, many nations seek deals across divides. The West is surprised to find itself viewed by these countries not as the sole hegemon or center, but as one economic bloc among many—often through a post-colonial lens—as the creator of the *status quo*. Despite 52 Western-aligned nations (15% of the world) condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, only 12 praised Russia, while 127 remained

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<sup>27</sup> Norrlof, Carla. "The Waning of Pax Americana?" *Great Decisions*, 2018, pp. 11–22. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26593692>.

<sup>28</sup> "How to Survive a Superpower Split." *The Economist*, The Economist Newspaper, 11 Apr. 2023, [www.economist.com/international/2023/04/11/how-to-survive-a-superpower-split](https://www.economist.com/international/2023/04/11/how-to-survive-a-superpower-split).

<sup>29</sup> Latif, Muhammad Ijaz, and Sehar Sabir. "China: 'Rising Threat' or 'Rising Peace.'" *Strategic Studies*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2021, pp. 32–48. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48732273>.

<sup>30</sup> Ignatius, David. "Biden's Unsentimental Foreign Policy Strategy." *The Washington Post*, Jan. 2023, [www.washingtonpost.com/ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/opinions/2023/01/04/biden-foreign-policy-strategy-realism/ons/2023/01/04/biden-foreign-policy-strategy-realism/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/opinions/2023/01/04/biden-foreign-policy-strategy-realism/ons/2023/01/04/biden-foreign-policy-strategy-realism/).

<sup>31</sup> León-Manríquez, José Luis. "Power Vacuum or Hegemonic Continuity? The United States, Latin America, and the 'Chinese Factor' After the Cold War." *World Affairs*, vol. 179, no. 3, 2016, pp. 59–81. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26369516>.

unaligned.<sup>32</sup> Most of the world does not follow the West unconditionally. The West is realizing it is just one part of a larger world.

Holding 45% of the world's population and 18% of global GDP,<sup>33</sup> surpassing the EU, the new nonaligned movement—spanning Africa, Asia, and Latin America—is reshaping geopolitics. Its core principle lies in maintaining strategic independence while avoiding direct alignment with major powers or blocs. The Economist identifies 25 key neutral economies as the “Transactional 25” (T25), from India to Qatar.<sup>34</sup> Their neutrality carries both risks and opportunities. Their resources, markets, and strategic locations make them pivotal actors to be won over. These nations adeptly leverage great-power rivalry for economic gains, political agency, security cooperation, and energy stability. Unlike Cold War-era nonalignment, this new approach emphasizes flexible diplomacy, multilateral engagement, and pragmatic national interest. It seeks to reform and maximize benefits within the existing international order rather than overturn it.<sup>35</sup> These states balance external influences, strengthen regional partnerships, and assert sovereignty, reshaping the world order for decades to come.

### **Multipolarity or World Orders**

Multipolarity has long been incubating in the character of nations and the course of history. Historical, cultural, and civilizational forces are living factors in the evolution of world order. A neutral, holistic perspective enables a more aloof analysis of global trends, revealing the underlying logic and historical patterns behind shifts in power. It allows for an unbiased understanding of the forces reshaping a post-American world and the contours of a new equilibrium.

In *World Order*, Kissinger systematically examined the strategic logic and order perceptions of civilizations across four centuries—Europe's balance-of-power system, the Islamic political order, Asia's diverse order traditions, and America's universalist worldview.<sup>36</sup> He highlighted the plural nature of order perceptions: World Order is not singular, but multiple. The frictions between these divergent concepts of order are a fundamental challenge in contemporary international relations, echoing Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*.<sup>37</sup> With his diplomatic career focusing on preventing a hot war and safeguarding America's interests, his notion of *World Orders* reflects his earlier practices, acknowledging that cultural, historical, and political traditions require diverse frameworks of legitimacy. This intellectual fruition marks an expansion

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<sup>32</sup> From the survey of Economist Intelligence Unit, 2023. See “How to Survive a Superpower Split.” *The Economist*, The Economist Newspaper, 11 Apr. 2023, [www.economist.com/international/2023/04/11/how-to-survive-a-superpower-split](http://www.economist.com/international/2023/04/11/how-to-survive-a-superpower-split).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> “Henry Kissinger Explains How to Avoid World War Three.” *The Economist*, The Economist Newspaper, May 2023, [www.economist.com/briefing/2023/05/17/henry-kissinger-explains-how-to-avoid-world-war-three](http://www.economist.com/briefing/2023/05/17/henry-kissinger-explains-how-to-avoid-world-war-three).

<sup>36</sup> Kissinger, Henry. *World Order*. The Penguin Press, 2014.

<sup>37</sup> Huntington, Samuel. *The Clash of Civilizations?* Oxford University Press, 1998. SEE also Allison, Graham. “China vs. America: Managing the Next Clash of Civilizations.” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 96, no. 5, 2017, pp. 80–89. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44821871>.

of legitimate rights, heralding a multipolar world where no single model can unilaterally define global order.

Legitimacy now requires the integration of unique civilizational values and regional political imperatives, transcending Cold War ideological binaries. This insight justifies the formation of endogenous orders based on localized notions of legitimacy, establishing *World Orders* as a theoretical foundation for multipolarity shift. Historical shifts in world order typically follow cycles of hegemonic succession and power redistribution, shaped by whether competing forces can define the limits of their rivalry. Foreign policy should be based on a shift from Power Politics to Issue Politics in big multilateral structures.

Civilizations remain “incommensurable” in the multipolar world.<sup>38</sup> Statesmen must be educators, bridging a nation’s history and vision, tradition and foresight. In the grander scheme, the future of global values belongs to a symbiosis of diverse civilizational perspectives. Each civilization shapes distinct expectations of power structures, governance, and interactions, defining regional orders that, in turn, dictate global governance. As power diffuses, regional actors grow decisive. The way in which states conceptualize their regional order determines strategies in great power balance and global cooperation,<sup>39</sup> directly influencing geopolitical alignments. Balancing the diverse and often conflicting ideals can be both an opportunity for cooperation on existential threats such as climate change and nuclear annihilation and a challenge that requires astute leadership to manage conflicts.

**Word Count (essay text only):** (2096/2100)

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<sup>38</sup> Hsieh, Nien-hê, and Henrik Andersson. “Incommensurable Values.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 14 July 2021, plato.stanford.edu/entries/value-incommensurable/.

<sup>39</sup> Garzón, Jorge F. *Multipolarity and the Future of Regionalism: Latin America and Beyond*. German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA), 2015. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep07600>.

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