

Conference Paper

QUEST FOR A NEW INTERNATIONAL ORDER IN AN ERA OF WANING MULTIPOLARITY: The Case for Conductive Multilateralism

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QUEST FOR A NEW INTERNATIONAL ORDER IN AN ERA OF WANING MULTIPOLARITY: The Case for Conductive Multilateralism*

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Abstract

Contemporary international order is marked by an apparent contradiction: the proliferation of global challenges that require robust multilateral responses, and a simultaneous crisis of multilateralism rooted in institutional fatigue. This fatigue—manifested in declining legitimacy, operational gridlock, and eroding political will—has become a defining feature of global governance. In parallel, the multi-polar configuration of the post-Cold War world is under strain, with rising tensions among major powers, growing fragmentation, and increasing unilateralism. The two trends are mutually reinforcing: as the multi-polar order weakens, international institutions suffer; and as institutions decay, multi-polar cooperation becomes more difficult to sustain.

The paper observes that by strengthening and fostering multilateralism in critical areas and engaging the public more effectively in addressing global challenges that affect directly their very own existence, welfare and destiny, policymakers can achieve a more stable and inclusive global system. To achieve this goal, however, international community must put forth the will and effort to build a revised version of multilateralism that would accommodate the harsh winds of change on one hand and ensure progress towards a more humane and just social order for all, on the other. It is further suggested that a new world order that is built upon "conductive multilateralism" would facilitate dynamic models of collaborative and participatory institutional networks, organized around "geographic plane(s) of common issues" as opposed to "issues of given geographic plane(s)."

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I) Introduction

At present, the international political environment is undergoing a state of profound flux, marked by transformations across political, economic, demographic, and cultural domains in ways that are historically unprecedented. This pervasive atmosphere of change extends across the globe, encompassing individuals, societies, nations, and states alike, leaving no region untouched and no actor unaffected. The very fabric of human interaction—ranging from interpersonal relationships to the operations of international institutions—is being reshaped, with significant implications for both the structural foundations and the substantive dimensions of global affairs.

Change, of course, is not a new phenomenon; it has been constant throughout human history. It is not the existence of change itself that characterizes the current moment as exceptional, but rather the nature of its manifestation today. What distinguishes contemporary change from its historical antecedents is its triadic character: the unprecedented velocity at which it unfolds, the magnitude of its reach, and the force with which it imposes transformation. Frequently abrupt and far-reaching, such change often surpasses foresight, overwhelms the present order, and disrupts even the most resilient institutional structures. As ever, its nature remains profoundly tectonic—fundamental, deep-seated, and transformative.

This paper recognizes that international relations are described in static models; models that are articulated in the language of "polarity," as uni-polar, bi-polar or multi-polar, depending on the number of global powers who prevail as dominant players in world politics in a given period in history. It is argued here that while studying international relations, the terminology of polarity provides a certain level of presentation convenience but runs the risk of falling substantially short of understanding world affairs for developing proper academic insights or for relevant policy proposal or, for that matter, mandating effective and meaningful policy actions. The transactional nature of relations in a world that is described by various forms of polarity is important but not sufficient to develop a broad and forward-looking appreciation of international affairs unless the "play field" is described and studied in terms of "flows" in global affairs.

As such, this paper argues that following a sound understanding of multipolarity and the concept of power relations that underlie international relations, it is important to study multipolarity in terms of multipolarization, as an on-going process. Furthermore, it is argued that any effort to

build a more just and equitable world must focus on developing innovative institutional structures that capture a) the flows in international relations on one hand while, on the other, b) ensuring to operate on confidence-projection and self-motivating premises for a world in the form of a home for all.

In studying the current power relations in the international system, the paper challenges simplistic assumptions that we are entering a new multipolar world. It is argued that while multiple centers of power exist, there is no cohesive leadership bloc capable of stewarding a global order. This differs markedly from the bipolar stability of the post-Cold War period and the unipolar dominance that followed the end of the Cold War era.

In response, the paper advances the idea of Conductive Multilateralism: a flexible, functional model of global governance. Rather than rely on formal consensus or universal norms, Conductive Multilateralism emphasizes issue-based cooperation, pragmatic coalitions, and timely action. It prioritizes local sensitivities while maintaining global relevance, offering a governance structure that is both adaptive and durable. The paper suggests "conductive multilateralism" as a rather futuristic example for alternative structures to be considered that would lead to a sustainable and resilient world order.

II) Main Drivers of Change in International Affairs

Climate change and technological advancement stand out as the most influential drivers of this contemporary shift. Their implications are not peripheral but structural, necessitating a reassessment of the very frameworks through which global politics are theorized and practiced. These phenomena are not only reshaping global governance and economic structures but also redefining the parameters of security, development, and societal organization in the 21st century.

Climate change poses significant challenges to state stability, human mobility, and global health. As environmental degradation accelerates, it exacerbates underlying vulnerabilities, fuels conflict over scarce resources, and compels a re-evaluation of traditional notions of sovereignty, responsibility, and global justice. Its impacts transcend the traditional boundaries of state-centric international relations, affecting not only environmental systems but also security, economy, migration, and diplomacy. From rising sea levels to increased frequency of extreme weather

events, climate change undermines territorial integrity and worsens resource scarcity, triggering conflicts and humanitarian crises.¹ Scholars and governments increasingly acknowledge the link between environmental degradation and global instability.² Yet, without systemic mitigation strategies, climate-induced disruptions continue to intensify existing inequalities and stress fragile political systems.³ Climate change exposes the limitations of existing international institutions and consistently highlights the need for coordinated inter-generational and transnational governance solutions.⁴

Technological advancements, on the other hand, and the exponential growth of technological innovation are rapidly altering the Dynamics of power, communication, and production.⁵ The proliferation of digital technologies, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and cyber capabilities is transforming economies, labor markets, and the very architecture of international relations. Technology not only accelerates the pace of change but also introduces complex ethical, legal, and security dilemmas that global institutions are often ill-equipped to address. Moreover, technological asymmetries are contributing to new forms of inequality and geopolitical competition, challenging established hierarchies and alliances.

Advances in artificial intelligence (AI), quantum computing, biotechnology, and digital platforms are restructuring economies, altering labor markets, and redefining political influence. These technologies do not merely provide tools of efficiency but mechanisms of power consolidation, surveillance, and social engineering.⁶ The unregulated development and deployment of technology is already paving the way to disinformation campaigns, autonomous

¹ Homer-Dixon, T. (1999). **Environment, Scarcity, and Violence**. Princeton University Press.

² Dalby, S. (2013). **Climate change: New dimensions of environmental security**. *The RUSI Journal*, 158(3), pp. 34–43.

³ IPCC. (2023). **Sixth Assessment Report: Summary for Policymakers**. <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/>

⁴ Biermann, F., & Pattberg, P. (2008). **Global environmental governance: Taking stock, moving forward**. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 33, 277–294.

⁵ The impact of technological advancements, including the effects of emerging field of "disruptive technological" and their role in the changes in international relations are referenced to Fourth Industrial Revolution (FIR) in the literature. For a brief overview of FIR in relation to the changing nature of international affairs, Klaus Schwab (2016), "**The Fourth Industrial Revolution**," World Economic Forum, pp.11-12; Alejandro Lavopa and Michele Delera (2021), "**What is the Fourth Industrial Revolution?**" Industrial Analytics Platform, <https://iap.unido.org/articles/what-fourth-industrial-revolution>; Glenn Diesen (2021), **Great Power Politics in the Fourth Industrial Revolution: The Geoeconomics of Technological Sovereignty**; London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021, pp. 14-16. Tianyang Song and Hao Wang (2023), "**Sino-US Tech Rivalry and Biden's Pursuit of Renewing America's Supremacy**," *Chinese Journal of International Review*, 5(2): pp. 1–26.

⁶ Zuboff, S. (2019). **The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power**. Public Affairs.

weapons systems as the geopolitical consequences of technological advancement often outpace regulatory efforts, leaving global institutions struggling to keep up.⁷

Together, these two forces intersect in powerful and unpredictable ways, generating both opportunities and profound uncertainties. They necessitate a reconceptualization of governance frameworks, a redefinition of global priorities in navigating the rapidly evolving international landscape. As Anne-Marie Slaughter notes, power in the digital age becomes increasingly networked, rather than hierarchical, requiring new strategies for influence and governance.⁸

III) International Order: Conceptual Definition

States constitute the primary units of analysis in the study of international relations. In broader terms, they are independent political communities, each endowed with a governing authority and exercising sovereignty over a defined territory and population segment.⁹ These communities assert internal sovereignty—the supreme authority within their territorial boundaries—and external sovereignty, which denotes independence from other external actors rather than dominance over them.¹⁰ A political unit that merely claims sovereignty, but lacks the capacity to enforce or exercise it, does not fulfill the criteria of statehood in the strict sense.¹¹

An international system, or system of states, is established when two or more states engage in sustained interactions that are significant enough to influence each other's decision-making processes, leading them to behave—at least to some extent—as components of a broader whole.¹² This system is characterized by regular and observable contact among states, wherein each state's conduct becomes a variable in the strategic calculations of the others.¹³

⁷ Brundage, M., et al. 2018. **The Malicious Use of Artificial Intelligence: Forecasting, Prevention, and Mitigation**. Future of Humanity Institute.

⁸ Slaughter, A.-M. (2017). **The Chessboard and the Web: Strategies of Connection in a Networked World**. Yale University Press.

⁹ Hedley Bull, **The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics** (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 8.

¹⁰ Stephen D. Krasner, "Sovereignty: An Institutional Perspective," *Comparative Political Studies* 21, no. 1 (1988): pp. 66–94.

¹¹ Robert H. Jackson, **Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Third World** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹² Martin Wight, **Systems of States**, ed. Hedley Bull (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1977), p. 25.

¹³ Barry Buzan and Richard Little, **International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 93.

State interactions within such a system can be direct—through geographic proximity, rivalry, or alliance—or indirect, shaped by third-party relationships or the general systemic influence exerted by each state.¹⁴ These interactions may involve cooperation, conflict, neutrality, or even mutual disregard, yet still contribute to the dynamics of the system.¹⁵ Moreover, interactions can occur across various spheres—political, strategic, economic, or social—and may range from comprehensive to limited in scope. The interactions may be present over a whole range of activities- political, strategic, economic, social- as they are today, or only in one or two; it may be enough, as Raymond Aron's definition of an international system implies, that the independent political communities in question "maintain regular relations with each other." and are all capable of being implicated in a generalized war.¹⁶

IV) International System: Structural Outlook

Building on this conceptualization, Martin Wight introduces a typological distinction between an "international states system" and a "suzerain-state system."¹⁷ In an international states system, the component units are sovereign states, each recognized as having ultimate authority within its own borders and independence from external control. Sovereignty here is both a legal status and a practical condition. By contrast, a suzerain-state system is one in which a single dominant state exercises overarching authority or supremacy over others—sometimes through formal imperial rule, other times through deeply asymmetrical dependencies. The Roman Empire's relations with its neighboring territories serve as a historical exemplary of such a system.¹⁸

Wight further observes that hegemony the predominance of one state over others—may exist within either type of system, but the difference lies in its durability and contestability. In a suzerain-state system, hegemonic power is permanent and structurally embedded, rendering challenges to its authority impractical or illegitimate. In contrast, within an international states system, hegemony is temporary, often contested, and liable to shift over time due to changes in power distribution or legitimacy claims.¹⁹ Thus, even in periods marked by a dominant power

¹⁴ Kenneth N. Waltz, **Theory of International Politics** (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), pp.60–61.

¹⁵ Morton A. Kaplan, **System and Process in International Politics** (New York: Wiley, 1957), p. 2

¹⁶ Raymond Aron, **Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations** (New York: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 6–7.

¹⁷ Wight, 1977; 23-25

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 32–33.

(such as the post-World War II American-led liberal order), the system remains international so long as sovereignty retains normative and operational relevance for all participating states. This distinction is analytically significant for understanding historical and contemporary configurations of international order. It allows scholars to differentiate between hierarchical and anarchic systems, and to assess the conditions under which state sovereignty is either preserved, diluted, or overridden by supranational or imperial authority.

Beyond the structural analysis of international systems, another critical conceptual framework in the study of international relations is that of the "international society," or "society of states." This concept refers to a group of states that, recognizing shared interests and values, consider themselves bound by a common set of rules governing their interactions and participate in shared institutions²⁰. The existence of an international society implies more than mere interaction; it involves a mutual recognition of legitimacy, responsibility, and normative obligations.

If modern states are considered part of an international society, it is because they adhere to normative principles in their conduct, such as respect for each other's sovereignty, the sanctity of treaties, and limitations on the use of force²¹. These norms are operationalized through institutional mechanisms, including international law, diplomatic practice, multilateral organizations, and even customary procedures relating to armed conflict.

Importantly, the concept of international society builds upon the notion of an international system but is not reducible to it. While an international system arises whenever states interact and influence each other's strategic calculations, an international society requires an additional layer of normative and institutional cohesion²². States may be embedded in a system of interaction without perceiving themselves as part of a shared normative order.

Historical examples illustrate this distinction. Prior to the nineteenth century, several non-European states—including the Ottoman Empire, China, Japan, Korea, and Siam—were integrated into the European-dominated international system through war, diplomacy, and commerce, yet were excluded from the European society of states. Their participation in

²⁰ Bull, 2002; 13.

²¹ Ibid., 13–15.

²² Barry Buzan, **From International System to International Society: Structural Realism and Regime Theory Meet the English School**, *International Organization* 47, no. 3 (1993): 327–352.

international politics was functional but not normative: they were active actors but not recognized as legitimate members of a shared moral or legal community.

The Ottoman Empire, for instance, engaged in wars, alliances, and diplomacy with European powers from the sixteenth century onward, functioning as part of the international system. However, for many centuries, both the Ottomans and the European powers denied the existence of common interests, refused to consider treaties as morally or legally binding, and adhered to separate institutional structures. It was not until the Treaty of Paris in 1856, concluding the Crimean War, that the Ottoman Empire was formally recognized as a member of European international society.²³ Arguably, full recognition within this normative order was not achieved until the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 which confirmed Turkish sovereignty under the new Turkish Republic.²⁴ This historical evolution underscores the distinction between systemic participation and societal inclusion in international relations. The society of states is thus not merely a descriptive feature of global politics but a normative structure with specific conditions for membership, shaped by evolving standards of legitimacy, reciprocity, and institutional engagement.

V) Objectives of International Relations

Having elaborated the conception of a system of states, and of a society of states, it is important to develop a certain understanding of the innate objectives that affect the form, the substance and the prospects that international order operates on. What is meant by international order? International order is described as a pattern or disposition of international activity that sustains those goals of society of states that are elementary, primary or universal.

A foundational aim commonly shared among modern states is the preservation of the international system itself and the continued existence of the society of states. Despite persistent divisions and conflicts among them, states have consistently maintained a collective belief in their primacy as the principal actors in global politics, as well as the principal holders of international rights and obligations. The society of states has actively sought to ensure the

²³ Treaty of Paris, 1856, in **British and Foreign State Papers**, vol. 46 (London: HMSO, 1856), 8–16.

²⁴ Treaty of Lausanne, 1923, in **League of Nations Treaty Series**, vol. 28 (Geneva: League of Nations, 1924), 11–119.

continuity of the state system as the prevailing and legitimate form of political organization both in practice and in principle.

This status, however, has been increasingly challenged by non-state actors, whose actions threaten to displace states from their central role in international affairs. Supra-state entities, such as the United Nations, represent one form of challenge by attempting to transcend or supersede state authority. Similarly, sub-state actors, operating within the confines of a particular state, and trans-state actors, which cut across national boundaries, also contest the privileged position traditionally held by states, thereby undermining their exclusive claim to rights and duties in the international arena.

A second key objective pertains to the maintenance of the independence and external sovereignty of individual states. Within the framework articulated in *The Concept of Order in World Politics*, states engage in the society of states with the expectation that their sovereignty will be recognized, particularly their supreme authority over internal affairs and territorial integrity. This recognition, however, comes with the reciprocal obligation to acknowledge the sovereignty of other states.

In practice, international society has tended to subordinate the sovereignty of individual states to the overarching goal of preserving the international system itself. This prioritization reflects the dominant influence of great powers, which often perceive themselves as custodians of international order. Consequently, the independence of specific states has historically been sacrificed in pursuit of systemic stability, often justified through principles such as "compensation" or "balance of power."²⁵ Similarly, great powers have at times promoted or acquiesced in arrangements that limit the sovereignty of smaller states—through mechanisms such as spheres of influence, buffer zones, or neutralized states—in the interest of maintaining broader systemic equilibrium.

A third fundamental objective of international society is the pursuit of peace. However, this does not refer to an idealized vision of universal or perpetual peace. Rather, it denotes the maintenance of peace in a more limited and practical sense: the general condition of non-violence among member states of the international society. This peace is expected to prevail as

²⁵ Bull, 2002; 13.

the normative baseline in inter-state relations, with recourse to war considered permissible only under exceptional circumstances and in accordance with widely accepted principles.

Crucially, peace in this conception is not regarded as an absolute value but rather as a subordinate goal. It is subordinate, first, to the preservation of the states system itself, for which war may be deemed a legitimate instrument; and second, to the safeguarding of the sovereignty and independence of individual states, which reserve the right to wage war in self-defense or in protection of other vital interests. This hierarchical positioning of peace is reflected in the commonly used phrase “peace and security,” notably enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations. In this context, “security” implies not only objective safety—freedom from actual threat—but also subjective safety—freedom from perceived or felt threat.²⁶

A fourth set of objectives aligns with what are often described as the universal goals of all forms of social organization: the minimization of violence resulting in death or physical harm, the upholding of agreements or promises, and the stabilization of property rights through established rules.²⁷ Within international society, states collaborate to maintain their exclusive control over the legitimate use of force, denying this right to other actors. At the same time, they acknowledge constraints on their own use of violence. At a minimum, this is manifested in the shared norm that diplomatic envoys and messengers must not be harmed, as such acts would undermine the possibility of communication.

Moreover, there is a broader normative framework within which the use of force is evaluated. States generally accept that war should only be undertaken for a just cause, or at least one that can be defended in terms of shared norms and legal principles. This reflects the enduring importance of moral and legal considerations in legitimizing the use of violence in international affairs.

VI) Paradoxical Nature of The International System

A comprehensive evaluation of these principal objectives reveals that the society of states functions within an ecosystem in which member political entities simultaneously pursue stability

²⁶ Ibid., 15

²⁷ Ibid., 16

and order on one end of the spectrum, while on the other, they are equally committed to safeguarding their sovereignty and preserving what may be termed their “spheres of vitality.”²⁸

This dual imperative underscores a fundamental contradiction at the heart of international affairs—a global landscape characterized by oscillations between peace and conflict, operating within a dynamic and spatially fluid environment, what may be termed as “dynamic spatial plane.”²⁹ In that sense, the inherently unstable nature of the international order compels states to continuously strive for equilibrium, lest they forfeit strategic ground amid the emergence of new opportunities to enhance their relative standing.

In *Leviathan* (1651), Thomas Hobbes described a world without overarching authority as a 'state of nature'—a condition of fear, insecurity, and constant competition. Translated into international relations theory, this condition is known as anarchy, where sovereign states coexist in a system with no global sovereign to enforce rules or mediate disputes. Realist scholars like Kenneth Waltz and Hans Morgenthau embraced this view, arguing that states are driven primarily by survival, self-interest, and the accumulation of power in an inherently uncertain environment. In such a system, trust is minimal, and cooperation—even on issues of shared concern—is structurally constrained.

²⁸ “**sphere of vitality**,” in the meaning that is used here, refers to a geographic or strategic area that a state or political actor considers essential not merely for its survival or security (as in a “vital interest”) but for its active development, growth, and flourishing—in political, economic, cultural, or ideological terms. In the study of international relations, the notion of a “sphere of vitality” echoes established ideas in strategic and developmental geopolitics, including Brzezinski’s “geostrategic pivots” (1997), Shambaugh’s analysis of China’s global engagement as a means of sustaining internal growth (2013), and the framing of China’s Belt and Road Initiative as a tool for economic integration and civilizational outreach (Swaine, 2015; Callahan, 2016). Such a sphere encompasses regions critical to a state’s developmental momentum, strategic access, and normative projection.

²⁹ “**dynamic spatial plane**,” employed as a conceptual framework that captures the constantly shifting geopolitical, economic, and strategic geography of the international system, shaped by changing alliances, technological infrastructures, environmental pressures, and patterns of conflict and cooperation; entailing: 1) a fluid geography of power, that is no longer fixed in traditional state centers or borders, shifts in economic hubs (e.g., rise of Asia), climate corridors (e.g., Arctic routes), and digital infrastructures (e.g., data cables, cyber nodes) create a dynamic spatial map; 2) non-territorial influence, traditionally focused on physical territory, also flowing through networks, supply chains, and information ecosystems, which operate on a non-contiguous spatial logic; 3) multi-scalar interaction, on global, regional, and local scales, e.g. a certain natural disaster in one part of the world, triggering migration to Europe, changing local politics there—thus reshaping the spatial field of diplomacy and security; 4) temporal dynamism, the “plane” being not just spatial but also temporal: hotspots shifting quickly (e.g., Ukraine, Pakistan-India, Iran, South China Sea and the like). See: Agnew, J. (1994). “The Territorial Trap: The Geographical Assumptions of International Relations Theory.” *Review of International Political Economy*, 1(1), 53–80. Also: Cowen, D., & Smith, N. (2009), “**After Geopolitics? From the Geopolitical Social to Geoeconomics.**” *Antipode*, 41(1), 22–48.

The inherently anarchic nature of international relations has been most prominently reflected in the recurring pattern of armed conflict among political entities throughout recorded history. Empirical estimates suggest that, over the course of the last 5,000 years of human civilization, only approximately 250 to 300 years have been devoid of warfare.³⁰ This stark reality lends strong credence to the argument that human history— particularly the society of states— is fundamentally characterized by war: either in the context of a) preparations for armed conflicts and engagements in hostilities, or b) by failed efforts to foresee and prevent them from going forward; or c) to live or subsequent efforts to recover from them.

Consequently, the discipline of International Relations (IR) has, in large measure, evolved as a study of war and peace. It concerns itself not only with the causes and consequences of military conflicts but also with failed attempts to prevent them. The prevalence of warfare has positioned military strategy, deterrence theory, and conflict resolution at the core of IR scholarship.

Despite this seemingly bleak historical pattern, data suggest a paradoxical trend: the long-term frequency and intensity of wars have shown a general decline, particularly since the end of the Second World War.³¹ This is evidenced by the relative reduction in inter-state wars, the proliferation of international norms surrounding conflict prevention, and the increasing institutionalization of global governance mechanisms aimed at maintaining peace and security.

However, this decline must be juxtaposed with the realities of the contemporary global landscape, which is marked by a troubling and sudden resurgence of violence and systemic instability. Recent years have witnessed the proliferation of regional wars, the escalation of nuclear brinkmanship, the intensification of proxy wars, and the widespread targeting of civilian populations. These trends are further compounded by the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage, large-scale forced displacement and demographic engineering, the uncontrolled spread of pandemics, and the accelerating degradation of the environment.

³⁰ Will and Ariel Durant, **The Lessons of History** (1968) – they discuss the frequency of war, but do not give this exact number. Same topic is also addressed in David Singer & Melvin Small **Correlates of War Project 1816-2016** (University of Michigan), providing an extensive dataset on interstate, intrastate, and extra-systemic wars since 1816; by Steven Pinker, **The Better Angels of Our Nature** (2011) who examines how peace is achieved in a critical approach; and, Max Roser, **Our World in Data**, documenting global battle deaths per year and so forth.

³¹ Steven Pinker, **The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined (2011)**; and Max Roser, **Our World in Data Project (2011)** University of Oxford Martin School, Institute for New Economic Thinking.

First of all, characterizing the recent developments in global affairs as merely "sudden" would constitute a superficial reading of the deeper structural dynamics underlying the international system. As previously argued, transformative shifts in international relations tend to follow protracted, tectonic trajectories rather than instantaneous ruptures. What may appear abrupt or unexpected at the surface level is, in fact, often the outcome of long-standing systemic pressures and accumulated contradictions within the prevailing global order.

VII) Search for A "Point of Equilibrium"

Contemporary world affairs increasingly reveal a multidimensional crisis marked by a clash of fundamental paradigms: between normative values and strategic self-interests, between entrenched ideological dogmas and pragmatic responses, and between inherited patterns of conformity and the imperatives of modernity. This evolving crisis not only signals the exhaustion of the existing international architecture but also underscores its structural inadequacies in offering effective and equitable solutions to the pressing challenges faced by both global populations and local communities.

In this context, the "international community"—or more precisely, the society of states—faces an urgent imperative to recalibrate its mechanisms of governance and cooperation in response to the complex, interdependent, and increasingly fragmented realities of the twenty-first century. The operational environment of international politics is characterized by a high degree of fluidity, while the repertoire of available instruments and capabilities is evolving at an unprecedented pace. As such, the current global conjuncture may be best understood as a critical inflection point—an historical juncture wherein dominant actors are compelled to engage in a contested redefinition of the normative principles and structural underpinnings of global order.

This ongoing transformation reflects a broader search for a renewed "point of equilibrium" in world politics, a theme which has been briefly introduced in earlier sections of this paper. Whether this equilibrium will be forged through cooperative adaptation or hegemonic assertion remains an open question—one that will shape the contours of international relations in the decades to come.

VIII) Concept of Power in International Relations

Within this context, the complexities of global affairs cannot be fully understood through abstract or moralistic frameworks. A realistic study of international relations builds on the enduring relevance of power politics, the primacy of the state, and the constraints imposed by an anarchic international structure. Accordingly, the study of international relations must center on the strategic calculations of sovereign states as they navigate a world characterized by insecurity and the perpetual possibility of conflict.

The study of power in international relations, despite a wealth of historical cases and theoretical studies, still poses certain setbacks in hypothesizing and measuring the behavioral patterns of international actors due to inaccessibility of certain information and lack of reliability of relevant data in the field. However, scholars have identified three main approaches that would provide a fairly potent and effective framework of assessing power as a key paradigm in studying international relations: a) resource and capabilities based power, b) control power -over other international actors, states as well as non-states, and, c) structuring power.³²

When assessing power in international relations, the concept of resources and capabilities refers to both tangible stocks and dynamic flows of material and industrial potential that can either be directly employed or rapidly transformed into military strength, standing for a point of actualized power. These underlying capacities are traditionally reflected in indicators such as the size, structure, and combat readiness of a nation's armed forces, the technological sophistication and operational effectiveness of its weapons systems, the average age and modernization level of its military equipment, and overall defense expenditure.³³

However, the effective exercise of power goes far beyond mere numerical strength. A country's geopolitical position—its proximity to contested regions, access to strategic maritime routes, and buffer zones—can significantly amplify or constrain its strategic leverage. Similarly, the physical geography of a state, including terrain characteristics, availability of natural harbors, road

³² Alan Ned Sabrosky, ed. **Polarity and War, 1985**; Jeffrey A. HART; Politics of Power and Polarity, "**Power and Polarity in the International System**," 25.

³³ For a broader discussion of elements, see; Strategic Studies Institute U.S. Army War College; **National Power: Theory of War and Strategy**, Vol.1, chptr 10; David Jablonsky, **National Power**, 2008.

networks, and transport infrastructure, plays a crucial role in shaping its ability to mobilize and sustain force projection.

In addition to conventional industrial indicators such as iron and steel production capacity, a state's technological base—particularly in electronic communications, digital infrastructure, and innovation ecosystems—has emerged as a key multiplier of power. Energy production and distribution capabilities, telecommunication systems, and the degree of cyber resilience also form critical components of a state's strategic readiness.

Furthermore, human capital—the educational level of the population, the strategic orientation of curricula, and the adaptability of the labor force to evolving technological and military demands—constitutes a foundational pillar of national capability. In recent years, financial capacity and fiscal agility, namely, the ability to marshal and direct monetary resources toward priority sectors—have gained prominence. This shift is especially evident in emerging fields such as naval modernization, missile and satellite launch systems, (armed) unmanned aerial vehicles, and artificial intelligence applications in warfare.

Finally, contemporary developments in military affairs have underscored the increasing salience of "power projection" the ability to deploy and exert influence with speed, precision, and strategic effect. In many recent cases, the effectiveness of power politics has hinged not merely on the quantitative dimensions of force but on the qualitative superiority of timing, tactical impact, and operational coherence. This evolution suggests a paradigm shift from measuring power in static terms toward evaluating its dynamic application in real-world strategic environments.

The application of force—whether through direct threats, coercive pressure, or more subtle forms of "persuasion" such as implied danger or the promise of benefits—remains a central mechanism in the realization and projection of power within the international system. The ability to influence behavior through fear or incentive is a fundamental dimension of strategic interaction among state and non-state actors alike.

In addition to the use of force, control over key strategic assets plays a crucial role in shaping global power dynamics. These assets include natural resources such as rare minerals and energy

reserves, control of maritime routes and critical supply chains, access to and distribution of culturally significant materials, essential consumer goods, and agricultural production. Influence is also exercised through the guardianship or occupation of religious sites that are held sacred by particular communities or institutions may derive symbolic authority and soft power from such custodianship. Beyond material and cultural assets, contemporary power projection increasingly involves more nuanced instruments. Technology and financial capital, for instance, function as instruments of soft power, enabling actors to shape preferences, build dependency, and ultimately exert control without overt coercion. These tools allow for the construction of asymmetrical relationships in which the actor with superior technological or financial capabilities can subtly dictate terms and limit the strategic autonomy of others.

Equally significant are the reactive dimensions of power—measures designed to counter or resist domination. Mechanisms such as economic sanctions, trade embargoes, or restrictions on access to international financial systems represent coercive tools often employed by powerful states or coalitions to discipline adversaries or influence their behavior. These punitive instruments, though seemingly defensive, can be as consequential in shaping outcomes as the initial acts of power projection themselves³⁴.

The concept of "structuring power" emerges within this broader discourse. It is a term developed by scholars of international relations to describe a particular mode of influence observed in the behavior of dominant international actors. Rather than relying solely on coercion or persuasion, structuring power refers to the capacity to shape the rules, norms, and institutional frameworks that govern international conduct. It is through such structural means—such as determining the terms of trade, defining the legitimacy of political regimes, or setting the global agenda on issues like security, climate, or development—that major powers embed their preferences within the very fabric of the international order.³⁵

IX) Concentration of Power

"Concentration of Power" emerges as a strong differentiating parameter in international affairs. Once "concentration" factor is taken as a strong measure of power in the international arena, it

³⁴ Theodore Moran, **Multinational Corporations and the Politics of Dependence: Copper in Chile**, Princeton University Press, 1974, 247-269.

³⁵ Hart, 1985, 30-31.

becomes important to clarify how "concentration" is measured. One method of measuring concentration is based on using "the standard of perfect equality."³⁶ In this approach, greater the departure of a given distribution of power from a distribution where the power of each actor in the given population of actors is identical, the more concentrated is power.³⁷ Moving along the lines of the same approach, other studies yield important outcomes where, using CON, data indicate higher levels of concentration and movements in the direction of higher levels, the tendency towards military conflicts weaken in the 20th Century as it is exactly the other way around in the 19th Century.

X) Polarity and Polarization in International Relations

The concepts of polarity and polarization are foundational to the study of International Relations (IR), providing essential frameworks for understanding the structure and dynamics of the international system. The global distribution of power remains a central concern in International Relations (IR). The concepts of polarity and polarization form core analytical frameworks within the discipline of International Relations (IR), providing scholars with essential tools to understand the structural configuration and strategic behavior of states in the international system. These constructs illuminate how power is distributed and how states align themselves in relation to dominant actors. Although the terms are sometimes used interchangeably in non-specialist discourse, they are analytically distinct. Polarity refers to the structure of the international system—specifically, the number and distribution of major power centers—whereas polarization captures the behavioral patterns of state alignment and bloc formation in response to that structure³⁸.

At the heart of both polarity and polarization lies the notion of power. In IR theory, power is not confined to material capabilities but includes military force, economic performance,

³⁶ Standard of Perfect Equality is a concept that is driven from Lorenz Curve with a slope of 1 where in a given universe of uses and sources, a percentage of use is associated exactly with the same percentage of source, thereby, the two falling completely on the line of perfect equality whose slope equals 1. However, if the goods are not distributed evenly, the Lorenz curve will deviate from the line of perfect equality, resulting in a belly-up or belly-down shape, indicating a certain concentration of uses in a given level of sources. In social sciences, this method serves as a basis for other approaches like the GINI index or The Schultz Coefficient. Regarding the measurement of "concentration," the Index of Concentration, CON, has been tested to capture various sensitivities more effectively as discussed in; James Lee Ray and J. David Singer, *Measuring The Concentration of Power in the International System*; Sociological Methods & Research, V.1, N.4., Sage Publications Inc., 1973; 421-433.

³⁷ Hart, *ibid.*, 31.

³⁸ Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, pp. 70–72.

technological innovation, demographic scale, and diplomatic influence³⁹. The conceptual and practical debates surrounding power constitute the epistemological foundation of polarity. A state is typically identified as a "pole" when it possesses a sufficient concentration of strategic resources to shape international outcomes and influence the preferences of other actors.⁴⁰

Such superiority is expressed through various indicators: extensive territorial control, large population size, advanced industrial and technological capacity, and privileged access to critical natural resources. States that achieve this level of strategic autonomy often transcend the role of powerful actors to become system-defining entities. They can institutionalize their interests, influence international norms, and construct durable frameworks of global governance.⁴¹

Polarity thus offers a macro-structural map of the distribution of material capabilities and informs the strategic calculus of states. A high degree of concentration can lead to structural stability, while a more diffuse configuration may induce competition and miscalculation. In this way, polarity conditions the international system, providing both constraints and opportunities for state action.⁴²

In contrast, polarization refers to the behavioral phenomenon whereby lesser powers align themselves with dominant poles, forming political, economic, or military blocs. Polarization is not merely a mechanical response to the distribution of capabilities; it reflects a complex interplay of ideological affinities, security dilemmas, institutional commitments, and economic interdependencies.⁴³ Alignments are institutionalized through formal alliances (e.g. NATO), intergovernmental organizations, trade regimes, and long-term basing agreements.⁴⁴

Unlike polarity, polarization is dynamic and relational. It captures the ways in which actors navigate systemic pressures, develop strategic partnerships, and embed themselves within hegemonic or counter-hegemonic structures.⁴⁵ Moreover, polarization is not limited to the global

³⁹ Nye, J. S. (2004). **Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics**. New York: PublicAffairs, pp. 1–3.

⁴⁰ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001). **The Tragedy of Great Power Politics**. New York: W.W. Norton, pp. 5–8.

⁴¹ Ikenberry, G. J. (2001). **After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars**. Princeton University Press, pp. 3–5.

⁴² Waltz, K. N. (1979). **Theory of International Politics**, pp. 72–77.

⁴³ Snyder, G. H. (1997). **Alliance Politics**. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 17–20.

⁴⁴ Lake, D. A. (2009). **Hierarchy in International Relations**. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 33–36.

⁴⁵ Buzan, B., & Wæver, O. (2003). **Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security**. Cambridge University Press, pp. 45–47.

level. Regional dynamics often mirror systemic patterns, as subordinate states become enmeshed in the competitive logic of global poles. In some cases, this generates dense patterns of integration; in others, it provokes rival blocks, proxy conflicts, or balancing behaviors.

Polarity and polarization, while conceptually distinct, are deeply interconnected. Polarity shapes the external environment in which polarization occurs, while the aggregate behavior of states—driven by polarization—can reinforce or alter existing power structures. A comprehensive understanding of international dynamics, therefore, requires an integrated approach that considers both the structure of the system and the agency of its constituent actors.

While the structural realism tradition emphasizes the enduring nature of anarchy in international relations, it also cautions against the tendency to view any given polarity configuration as inherently stabilizing.⁴⁶ For example, unipolarity does not preclude conflict; multipolarity does not ensure balance. Institutional mechanisms, diplomatic norms, and shared values may mitigate conflict, but from a realist perspective, they remain instrumental tools—subordinated to the pursuit of national interest.

Thus, the conduct of statecraft must be grounded in a realistic appraisal of systemic constraints, strategic rivalries, and material interests. While aspirations such as justice, global cooperation, and peace remain normatively significant, they cannot substitute for the enduring realities of power competition and security imperatives. Strategic calculations, informed by history, geography, and demography, continue to define the behavior of states within the international system.

In an era characterized by shifting alignments and the emergence of new centers of power, the concepts of polarity and polarization continue to serve as essential analytical tools for both academic inquiry and policy formulation. As the international system evolves toward an increasingly multipolar configuration, these frameworks offer critical insights into the trajectories of global order, the development of alliance structures, and the prospects for systemic transformation.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Waltz, K. N. (2000). "Structural Realism after the Cold War". *International Security*, 25(1), pp. 5–7.

⁴⁷ Acharya, A. (2014). *The End of American World Order*. Cambridge: Polity Press, pp. 18–22.

Rather than subscribing to idealistic or normative prescriptions, a realist-informed perspective underscores the need for empirically grounded strategies that emphasize continuity, strategic rivalry, and the contingent nature of international politics. Within this context, polarity functions as a structural map delineating the distribution of power across the system, while polarization captures the dynamic processes through which that map is navigated, contested, and reconfigured by state behavior.

Although analytically distinct, polarity and polarization are deeply interrelated and mutually constitutive. The structural configuration of power—polarity—conditions the strategic environment within which polarization unfolds. Conversely, patterns of polarization, through the aggregation of alignments and antagonisms, can serve to reinforce or destabilize prevailing polarity structures. A historical illustration of this dynamic can be found in the Cold War era, where a relatively stable bipolar structure produced enduring alignments. In contrast, the contemporary shift toward multipolarity is accompanied by more fragmented, overlapping, and fluid patterns of polarization.

Furthermore, while changes in the concentration of power at the global level reshape macro-level polar configurations, regional subsystems often reflect, refract, or even revise these global structures. This is particularly evident in cases where regional actors are embedded within broader strategic rivalries. The resulting multi-level systemic interactions challenge reductionist models of polarity and demand a more nuanced, layered understanding of both regional and global dynamics. These complexities will be examined in greater detail in the subsequent sections of this paper.

XI) Multipolarity and Multipolarization in International Relations

Gone is the era where international relations could be interpreted through simplified bipolar, unipolar or even non-polar models in rapidly transforming times. As discussed earlier, the foundational force shaping global politics continues to be the distribution of power among states where relative concentration of power, as defined by "polarity," determines both strategic behavior and systemic outcomes.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Waltz, Kenneth N. **Theory of International Politics**. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979, pp. 70–72

Multipolarity in the contemporary era is fundamentally linked to three intersecting dynamics. First, there has been a broad-based redistribution of global wealth, reducing the relative concentration of economic activity in the West (economic power). Second, more states—particularly from the Global South—have begun asserting themselves strategically and ideologically (ideological power). Third, the international system has become increasingly transactional, marked by bilateralism and strategic hedging rather than institutionalized multilateralism (diplomatic power).⁴⁹

Thus, viability of a multipolar system within the realm of international relations has emerged and remains to be a focal point of academic debate, policy analysis, and strategic discourse. Proponents of multipolarity argue that such a structure not only reflects the evolving distribution of power in the international system but also offers potential pathways toward a more equitable and representative global order.

One of the core arguments in favor of multipolarity lies in its potential to restore and maintain a balance of power. Unlike unipolar or bipolar systems, a multipolar order inherently limits the capacity of any single actor to dominate global affairs. This diffusion of power is theorized to reduce the incentives for unilateral behavior and hegemonic ambition, thereby decreasing the likelihood of major power wars. The checks and balances embedded in such a system may promote restraint and encourage negotiation, ultimately contributing to a more stable international environment. As Kenneth Waltz contends in structural realist theory, the balancing behavior of states in multipolar systems can deter aggressors and enhance systemic equilibrium, although the management of such balance becomes more complex with the increase in power poles.⁵⁰

Secondly, multipolarity is often associated with increased global representation. The rise of non-Western powers—most notably China, India, Brazil, and other actors from the Global South—signals a departure from the long-standing dominance of Western hegemony. In a multipolar world, these states are afforded greater voice and agency in shaping international norms, institutions, and agendas. This development enables a more pluralistic and inclusive form of

⁴⁹ Josep Borrell, **Multipolarity Without Multilateralism**, European Union External Action Service-EEAS, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/multipolarity-without-multilateralism_en#top 24.9.2023; last visited on July 8, 2025.

⁵⁰ Waltz, Kenneth N. **Theory of International Politics**. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979.

global governance, allowing for a broader articulation of diverse interests and values. The institutional diversification of global forums—such as the BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), or African Union (AU)—reflects this trend toward a more distributed form of international authority.⁵¹

A further advantage of a multipolar system lies in its support for regionalism and localized governance frameworks. In a world characterized by multiple "political centers of gravity", regional powers can assume leadership roles within their respective spheres. This may lead to the development of regional governance mechanisms that are more attuned to the cultural, political, and economic specificities of local contexts. For instance, the leadership of the European Union in Europe, ASEAN in Southeast Asia, or the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in Africa exemplifies how regional institutions can emerge and assume an operational and position thrive within a multipolar architecture. Such arrangements may enhance regional stability while contributing to the broader fabric of global order.⁵²

Lastly, multipolarity introduces greater flexibility in alliance formation and diplomatic engagement. Unlike the rigid bloc structures that characterized much of the Cold War's bipolarity, a multipolar world allows for more fluid and interest-driven coalitions. States are less bound by ideologically fixed alignments and more likely to engage in pragmatic, issue-specific partnerships. This enables more dynamic and adaptive forms of diplomacy, where shifting configurations of cooperation and competition reflect the evolving preferences and priorities of states. The rise of "minilateral" arrangements—such as the Quad, AUKUS, or the I2U2 Group—illustrates how flexible cooperation models can coexist and operate in a multipolar system without requiring the permanence or exclusivity of traditional alliances.⁵³

Taken together, these features suggest that multipolarity appears to present a viable and potentially desirable structure for organizing international relations in the 21st century. Its ability to balance power, promote inclusiveness, support regional initiatives, and enable diplomatic flexibility underscores its relevance in a fragmented yet interconnected world.

⁵¹ Acharya, Amitav. **The End of American World Order**. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014.

⁵² Hurrell, Andrew. "Regionalism in Theoretical Perspective." In **Regionalism and World Order**, edited by Andrew Gamble and Anthony Payne, London: Palgrave, 1996.

⁵³ Acharya, Amitav. *The End of American World Order*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014.

Yet, a significant dimension of contemporary multipolarity lies in the ideological realm, particularly the contestation of "universalism." Many newly emerging international actors, especially those in the Global South openly express growing skepticism toward the Western framing of human rights, democracy and development.⁵⁴

This critique is rooted in a historical experience where universal values were perceived as veiled instruments of cultural imperialism and geopolitical control. In rejecting the Western liberal order, many states are not only questioning specific norms but also the legitimacy of the actors that promote them. Ironically, this fragmentation occurs at a time when the need for global regulation is more urgent than ever. Transnational challenges—ranging from pandemics and climate change to trans-border crime and poverty eradication—require collective action. Yet, the ideological fragmentation of the global order rightly undermines the prospects for such cooperation, leading to a paradoxical situation in which multipolarity exacerbates the very problems it cannot solve.

The current phase of multipolarity represents more than a redistribution of economic power. It is a systemic transformation that encompasses shifts in strategic alignment, the revival of sovereignty as a political doctrine, and the erosion of normative consensus around global governance. While multipolarity might offer more actors "a seat at the global table," this framework alone does not necessarily foster a more inclusive or cooperative world order.

The growing plurality of values, norms, and interests that define the post-unipolar require more than just a certain "sitting arrangement" towards the establishment and nurturing of a collaborative and harmonious international order. As the global system transitions from unipolarity, the emergence of multiple power centers does not necessarily equate to effective, egalitarian and sustainable structures of global governance. On the contrary, the emerging centers of power contribute to a range of deep and often irreconcilable geopolitical, institutional, and ideological stances that complicate the viability of a truly functional multipolar world. Three interdependent dynamics—namely institutional fatigue, great power antagonism coupled with nationalism, and the intensification of regionalism—undermine the coherence and functionality of the multipolar system.

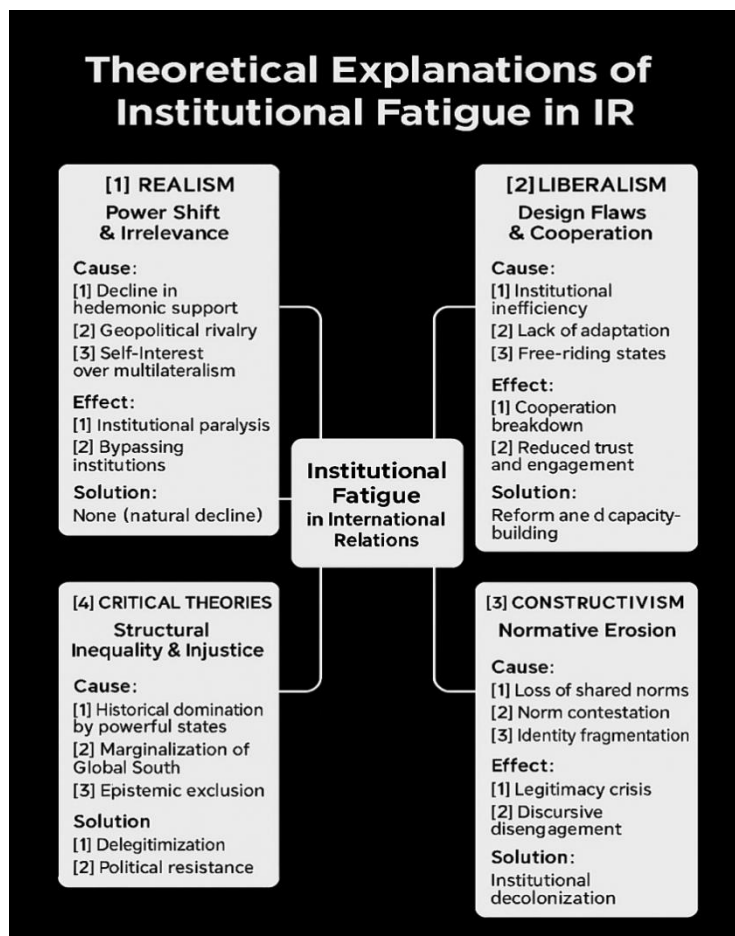
⁵⁴ Borrel, 2023.

XII. Institutional Fatigue

Among the three dynamics that are referred to here, institutional fatigue predominantly explain the wavering of the establishment of a truly multipolar system of world politics. Institutional fatigue is an important area of academic inquiry, defined and analyzed by different schools of thought to shed light on its impact on the substance and direction of flow in international relations. In essence, the concept of institutional fatigue in international relations is inherently multidimensional, entailing issues of power, legitimacy, cooperation, and identity.

Due to the multi-dimensional and complex nature of the phenomenon of institutional fatigue, a pluralistic approach would be more appropriate to employ in order to adequately capture its causes and consequences. This approach would not only facilitate a more accurate understanding of institutional fatigue but also would engage a broader engagement with competing explanations for institutional decline and the possibilities for renewal. Four principal traditions within International Relations (IR) theory, i.e. Realism, Liberal Institutionalism, Constructivism, and Critical Theories, each within its unique perspective, contribute distinct analytical lenses and ontological commitments that help to illuminate different attributes of institutional fatigue. (Figure 1)

Figure 1



Realist theory, particularly its structural or neorealist variant, approaches international institutions as derivatives of the underlying distribution of material power in an anarchic system. From this perspective, institutions reflect the strategic preferences of dominant states, "the hegemons" and hold little independent influence over state behavior. Institutional fatigue, therefore, is interpreted not as an internal failure of multilateral organizations, but as a rational outcome of shifting power dynamics. When institutions cease to serve the interests of powerful states, or when a redistribution of capabilities renders them obsolete, states are likely to disengage. The retreat, from time to time, of global powers from various multilateral platforms in favor of bilateral or unilateral strategies is viewed by realists as a pragmatic adjustment to changing power configurations rather than an institutional breakdown per se.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979, pp. 88–123.

Consequently, realism is generally skeptical of institutional reform, maintaining that institutional effectiveness is contingent upon the alignment of interests among major powers.⁵⁶

In contrast, Liberal Institutionalism offers a more optimistic account of institutional function and resilience. Rooted in rationalist assumptions, liberal theorists argue that institutions play a critical role in facilitating interstate cooperation by reducing transaction costs, increasing transparency, and promoting rule-based interaction. From this vantage point, institutional fatigue is primarily the result of design flaws, implementation failures, or an inability to adapt to emerging global challenges. When institutions become overly bureaucratic, inefficient, or politically unrepresentative, both states and publics begin to question their legitimacy and utility. However, liberal institutionalism maintains that institutional fatigue is not inevitable and can be reversed through reform, enhanced governance mechanisms, and broader inclusivity.⁵⁷ Trust-building, institutional learning, and the recalibration of mandates are emphasized as essential components of resilience and renewal.⁵⁸

Constructivist theory introduces an additional dimension to the analysis by emphasizing the social construction of international institutions through norms, identities, and shared meanings. Institutions, in this context, are not merely instrumental arrangements but also sites of normative interaction and identity formation. Institutional fatigue is therefore interpreted as a crisis of legitimacy and meaning—arising when the normative foundations of institutions erode and shared understandings among stakeholders’ fragments. Contemporary polarization around issues such as sovereignty, human rights, or environmental justice illustrates how the weakening of normative coherence can destabilize institutions like the United Nations or the World Health Organization. Constructivists argue that recovery is possible through normative reconstruction, discursive engagement, and the rearticulation of institutional purpose.⁵⁹ Renewal, from this perspective, requires reestablishing the shared values and collective identities that originally underpinned institutional legitimacy.

⁵⁶ John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security* 19, no. 3 1994: pp. 5–49.

⁵⁷ Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984, pp.75–110.

⁵⁸ Lisa L. Martin and Beth A. Simmons, "Theories and Empirical Studies of International Institutions," *International Organization* 52, no. 4 1998: pp. 729–57.

⁵⁹ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 247–278.

Finally, Critical Theories—including Marxist, neo-Gramscian, postcolonial, and Global South perspectives—offer a radical critique of the structural hierarchies embedded within the global institutional order. These approaches argue that institutional fatigue stems not merely from inefficiency or normative drift but from deeper patterns of historical inequality and epistemic injustice. International institutions, they contend, often operate as vehicles for the reproduction of Northern hegemony, systematically marginalizing voices from the Global South and perpetuating asymmetries in global governance. Institutional fatigue thus reflects a form of structural disillusionment, as historically excluded actors become increasingly disenchanted with institutions that fail to represent their interests or epistemologies. From this standpoint, meaningful renewal requires more than technique reform; it demands structural transformation—decolonization, democratization, and the empowerment of subaltern actors within the international system.

Taken together, these four theoretical approaches offer a comprehensive analytical architecture for understanding institutional fatigue. Realism directs attention to geopolitical shifts and the strategic recalibrations of powerful states; liberalism highlights design flaws, governance deficiencies, and the possibilities for procedural reform; constructivism focuses on the erosion of shared norms and the crisis of legitimacy; and critical theories expose the structural inequities and historical injustices that undermine the inclusivity and credibility of global governance. The adoption of this theoretical pluralism enables a more holistic understanding of institutional fatigue, not as a singular or linear process, but as a complex and contested phenomenon shaped by the interplay of material, functional, ideational, and historical forces. Such an integrative framework is essential for assessing both the constraints and possibilities for institutional fatigue.

XIII. IR Space, getting "crowded."

Entry to the scene of newly emerging actors, both of state and non-state nature who were originally established and nurtured under conditions of bipolar or unipolar dominance, the supranational institutions exhibit structural inertia and face persistent challenges in reforming governance frameworks to reflect the rise of new power centers.⁶⁰ As newer powers demand greater influence without corresponding structural accommodation, institutional paralysis ensues. Their failure to provide prompt and proper response to important transnational issues and crises

⁶⁰ Ikenberry, G. John. **After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars**. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, pp. 219–245.

in financial, environmental, social and political areas in the world gets critically questioned and leads to declining effectiveness and legitimacy of these institutions.

The resulting decision-making paralysis and perceived lack of legitimacy contributes significantly to the widespread dissatisfaction, particularly among emerging powers that seek greater voice and representation in global affairs.⁶¹ Supranational institutions, in this situation, face a significant degree of loss of confidence which is the single most important root-cause of institutional fatigue. As multilateral cooperation becomes more fragmented, institutional fatigue accelerates the erosion of global coordination mechanisms, reinforcing tendencies toward unilateralism and regionalism.

The reassertion of strategic rivalry among major powers, great power politics, has further strained the viability of multipolarity. Rather than facilitating balance and cooperative diplomacy, the multipolar setting has intensified zero-sum dynamics and strategic mistrust.⁶² Simultaneously, the global proliferation of nationalist ideologies has fostered a normative shift away from cosmopolitan and multilateral ideals. Nationalist governments increasingly prioritize sovereignty, transactional diplomacy, and bilateral agreements, thereby diminishing the appeal and effectiveness of collective governance frameworks.⁶³ In this environment, state behavior is shaped more by competitive geopolitical logics than by shared global norms, undermining the integrative function that multipolarity was theoretically expected to support.

As trust in global institutions declines and great power rivalries deepen, regionalism emerges as an alternative mechanism for order and influence. Economic, political, and security-oriented regional groupings—such as the European Union (EU), BRICS, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—are increasingly positioned as vehicles for strategic coordination and stability.⁶⁴ These formations offer states a more pragmatic and interest-aligned platform for cooperation; however, they also signify a retreat from universal governance to a more fragmented international architecture. The proliferation of regional blocs, while potentially stabilizing in localized contexts, contributes to the splintering of global governance and the rise

⁶¹ Keohane, Robert O. **After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy**. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984, pp. 135–169.

⁶² Mearsheimer, John J. **The Tragedy of Great Power Politics**. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001, pp. 4–10.

⁶³ Krasner, Stephen D. "Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy." Princeton University Press, 1999, pp. 116–142.

⁶⁴ Acharya, Amitav. **The End of American World Order**. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014, pp. 68–90.

of parallel institutional orders that are often incompatible or competitive in scope.⁶⁵ This regional turn further signals the systemic unraveling of a cohesive multipolar order.

Consequently, despite the emergence of a number of "centers of power" in the international arena, it is still difficult to describe world politics as operating in a properly constructed multipolar framework. Today, the number of states that are possessing a) huge asset holdings of physical, financial, industrial and military might, together with b) the will and the means to deploy their capacities in actualizing their policy objectives in various fields of international affairs is rapidly increasing. Yet, sheer presence of these political entities in the international arena is an important topic of debate whether the presence of these entities is sufficient to conclude that it is a multipolar world.

While material indicators explain much of the structural transformation, the "present-day multipolar order" is also characterized by the resurgence of sovereignty and national identity as dominant political claims. Particularly across the Global South, though internally diverse, there is a marked shift toward seeking alternatives to the Western political and economic model.

This shift does not necessarily amount to the formation of coherent anti-Western blocs. Rather, it manifests as a pragmatic openness to engaging with multiple global actors based on situational interests. Such transactional relationships suggest that multipolarity is not governed by ideological alliances but by short-term calculations of benefit and leverage. This further weakens the regulatory power of multilateral institutions which rely on shared norms and long-term institutional commitments.

Figure 2 provides a sample group of states, namely G7 countries and BRIC countries, listed with respect to certain, generally accepted indicators of power in international politics⁶⁶. The group of states in the list is quite restricted; yet, even a close analysis of this comparison reveals the level of diversity, fragmentation and variety among these states, let alone the rest of the emerging world, when it comes to determining what attributes actually qualifies a given state "a pole" in the system.

⁶⁵ Hurrell, Andrew. "Regionalism in Theoretical Perspective." In *Regionalism and Global Politics*, edited by Louise Fawcett and Andrew Hurrell, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 37–73.

⁶⁶ Tobias Bunde and Sophie Eisentraut, *Multipolarization*, Munich Security Report, February 2025, Munich, p. 16

Then two questions inevitably rise regarding the concept of "multipolarity" in practice:

Q1: Is this truly and properly a multipolar world today in all aspects of the concept of multipolarity, signifying structural situation?

Q2: Is it that international relations are in a motion, at this time in history, towards "multipolarization, a process that is still in progress and yet to be completed at some point in the future, if ever?"

What is clearly certain is that the international landscape is decisively transforming with the introduction of new and aspiring players in the Game, and, it is important to remember that as the game field is transforming, the rules of the game do not remain immune to change, either.

Understanding this evolving landscape requires moving beyond traditional structural paradigms to engage with more complex and decentralized models of power distribution. It also requires the appreciation of the often-opaque forces that shape public's perception of "centers of power," stated otherwise as "global powers." Going forward, economic indicators reveal a clear decline in the relative dominance of traditional super powers. In 1990, the G7 nations accounted for approximately 67% of global GDP; today, that figure has dropped below 40%. Over the same period, China's share of world GDP rose from 1.6% to nearly 8%.⁶⁷ Even within the G7, the United States' share has contracted less than those of Europe and Japan, retaining a relative advantage, though within a diminished Western Bloc.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Figure 2

Comparison of the G7 and BRICS across various (great-power) indicators

	Canada	France	Germany	Italy	Japan	UK	US	Brazil	China	India	Russia	South Africa
Democracy, scale 0–1	0.76	0.81	0.81	0.76	0.73	0.77	0.77	0.69	0.04	0.28	0.06	0.58
Rule of law, scale 0–1	0.8	0.72	0.83	0.66	0.79	0.78	0.7	0.5	0.47	0.5	0.43	0.56
Press freedom, scale 0–100	81.7	78.7	83.8	69.8	62.1	77.5	66.6	58.6	23.4	31.3	29.9	73.7
Perception of corruption, scale 0–100	76	71	78	56	73	71	69	36	42	39	26	41
Military spending, USD billions	27.2	61.3	66.8	35.5	50.2	74.9	916	22.9	296	83.6	109.5	2.8
Military spending, share of GDP, percent	1.3	2.1	1.5	1.6	1.2	2.3	3.2	1.1	1.7	2.4	5.9	0.7
Military spending per capita, USD	702	947	802	604	407	1,106	2,694	106	208	59	758	46
Number of active troops, thousands	67	204	181	161	247	144	1,326	367	2,035	1,476	1,100	69
Nuclear warheads, estimates	0	290	0	0	0	225	5,044	0	500	172	5,580	0
GDP, nominal, USD trillions	2.2	3.2	4.7	2.4	4.1	3.6	29.2	2.2	18.3	3.9	2.2	0.4
GDP, PPP, USD trillions	2.6	4.4	6.0	3.6	6.6	4.3	29.2	4.7	37.1	16	6.9	1
GDP per capita, nominal, USD thousands	53.8	48	55.5	40.2	32.8	52.4	86.6	10.3	13	2.7	14.9	6.3
GDP per capita, PPP, USD thousands	62.8	65.9	70.9	61	53	62.6	86.6	22.1	26.3	11.1	47.3	15.7
Global trade, percent of total	2.4	3.5	6.6	2.5	3.1	3.5	11.2	1.2	10.8	2.7	1.4	0.4
FDI net outflow, percent of GDP	3.9	1.3	1.8	1.3	4.3	1.9	1.6	1.2	1	0.4	0.5	-0.7
FDI net inflow, percent of GDP	2.2	0.3	0.4	1.8	0.5	-2.6	1.3	3	0.2	0.8	-0.5	0.9
General government gross debt, percent of GDP	106	112	62.7	137	251	102	121	87.6	90.1	83.1	19.9	75
Reserve currencies held by central banks, percent	2.74	20	20	20	5.82	4.97	57.4	<0.17	2.17	<0.17	<0.17	<0.17
Connectedness, scale 0–100	59	61	64	58	55	69	57	52	50	52	49	54
Innovation, scale 0–100	52.9	55.4	58.1	45.3	54.1	61	62.4	32.7	56.3	38.3	29.7	28.3
Research & development spending, percent of GDP	1.6	2.2	3.1	1.5	3.3	2.9	3.5	1.1	2.4	0.6	0.9	0.6
Critical technologies, number of top 5 positions	4	2	14	7	4	29	44	0	44	29	1	0
Unemployment rate, percent	6.2	7.3	3	7	2.5	4.3	4.1	7.2	5.1		2.6	33.7
Monetary poverty rate, percent of population	0.7	0.5	0.5	1.7		0.7	2	23.5	17	44	2	
Human development, scale 0–1	0.94	0.91	0.95	0.91	0.92	0.94	0.93	0.76	0.79	0.64	0.82	0.72
Economic inequality, scale 1–0	0.5	0.46	0.46	0.53	0.54	0.46	0.63	0.68	0.57	0.63	0.58	0.75
Gender equality, gender gap scale 0–1	0.76	0.78	0.81	0.7	0.66	0.79	0.75	0.72	0.68	0.64		0.79
Soft power, scale 0–100	64.4	67.3	69.8	62	70.6	71.8	78.8	48.8	71.2	49.8	57.7	43.7
Diplomacy, number of diplomatic missions	157	249	217	206	251	225	271	205	274	194	230	114
Humanitarian aid, percent of global spending	1.6	2	7.7	0.7	3.5	6	42.5	0	0		0	0
Share of students from abroad, percent	17.4	9.1	11.2	3.4	5.6	21.6	4.9	0.2	0.4	0.1	8.5	2.9
Number of universities in the top 200	8	5	20	3	5	25	55	1	13	0	1	1
Population, millions	39.3	66.4	84.5	59.5	124	68.7	344	211	1,423	1,438	145	63.2
Population growth rate, percent	1.22	0.17	0.35	-0.2	-0.5	0.7	0.58	0.41	-0.2	0.89	-0.3	1.32
Age dependency ratio, percent	53	62.6	58	57.1	69.9	57.8	53.9	44	44.7	47	51.8	48.4
Median age, years	40.3	41.8	45.1	47.5	49	39.8	38	33.9	39.1	28.1	39.5	28.2
Life expectancy, years	82.6	83.3	81.4	81.6	84.7	81.3	79.3	75.8	78	72	73.2	66.1
Happiness, scale 0–10	6.44	6.56	6.72	6.62	6.23	6.81	7.26	6.12	6.36	4.1	5.54	5.08



Data: Various sources, providing the latest comparable data (see endnotes). Illustration: Munich Security Conference

This trend can be further illustrated through the following indicators:

- ✓ In 2000, the G7 represented 72% of global GDP; by 2011, this had declined to 53%, according to IMF data⁶⁸
- ✓ Between 1980 and 2008, China's GDP per capita compared to the U.S. increased from 6% to 22%—levels comparable to Japan's economic positioning in the post-WWII era⁶⁹
- ✓ A decade ago, global attention centered on U.S. and EU monetary policy. Today, Chinese monetary policy is closely monitored in major financial hubs such as New York and London⁷⁰
- ✓ Developing and transitional countries (DTCs) saw their share of world output rise from 23% to 33% between 2000 and 2009, and from 40% to 50% using purchasing power parity (PPP), see Table 1
- ✓ South–South trade has intensified. In 1997, the ten largest Asian exporters (excluding Japan) sent 46% of their exports to the U.S., EU, and Japan. By 2009, this share had declined to 36%, with China becoming Brazil's leading trade partner⁷¹
- ✓ The euro has emerged as the second major global reserve currency, increasing its share of global reserves from 18% in 1999 to 27% in 2009, indicating growing European cohesion despite internal challenges⁷²

Together, these shifts signify not only a redistribution of economic power but also a relative weakening of the Western-centric global governance architecture.

Present day's multipolarity is increasingly understood as a structural reality driven by continuing shifts in the global distribution of economic and political power. However, the rise of multipolarity is not simply a quantitative rearrangement of material capabilities; it also entails profound changes in how states assert their sovereignty, pursue strategic autonomy, and contest the normative foundations of the existing international order.

⁶⁸ IMF. **World Economic Outlook Reports**, various years 2000–2011.

⁶⁹ Maddison, Angus. **Contours of the World Economy, 1–2030 AD: Essays in Macro-Economic History**. Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 190–193.

⁷⁰ Subramanian, Arvind. **Eclipse: Living in the Shadow of China's Economic Dominance**. Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2011, pp. 51–53.

⁷¹ European Central Bank. **The International Role of the Euro**. ECB, July 2010, pp. 9–11.

⁷² Naim, Moisés. **“Rogue Aid.”** *Foreign Policy*, no. 159, March/April 2007, pp. 95–96.

Table 1

Share of Developing and Transitional Countries in World Output, 1980–2009 (in percentages)					
World Output	1980	1990	2000	2005	2009
MKT	26	18	23	26	33
PPP	32	33	40	45	50

Source: World Bank, *World Development Indicators*.
Note: MKT refers to output converted at market exchange rates; PPP refers to output converted at purchasing power parity exchange rates.

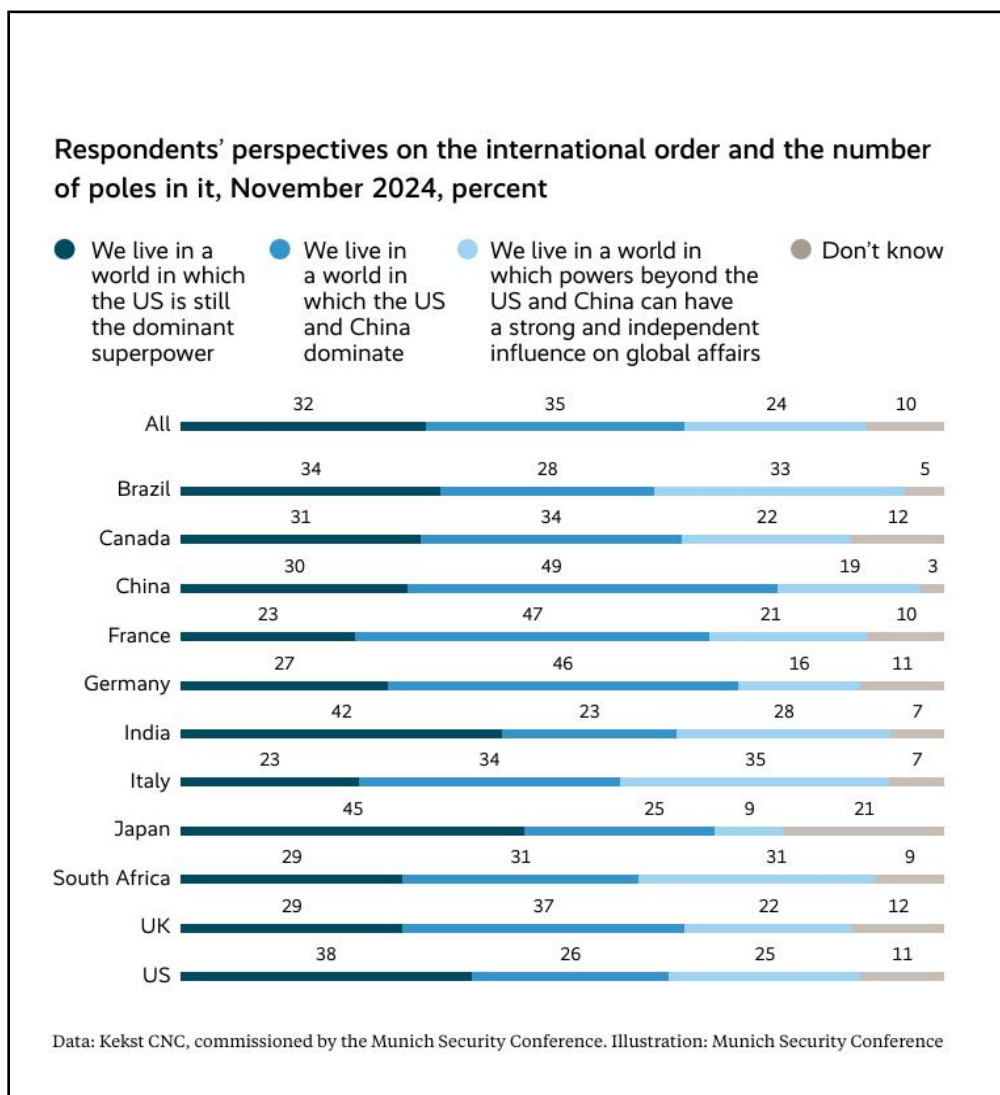
As seemingly objective criteria for assessing polarity do not provide clear-cut results, the most decisive criterion may be how many states are perceived as great powers by others.⁷³ While there exist no data on how political leaders assess polarity today, public perceptions mirror the different scholarly interpretations of today’s order. (Figure 3)

Among the respondents in 2025 Munich Security Index,⁷⁴ about one-third thinks that today, the US is still "the" dominant superpower; another third thinks the US and China dominate. About a quarter believe where powers beyond the US and China can have a strong and independent influence on global affairs. When asked about which countries are great powers, respondents converge on the US, China, and Russia, with an average of more than 80 percent of all respondents agreeing that these countries are great powers. (Figure 4)

⁷³ For a definition of “polarity” that emphasizes the perception of status, see Benjamin Zala, “**Polarity Analysis and Collective Perceptions of Power: The Need for a New Approach**,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 2:1 (2017), pp. 2–17, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogw025>.

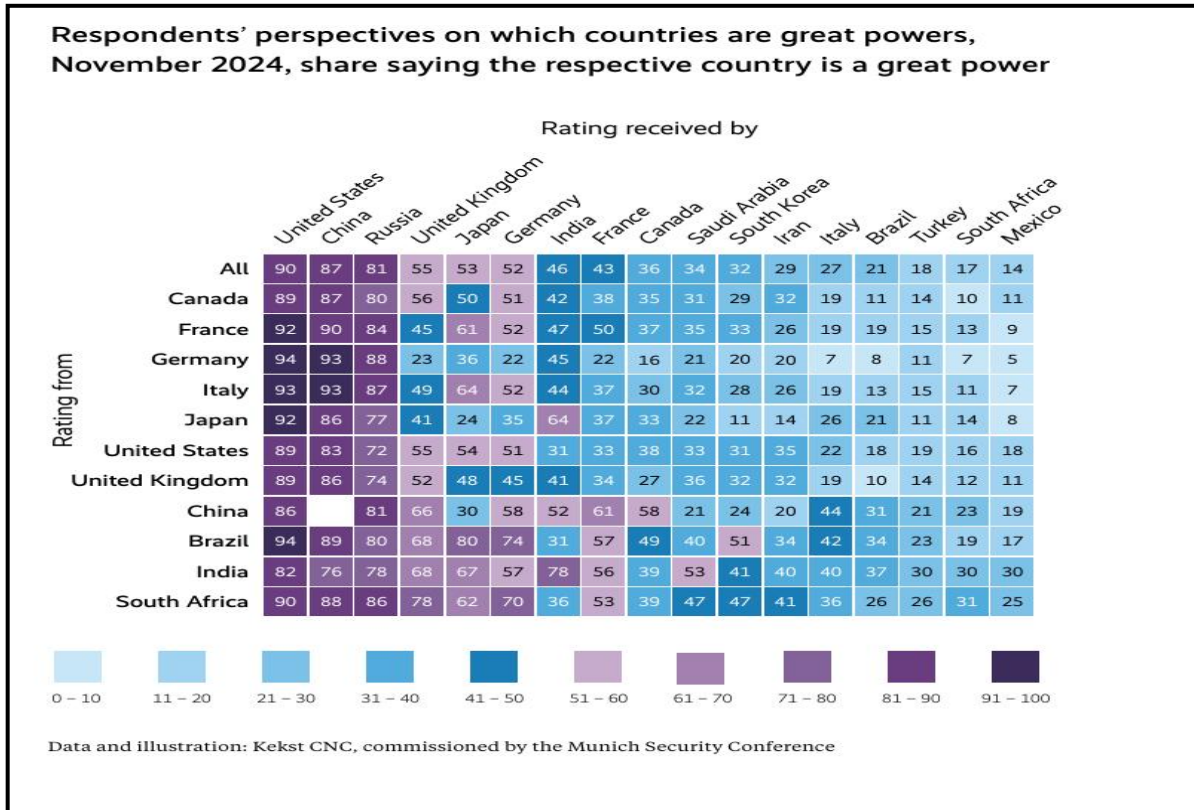
⁷⁴ For a detailed and thorough presentation of Munich Security Index, MSI, Munich Security Report, February 2025, pp. 32-53.

Figure 3



Given these responses and referring to the definition of "a political pole," new questions come to picture regarding the concept of "dominance." "A pole," by definition, denotes "self-sufficiency," "a self-standing structure," whose actions or position without necessarily being tied to or dependent on the position of "the others." This idea predicates in certain cases a position of indifference to "the others," the actions, expectations, needs, and intentions of other international actors in world politics. On the other hand, the idea of "dominance" implies a living relationship of "hegemony" by the dominant actor over the others. As such, it is not possible to talk about a position of dominance without the presence of "the dominated," inherently indicating a multi-player framework of policies and actions.

Figure 4



The questions here are:

Q3: Is it possible to talk about "a political pole" in international relations without talking about "a hegemon" together with the hegemonic relations between the hegemons and their respective followers in the field?

Q4: There has to be a limit to the number of "hegemons" with global capacities, operating in the international scene at a given point in time. What is the extent, limits of "polarity," optimum number of "poles" that international scene can afford to harbor?

This paper has sought to critically examine the concept of multipolarity by drawing upon historical trajectories, empirical indicators of power distribution, and observable patterns in

contemporary international affairs. The aim has been to assess the extent to which multipolarity accurately characterizes the current structure of world politics.

XIV. Polarization or Decentralization of Power in World Affairs

A review of historical developments and key shifts in global power dynamics, coupled with quantitative measures of national capabilities—such as economic output, military expenditures, and diplomatic reach—suggests that the present international system exhibits a highly fragmented and increasingly pluralized structure. This fragmentation has been intensified by the emergence of a wide array of state and non-state actors, each asserting their interests and aspirations across a broad range of global issue areas including climate change, digital governance, financial regulation, and regional security.⁷⁵

Within this complex architecture, one can identify a stratification of power among international actors. At the apex are a limited number of “global powers”—states that possess the economic, military, and institutional capacity, along with the political will, to influence, shape, or even restructure the ongoing transformations in the global order. The United States, China, and, to a lesser extent, the European Union and Russia, represent this category, given their expansive reach across multiple domains of international influence.

Beneath this tier lies a group of “strong powers,” which may lack global reach but nonetheless exert significant control within specific regional theatres. These actors—such as India, Brazil, Türkiye, and Indonesia—demonstrate robust capabilities that allow them to serve as pivotal powers in their respective regions, often influencing local security dynamics, trade regimes, and developmental initiatives.⁷⁶

A third category comprises “influential powers,” whose capacity to shape outcomes is more limited in material terms but is reinforced by historical legacies, demographic factors, natural resources, cultural ties, and geostrategic significance. Examples include Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and South Africa, which often assert regional influence through ideological appeal,

⁷⁵ Richard Haass, **The World: A Brief Introduction** (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), pp. 101–110.

⁷⁶ Andrew Hurrell, “**Regional Powers and the Emerging Multipolar Order,**” in *Global Power Shift*, ed. Chandra Chari (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 135–147.

religious or ethnic affiliations, or strategic geography rather than purely economic or military means.⁷⁷

The interplay among these various categories of actors has generated a highly interdependent and fluid international environment, wherein cooperation, competition, and contestation co-exist across different policy fields—ranging from technological innovation and energy security to military alliances and institutional reform. This dynamic interaction underscores the pluralization of influence rather than a coherent or consolidated polarity structure.

Nevertheless, despite this seemingly diversified and stratified global configuration, current empirical data and systemic analysis do not conclusively support the identification of a stable multipolar order in the classical sense. Multipolarity, as traditionally defined, implies a relatively balanced distribution of capabilities among three or more major powers capable of systemic influence.⁷⁸ Yet, the extant international system falls short of this threshold.

In fact, one might argue that the international order retains unipolar characteristics, with the United States continuing to function as the preeminent power, particularly in the military and technological domains, despite its relative decline from the heights of post-Cold War dominance. The persistence of U.S. primacy in global security arrangements, financial infrastructures (e.g., the dollar-based system), and innovation ecosystems reinforces this argument. However, this unipolarity is increasingly contested and diluted by the rise of competing centers of influence.⁷⁹

Accordingly, rather than a clearly defined unipolar or multipolar system, the current international landscape might be more accurately described as a fragmented and hybrid configuration, combining elements of asymmetric unipolarity, regional multipolarity and functional polycentrism across issue-specific domains.

Having noted this, the developments in international relations also indicate that certain states, e.g. China, to a certain extent, Russia are on the path, decisively making headway to becoming a "political pole" in international affairs. Should one or both of them, for example, realize their

⁷⁷ Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order*, 2nd ed. (Polity Press, 2018), pp. 65–88.

⁷⁸ Barry Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers: World Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (Polity Press, 2004), pp. 63–75.

⁷⁹ **RESPONSE to Q1 on page 36 of this paper**

goal of ascending to the position of a truly global power, this would fulfill the basic condition of "multipolarity" in world politics and mark the realization of one of the milestones of the on-going process of "multipolarization."⁸⁰

Nonetheless, the international conduct of these aspiring global powers reveals a dynamic that is not adequately captured by the static notion of a "pole" as a self-contained, autonomous entity. Instead, their modes of engagement reflect outward-oriented, interactive behaviors characterized by cooperation, competition, coercion and transactional bargaining with a wide range of other actors. Thus, it may be more analytically appropriate to conceive of them not strictly as poles, but rather as "global centers of influence"—entities that exert systemic gravitational pull through networks of hegemonic relationships and soft and hard power instruments.

The hegemonic character of these relationships is defined not only by their capacity to shape the behavior of subordinate actors, but also by the imperative to secure and preserve existing spheres of influence. Entry into the exclusive domain of hegemonic status, the "Club Hegemon" is not open or spontaneous. It is closely monitored and, when necessary, contested through a variety of mechanisms, including diplomatic maneuvering, economic containment, and, where deemed unavoidable, the application of military force⁸¹.

If, over time, these protective barriers are breached and additional actors attain sufficient hegemonic capabilities within their own geographic or functional domains, the international order may evolve toward a clear and true form of multipolarity. This would be an oligarchic structure composed of distinct hegemonic nodes. In such a configuration, each hegemon would assume responsibility for stabilizing and managing its respective sphere of influence. This structure would resemble the tri-partite "Yalta Regime" in the post-World War II period which laid the foundation for a clear and true bipolar global structure. Today, unlike the "Yalta Regime," a genuine multipolar configuration would logically require the existence of at least—and, at most—five relatively autonomous and equivalently influential powers.⁸² Without such a distribution, the notion of "multipolarity" would remain conceptually diluted and structurally non-existing.

⁸⁰ **RESPONSE to Q2 on page 36 of this paper**

⁸¹ **RESPONSE to Q4 on page 41 of this paper**

⁸² **RESPONSE to Q4 on page 42 of this paper**

Therefore, assessing the question of multipolarity and multipolarization, the term, Multipolarization is practically and conceptually better explains the nature of the world politics today and the level of interactions among the global powers as well as their dealings with their subordinates. Multipolarization refers to the ongoing process by which global power becomes more widely distributed among multiple centers of influence, rather than concentrated in a single hegemon or bipolar rivalry. While multipolarity describes the condition or structure of the international system characterized by the presence of three or more major powers with roughly comparable capabilities, multipolarization denotes the dynamic and often uneven transformation toward such a configuration. It encapsulates both a descriptive trend and a contested analytical category within international relations scholarship.

The process of multipolarization is multidimensional. It encompasses shifts in military capabilities, economic strength, technological innovation, and normative influence. Importantly, these shifts are not uniform; rather, they are characterized by asymmetric development across issue areas and regions. For instance, while China has emerged as a near-peer competitor to the United States in economic and technological terms, its global military projection remains more limited by a measure of capacity to project power on a global scale. Conversely, regional powers like Türkiye, Brazil, and South Africa have acquired increased influence within their respective geopolitical spheres without yet attaining global systemic status.

Multipolarization also involves an institutional dimension. As new power centers assert themselves, they increasingly seek representation and voice in global governance frameworks, often challenging the legitimacy and effectiveness of existing institutions like the United Nations Security Council or other supranational institutions. In this respect, multipolarization is not merely a reflection of shifting power balances, but a transformative process reshaping the architecture, agency, and dynamics of the international system. It is marked by diffusion, contestation, and reordering, underscoring the need for revised theoretical frameworks that move beyond traditional polarity analysis and account for complexity, fluidity, and heterogeneity in global affairs.

Q.5: If, in this case, multipolarity is not a practically relevant phenomenon in international relations today and Multipolarization relates more directly and strongly to the process of fragmentation and increasingly polycentric spread of power in international relations, what is the algorithm by which the power relations take shape, guided, directed in world politics?

Josep Borrel, the former high representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, noted in an op-ed piece in 2021, "The world today is becoming more multipolar and less multilateral. The challenge for (Europe) is to reconcile both dimensions, adapting to the new distribution of power, while working to mitigate the political fracturing of the world into competing poles. Multilateralism is above all a methodology designed to regulate world relations on stable, transparent principles that apply equally to all, regardless of their size."⁸³

Another author, Andrey Kortunov, the Academic Director of the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), in his article on Multilateralism (2024), makes reference "to supporters of political realism when they compare world politics to a chaotic collision of balls on a billiard table." Kortunov points out that there can be a lot of balls on that table, but they interact with each other mainly in bilateral and unilateral formats, without creating a stable multilateral system.⁸⁴

XV. Towards a New Multilateralism: Analogy of "The Billiardboard"

In this analogy of the billiard board, the world politics, without the billiard balls, global players of the polycentric space, it is not possible to talk about the existence of a multipolar system, even in its embryonic form. On the other hand, unless and if a co-ordinating framework steps in to monitor, regulate and guide the movements of the billiard balls, the individual international actors on the scene, it is equally impossible to talk about order, predictability, sustainability, stability and the like. Multilateralism, in its purest form, serves as the co-ordinating agent in international relations, expected to establish, maintain, develop and safeguard the "rules of the game" in international politics. Prof. Michael Staack of University of Armed Forces in Hamburg, takes the role of multilateralism in international relations a step further and describes it as the indispensable modus operandi of the world politics that are going through a period of multipolarization at the present./

⁸³ Borell, 2024.

⁸⁴ Andrey Kortunov, **International Multilateralism in a Non-Hegemonic World**, HORIZON, Winter 2024, pp. 20-21.

However, it is important to note that multilateralism, as it is, when applied in the field manifests a variety of structural and contextual characteristics. Present day's multilateralist model is a product of norms, rules, applications and actions of nearly five decades of historical background since WWII. Considering that a certain form of multilateralism existed during three decades of "bi-polarity" and during the period of "uni-polarity" that replaced for the following two decades, it is natural that the international actors, today, would vie for a renewed and new model of multilateralism to set in. Today, there are more players, international actors of state as well as non-state origin, in the field and new arrivals keep coming in every day.

As such, the old day multilateralism was operational mostly in the security matters between two blocks or in intra-block affairs, predominantly of economic origin. Coming to the present day needs, expectations and aspiration of the new international players, multilateralism must address a broad range of issues from economic democracy, poverty eradication works, environmental issues, transnational level demographic movements, international trade, intellectual property rights, cybersecurity matters in addition and beyond security issues.

This being the case, present day multilateralism is manifested in various operational and structural frameworks, exhibiting an extraordinarily versatile outlook with different character traits depending on the spirit of the times and of the emerging needs of the international community. Multilateralism takes place at the formal procedural level but also at the substantive and substantial level. Moreover, it may be rather quantitative, involving a participant group as large as possible, or manifest itself in qualitative terms, including mandatory standards or common procedures or values. Alternatively, it may occur in universal organizations (e.g., the UN), regional (e.g. EU or ASEAN) or sectoral (e.g., climate protection, arms control or trade policy) level.

Furthermore, multilateral cooperation can be exercised in exclusive clubs such as the G20, rendering the cooperation along a more comprehensive circle of participants possible in the first place.⁸⁵ Additionally, it can occur as a form or method of cooperation, as a policy tool or a foreign policy goal. It takes place through cooperation within global or regional institutions or consolidated cooperation among different circles of power. The multilateral forums influence the agenda setting of decisions and the outcome of the negotiations where multilateral diplomacy

⁸⁵ Fen Hampson, Paul Heinbecker: **The New Multilateralism of the Twenty-First Century**; Global Governance, 17, Nr. 3, 2011, p. 301.

signifies the core instrument in the current international system, while multilateral diplomacy functions as the core of the practice. Multilateralism in general is increasingly connected to ad hoc, transacted costs by means of relationships and experience. In addition, it is meant to tackle transnational problems to be resolved not multilateral efforts through cooperation or on a permanent basis. Multilateralism is a strategy to frame international relations in a “positive sum game” manner.⁸⁶

Analyzing and categorizing the above characteristics of present day multilateralism, Figure 5 presents a comparative list of various forms of multilateralism that have been applied international relations and continue to function as a fundamental "conceptual hinge"⁸⁷ in international flows of policies and actions. The distinctive part of this comparison is the inclusion of Conductive Multilateralism as a forward looking alternative approach in studying international affairs.

⁸⁶ Joseph Nye; **The Future of Power**, New York, 2021, p. XVI.

⁸⁷ A "**conceptual hinge**" refers to a critical conceptual device or analytical interface that enables the connection, transition, or synthesis between two or more policy positions and/or objectives, expressed in theoretical constructs, disciplinary approaches, or levels of analysis in international affairs. Much like a hinge in physical architecture that connects and allows movement between two otherwise separate parts, a conceptual hinge permits dialogue, mobility, or translation across conceptual domains. It serves a function Synthesis of Theories, Cross-Level Linkages, by offering an intermediary concept like “perception,” which links leaders' cognitive biases with broader systemic miscalculations, Operationalizing Abstract Constructs or Navigating Paradigm Tensions, by offering a mutual point of reference or compatibility. For example, “governance” may serve as a hinge between legalistic institutionalism and network-based theories of global order.

** "**Conductive Multilateralism**" is not yet a widely established term in international relations (IR) theory, but it can be interpreted or proposed as a normative or analytical concept, especially in contrast to dysfunctional or "performative" multilateralism. Conductive Multilateralism refers to a form of multilateral cooperation that actively facilitates effective coordination, inclusive participation, and problem-solving among diverse actors—state and non-state alike—in pursuit of shared global objectives. It emphasizes practical functionality over formalism, aiming to enable action rather than merely signify commitment.

Figure 5

Forms of Multilateralism		
Form of Multilateralism	Main Feature	Limitation
Formalistic Multilateralism	Treaty-based, institutional	Often slow, inflexible
Performative Multilateralism	Symbolic unity, diplomatic theater	Lacks enforcement, shallow cooperation
Exclusive/Club Multilateralism	G7-style elite coordination	Lacks legitimacy, breeds resentment
Conductive Multilateralism **	Actionable, inclusiv, effective	Requires political wil and compromise

XVI. An Alternative Institutional Model in International Relations: "CONDUCTIVE MULTILATERALISM"

Multilateralism, traditionally having been treated as an operating model, a given methodology in the formulation and implementation international politics must be conceived and recognized as an Institutional Framework in the future of world politics. There exist two corollaries in the institutional nature of multilateralism: a) "indivisibility:" the principles of multilateralism "logically entailing an indivisibility among the members of a collectivity with respect to the range of behavior in question," and, b) "diffuse reciprocity:" the expectation, applying when "the arrangement is expected to yield a rough equivalence of benefits in the aggregate and over time." Based on these pillars, multilateralism is regarded as "a highly demanding institutional form"⁸⁸ in the field.

There are certain conditions that have to be met, that will render acceptability and legitimacy to the new system before an alternative institutional structure is introduced to the international arena and before it starts enjoying gradual but steady pace of recognition by the stakeholders in

⁸⁸ John Gerard Ruggie (1993) "Multilateralism: The anatomy of an institution," in John Gerard Ruggie (ed.) Multilateralism Matters, pp. 10–12.

the field. In the case of Conductive Multilateralism, tool that this proposition must receive certain recognition by the international players and, therefore, meet certain structural and contextual criteria before it becomes operative in international relations in any effective and meaningful way. Following is a sample list of such criterion for discussion and development by the related parties in the professional and political field of world politics:

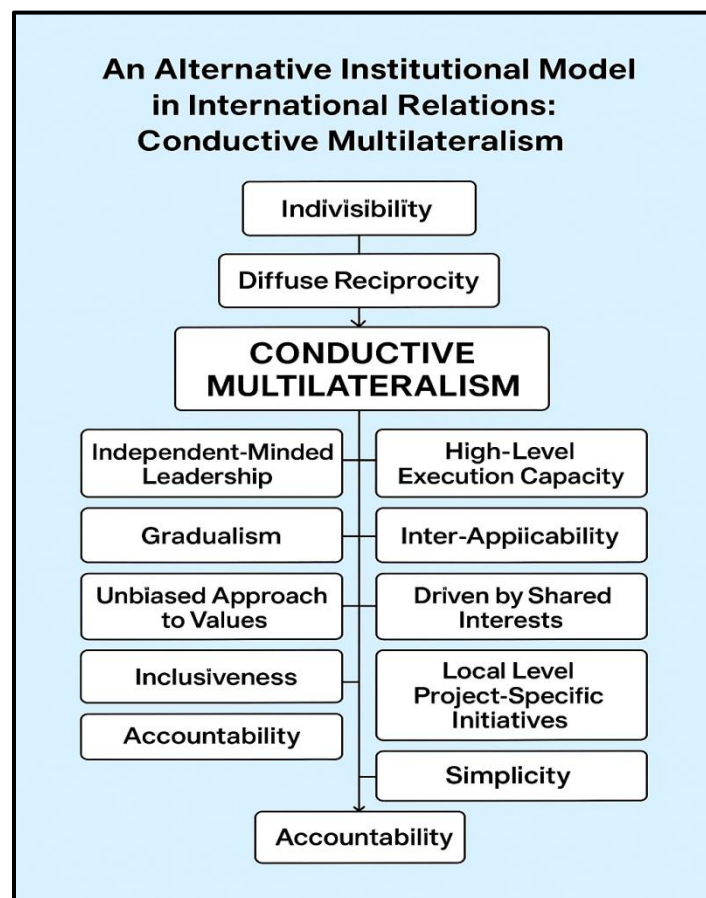
- **Independent-minded Leadership;** state leaders must be prepared to promote multilateralism without counting on the leadership of a multilateralist hegemon.⁸⁹
- **Gradualism;** Notwithstanding the actions of the forces of resistance to any alternative applications, the selective use of multilateralism, with a focus on the least toxic dimensions of international engagement would facilitate agreements faster and pave the way to higher levels of engagements.
- **Adoptability;** The “institutional fatigue” that plagues the system in the world today is unlikely to disappear in the near future. Voluntary commitments by States may become more practical than traditional legally binding international agreements requiring lengthy harmonization and ratification procedures.
- **High Level Execution Capacity;** Diplomats and experts must learn to use multilateral formats in the face of the relative weakness of international organizations and the erosion of international hierarchies.
- **Inter-applicability;** Given the deep interdependence of individual dimensions of world politics and economics, it is easy to predict that agreements in one area will inevitably affect the relations of the parties to such agreements in other spheres. It is likely that any future multilateral arrangements relating to international trade will have to automatically include environmental protection, social protection of the labor force, and foreign direct investment. Linking security and development issues will be even more challenging
- **Unbiased Approach to Values;** A new type of multilateralism should not see common values as a *sine qua non* for reaching agreements. The multilateralism of the twenty first century can only become universal if it is suitable for a world of value pluralism. At the same time, multilateralism should become a tool for overcoming the value conflicts that exist in the modern world. In other words, common values should not be the starting

⁸⁹ Kortunov, 2024, pp.38-42.

point in moving towards multilateralism, but the end point to which multilateralism can eventually lead.

- **Driven on shared interests;** A necessary and sufficient condition is only the coincidence of interests. Relations dominated by competition and even confrontation between powers, as well as those between non-state actors in global politics, should not prevent them from working together.

**Table 2:
Conductive Multilateralism Framework**



- **Inclusiveness;** Multilateralism should become as inclusive as possible—not so much in terms of the total number of participants, but in terms of the overall representativeness of multilateral formats. This applies primarily to the representation of States representing particular interest groups that are currently either underestimated or ignored altogether. After all, non-state actors—whether private companies, municipalities, regional

authorities, or non-profit organizations can no longer be seen as convenient tools that states can arbitrarily use to achieve their goals. These players form their own interests, priorities and values that differ from those operated by states.

- Emphasis on Local Level Project-specific Initiatives; If multilateral practices survive in the near future, they will survive primarily in the format of multilateralism ad hoc, or project specific multilateralism. Transparency, and excessive administrative costs, among other things. Global multilateralism should focus on a relatively small number of problems and challenges that cannot be addressed at the regional or national levels. Everything else should be delegated to structures and mechanisms that are closer to the problems and tasks to be addressed. Otherwise, global multilateral institutions will be blamed for problems for which others should be held responsible (for example, deepening socio-economic inequalities within individual countries).
- Simplicity; Another important feature of what might become the new multilateralism should be the general simplification of multilateral mechanisms, overcoming bureaucratic inertia, and combating duplication of functions both at the global and regional levels. The new multilateralism must ultimately eliminate tardiness, duplication of functions, isolation from ordinary people, lack of transparency and excessive administrative costs.
- Accountability; Survival and sustainability of the new system depends, in great part, the confidence it will generate with the stakeholders in the openness and the genuineness of the system. Transparency is of paramount importance in the rapid and sustained acceptance of it by as broad an array of participants in the system as physically possible. Accountability, in its real meaning, serves as the primary method to ensure such atmosphere of confidence and acceptance. There exist already a large body of techniques and technologies to apply genuine methods of accountability on a global scale, provided that the respective leadership structures provide the will to proceed with it.

XVII. CONCLUSION and Topics for Further Inquiry

Following is a summary of the main arguments in this paper that would serve as topics for further academic inquiry and policy analysis in the field of international relations. Presently, global politics are going through some peculiar times and the need to build a clear vision of future developments is deepening every day.

- The underlying concept of this paper is about "power" in international relations. It is about how it is distributed in the hands of various international players; how it is

concentrated in certain geographies; different types international players, taking on what elements of power that they possess and exercise.

➤ The paper argues that mere possession of power is only a "necessary condition" to be called a "power." At the heart of the concept of "power" lies 3 fundamental elements of power: distribution, projection, and operationalization in the global arena. Power is not merely about possession. It is about the capacity to mobilize resources, shape agendas, and influence outcomes. A state's or actor's classification as a "power" is contingent not only upon the tools it possesses but, on its ability, to exert influence effectively to achieve strategic objectives. Without this operational capacity, potential power remains latent. Unless a given international player has the capacity to deploy or deliver the instruments of power in his/her arsenal onto others to achieve one's respective policy objectives, one's potential to assume the role of an international power is limited to her power projection capabilities.

➤ Building on this central conceptual foundation, the paper notes that the current state of un-checked fragmentation in global politics poses a threat to the well-being of all peoples of the world. New entrants into the international scene, states as well as non-state players who demand their fair share of the value created and strive to assert their own political agenda in the functioning of international organizations, are further complicating implementation of otherwise available solutions to problems.

➤ As a result, increasing uncertainty dominates the geopolitical landscape, and a shared sense of strategic direction continues to be largely absent. International actors are seeking a new state of equilibrium, a new "point of equilibrium" one that can offer political, economic, and security visibility in a world defined by volatility and provide an atmosphere of relative calm and stability in the global scene.

➤ The institutional architecture designed in the mid-20th century to provide global confidence and crisis management is no longer fit for purpose. These structures, plagued by what this paper terms "institutional fatigue," are unable to respond effectively to today's multidimensional crises. This includes not only traditional nation-states but also

emerging non-state actors—cities, corporations, regional blocs, and issue-specific coalitions—who now demand a seat at the decision-making table.

➤ The paper notes at this point that there exist clearly not a group of powerful nations, much in the form of a multipolar world order or the clear and effective international regimes of bipolarity which was later followed by a period of unipolarity in the world in the post-WWII era.

➤ The need, therefore, persists that a collaborative, transparent and pragmatic new world order be established and embrace all actors in the field towards an open, expandable, confidence driving and wealth creating world order that will be based on justice and accountability of all.

➤ It was mentioned early in the paper that if the playfield of international politics is a billiard table, then the international actors would be the billiard balls. In this analogy, as also in the current international scene, there exist only one "8-ball" on the table, i.e. the U.S. It is a fact that the persistent structural dominance of this singular global power remains evident, forcing and shaping alignments, reactions, and strategic calculations across the board.

➤ On the other hand, there is a flip side of the coin, part of the global reality that is just as real as the existence of only one truly global power in world politics; that is the existence of several “centers of influence” that would compensate in world affairs for the often-lacking platforms of effective coordination, mutually assured confidence and credibility through which international players interact with each other in the international arena. These centers of power would include regional actors, cross-border coalitions, cities, public as well as private institutions of global outlook, non-state entities and the like that possess both the instruments, the capacities, capabilities, but most importantly, the willpower to influence outcomes, reshape cooperation, and reframe the strategic architecture of world politics.

➤ However, for these international players and those that would emerge anew in the future to have a strong position in and a clear impact on international affairs, a certain

conceptual framework along with its institutional posture must prevail. This framework would be essential as a counter-balancing force against a pole-centric construct in the international system or be instrumental in preventing the likely arising of an oligarchical power order in world affairs.

➤ It is important to note that the public's disillusionment with existing institutions stems not only from failure to act but from failure to explain, justify, and deliver. Transparency, real-time reporting, and equitable inclusion are foundational to any new governance initiative. Hence, it is critical that success and sustainability of any new operational framework would rest on its performance in achieving originally envisaged results and the level of accountability that is exhibited throughout its operations. These outcomes would also serve as powerful sources of the new system's legitimacy.

In sum, this paper has laid the groundwork for a new way of thinking about power, cooperation, and global responsibility. The paper also argued that as the strategic landscape continues to shift, so too must the architecture of international cooperation and outreach. As institutional fatigue deepens and public trust in the current supranational platforms erodes, global actors must reconsider the viability of performative diplomacy and switch to addressing real issue areas with an authentic attitude in its philosophical sense. A new system must embed real-time transparency, delivery tracking and equitable participation. Only then can it address the cynicism that has metastasized within both international institutions and the constituencies they claim to serve.

In a world where strategic conditions are volatile, alignments are temporary, and opportunities for collective action are brief and unpredictable, Conductive Multilateralism offers a model built for fluidity, fragmentation, and functional interdependence. It is a sober and pragmatic response to the realities of global multipolarization. This model recognizes that the playing field is fluid and temporary. It rests on transactional diplomacy where issue-based coalitions may be short-lived in relation to sector specific priorities and constantly shifting public demands. Its success depends on agility and institutional creativity which offers opportunities for new forms of international alignments that were unforeseeable or unpredictable under different circumstances before.

However, Conductive Multilateralism cannot and must not remain an abstract idea; it must build on a certain institutional framework, a matter that presents both a challenge and an opportunity. This entails operational rules, sustainable funding, and accountability mechanisms that make participation both meaningful and measurable. Without operational rules, durable mechanisms and accountability protocols, the idea would remain another virtual construct that would be occasionally referred to in the academic circles and remain vulnerable to crisis, inertia or to the next political shift. To function effectively, this model must evolve into a governance framework: flexible but stable, inclusive but purposeful and above all, credible in the eyes of the global public.

Q.6: All discussed and said, WHO, What Institutional Entity at what level of societal order can take on the implementation of Conductive Multilateralism with the material and organizational means to ensure proper workings of this Model on a global scale?

The key to actualizing a new world order based on a transformative understanding of international relations, the question of “who would (be responsible for) undertake(ing) the establishment and administration of the new Model?” must be responded clearly and unequivocally. The answer is: networks of local governments, NLGs.

Local governments, serving as the true “cradles of democracy, innovation and development” bear the full spectrum of capabilities, assets along with the mandate to initiate, form, implement, expand and advance successful cases of Conductive Multilateralism in the international arena. First, local governments enjoy the necessary grass-roots support, providing for them the necessary political backing to engage in multilateral networks of collaboration anywhere in the world. They have the capacity to undertake necessary organizations for such collaborative schemes as well as to take part in already existing organizations.

Second, local governments are at proximity to real problems in their respective communities as well as to the necessary resources to remedy these problems, to the solutions. Third, local governments operate at a scale, both in terms of territorial responsibilities as well as administrative responsibilities that enable them to capture emerging issues, analyze options,

formulate action positions and execute decisions in a timely and effective manner. As such, local governments possess a rapid response capacity to crisis situations as well as to emerging opportunities far more effectively than any national or supranational entity in the field. Moreover, local governments, to the extent that their policy propositions in their respective jurisdictions are scalable and transferable, provide a strong network of conductivity in the international arena more so than any other national or supranational agency. Finally, local governments operate at a level where high degree of accountability can be attained efficiently and effectively. Such accountability would lay the foundations of a new international order, contributing directly and significantly to the establishment and preservation of high levels of public trust and confidence in the workings of the proposed multilateral networks.

It is essential to recognize that Conductive Multilateralism would maintain a formidable level of relevance in international affairs through decisively and resolutely facing up to and aiming at revitalizing, reconfiguring and steadily developing new and innovative models of global cooperation. The Model would opt for effective coordination that would be grounded in shared interests, opening pathways for collaborative action even amid rivalry, making room for differentiated responsibilities based on capacity, proximity, or stake. In a time defined by rapidly shifting grounds and narrow windows of opportunity, Conductive Multilateralism must be designed to move fast, act decisively, and endure systemically in tackling the problems of the international community. That is the institutional task of our time, offering a credible path to a resilient, just and inclusive international order in the decades ahead.

Ultimately, the success of this framework rests on the willingness of the leadership suits of the international actors to assume not just reactive but constructive roles. With political will, strategic alignment, and institutional support, they can contribute to the emergence of a world marked by economic justice, pluralistic freedoms, and more equitable distributions of opportunity and security.

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