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The New Geopolitics of Global Power: Exploring the Transformation of International Order in an Era of Strategic Competition

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ABSTRACT

Since the end of the Cold War, the liberal international order has faced increasing challenges. Major powers, particularly the United States and China, are engaged in strategic competition that is reshaping trade, technology, security, alliances, and the institutions of global governance. The prevailing discussion, however, tends to center narrowly on military rivalry or great-power competition. This limited perspective overlooks the broader transformation of the international order through economic statecraft, technological rivalry, institutional contestation, regional alignments, sanctions, supply-chain restructuring, and diplomatic competition. Hence, this study investigates how strategic competition is transforming the distribution of power, patterns of alignment, and the functioning of the international order. It uses a qualitative, interpretive, and comparative documentary research design. Data sources include peer-reviewed academic publications, official policy documents, strategic doctrines, communiqués, reports of international institutions, and credible think-tank publications. Sources were selected through purposive sampling based on their credibility, diversity of perspectives, and direct relevance to the research questions. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis. The analysis identified five themes: power transition, strategic competition, and the erosion of uncontested unipolarity; economic statecraft, technological rivalry, and the securitization of interdependence; institutional contestation, selective multilateralism, and parallel institutions; regional realignment, security dilemmas, and the hedging strategies of middle powers; and normative competition and the formation of a fragmented and negotiated order. Together, these themes indicate that the international order is becoming more plural, fragmented, negotiated, and competitive, and that it cannot be adequately described as simply unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar. The study contributes to debates on global governance, international order, strategic autonomy, and the future of multilateral cooperation. It also provides a broader framework for understanding how major-power competition is changing the structures and practices of international politics.

Introduction

The international system is undergoing a major transformation. The years following the end of the Cold War were widely described as a "unipolar moment," characterized by the unparalleled military, economic, and institutional superiority of the United States and its role as the primary guarantor of an open international economy, multilateral institutions, and the diffusion of liberal norms (Krauthammer, 1991; Wohlforth, 1999). Over the past few decades, however, this condition of largely uncontested primacy has been increasingly challenged. Economic growth in Asia, the reassertion of Russian power, the growing global role of the European Union, and the rising influence of states such as India, Japan, Brazil, Türkiye, and the Gulf states have produced a more diffuse distribution of capabilities and influence (Acharya, 2018; Kupchan, 2012). Outcomes in trade, security, technology, and global governance are now shaped by several centers of power, although the depth and durability of this diffusion remain debated.

Strategic competition among the great powers once again plays a central role in world politics. Official strategic documents of several major states now describe their relations with rivals in explicitly competitive terms . Scholarly literature has likewise shifted from its post–Cold War focus on globalization and cooperative governance toward questions of rivalry, contestation, and order transition (Ikenberry, 2018; Mearsheimer, 2019). Understanding the nature and effects of this competition, and how it is restructuring the international order itself, is therefore a major task for International Relations scholarship.

A clear conceptual vocabulary is needed for this inquiry. In this study, international order is defined as the rules, institutions, norms, power relationships, and practices through which states manage cooperation, conflict, trade, security, and global governance (Bull, 1977; Ikenberry, 2011). The concept therefore includes both the material distribution of power and the social and institutional arrangements that give that power meaning and legitimacy. Strategic competition refers to sustained rivalry among major powers across several domains: military, economic, technological, diplomatic, institutional, and ideological. Strategic competition is not the same as open conflict. It is a long-term contest for advantage in which states try to shape the rules and institutions of the international system in their own favor while generally avoiding direct war .

The term global power transition must be treated with particular care. Power transition theory holds that instability is likely when the power of a rising state approaches that of the dominant state (Organski, 1958; Organski & Kugler, 1980; Gilpin, 1981). Applying this approach to the present does not imply that power has already shifted decisively from one country to another. The relative capabilities of the major states remain contested, and assessments differ according to domain, measurement, and analytical perspective, as do views on the direction of change . In this study, the term power transition therefore describes an ongoing and incomplete process rather than a completed shift. The contemporary international order is best understood as contested, uneven, and dynamically changing: some of its elements remain in place, others are being renegotiated, and still others are being challenged by alternative arrangements (Lake et al., 2021).

This process is highly political and contested. Competition between the United States and China is generally considered the most significant rivalry in contemporary international politics, spanning trade, technology, military posture, and influence within international institutions (Allison, 2017). Strategic competition is not, however, a purely bilateral matter. Russia is challenging the European security order, most visibly in Ukraine. The European Union seeks greater strategic and economic autonomy. India pursues a multi-aligned foreign policy that engages several partners at the same time. Japan is becoming more active in the security of the Indo-Pacific region. Other states, including middle powers and developing countries, also shape regional and global outcomes through their alignment decisions and diplomatic initiatives .

The arenas of competition have also widened. Rivalry now extends to trade policy and tariffs, artificial intelligence, semiconductors, energy security, critical minerals, maritime routes, cyber governance, sanctions regimes, and the reconfiguration of military alliances . Technological supply chains and standards have become strategic issues, as has access to the minerals and energy resources that underpin digital and green transitions. Economic interdependence, once widely regarded as a source of stability, is now increasingly viewed as a potential source of vulnerability and leverage. Farrell and Newman (2019) capture this dynamic in the concept of "weaponized interdependence."

Strategic competition is therefore not limited to military rivalry. It also encompasses economic statecraft through instruments such as sanctions, export controls, investment screening, and development finance (Blackwill & Harris, 2016). It includes competition for influence within international institutions and the construction of alternative institutional frameworks (Cooley & Nexon, 2020), as well as infrastructure diplomacy and connectivity projects that link states into competing economic networks . Competition over technological standards and digital governance will also shape how future technologies are regulated and used . Finally, narrative competition is a growing dimension, as states promote rival conceptions of legitimate order, development, and governance .

Recognizing these multiple dimensions is essential for understanding how strategic competition reshapes the international order rather than merely the balance of military power.

All of this places the current international order under strain. Shifts in relative power have raised doubts about the representativeness and legitimacy of institutions created in earlier eras (Acharya, 2018). Institutional gridlock has weakened the ability of multilateral institutions to respond to shared challenges, and geopolitical fragmentation threatens to divide the global economy and technological systems into rival spheres . These challenges are compounded by regional conflicts, a resurgence of economic nationalism, and declining confidence in multilateral institutions (Ikenberry, 2018). Together, they have prompted wide debate about whether the liberal international order is being reformed, replaced, or fragmented into several partial orders.

In this context, many states appear to prefer flexible approaches over rigid bloc politics. Strategic autonomy, hedging, issue-based coalitions, and selective alignment are concepts that explain how states cooperate with different partners in different domains, avoid exclusive commitments, and preserve freedom of maneuver (Kuik, 2008). These strategies aim to benefit from relations with several major powers while limiting exposure to their rivalry. Such dynamics, however, create significant uncertainty for global governance, international trade, climate cooperation, conflict prevention, and the development prospects of poorer states, which may face pressure to take sides or may find their shared concerns neglected amid escalating great-power rivalry .

Despite a growing body of literature, significant gaps remain. Much current scholarship focuses on military competition and the possibility of great-power war (Allison, 2017; Mearsheimer, 2019), on the bilateral dynamics of U.S.–China rivalry, or on whether the liberal international order is in decline (Ikenberry, 2018). These debates are valuable, but they tend to treat the transformation of order primarily as a function of relations among the strongest states. They pay less attention to how a wider range of actors interpret, negotiate, and respond to that transformation. They also often give more weight to the military dimension of geopolitics than to the economic, technological, institutional, and diplomatic arenas in which much contemporary competition takes place . A qualitative and interpretive analysis is therefore needed: one that captures how various actors, including major powers, middle powers, and developing states, perceive and respond to strategic competition, and that integrates economic, technological, institutional, diplomatic, and security dimensions within a single analytical framework.

To address this gap, the study pursues the following objectives. It examines key shifts in the contemporary international order and analyzes the impact of strategic competition on global power, alliances, international institutions, and governance. It also explores how major powers, middle powers, and developing states have responded to these changes, and it identifies the implications of geopolitical transformation for multilateralism, development, security, and international cooperation. Five research questions guide the study. First, how is the international order being transformed in an era of strategic competition? Second, how does strategic competition among major powers reshape the distribution of power, patterns of alignment, and the functioning of international institutions? Third, what role do economic statecraft, technological competition, and institutional contestation play in the transformation of international order? Fourth, how do middle powers and developing states interpret and respond to strategic competition, and what strategies do they use to protect their interests? Fifth, what are the implications of these transformations for multilateralism, global governance, development, and international security?

The study has significant theoretical, practical, and contextual value. Theoretically, it engages with major traditions in International Relations (IR). Realism focuses on the distribution of power, security competition, and the structural pressures of an anarchic system (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2019). Liberalism emphasizes the role of institutions, interdependence, and rules in reducing conflict and promoting cooperation (Keohane, 1984; Ikenberry, 2011). Constructivism focuses on the ideas, identities, norms, and narratives through which states interpret power and define legitimate order (Wendt, 1999). Power transition perspectives offer insight into the risks that arise when the distribution of capabilities changes (Organski & Kugler, 1980; Gilpin, 1981). By examining the interaction between material, institutional, and ideational dimensions, the study aims to offer a more holistic understanding of order transformation than any single perspective provides.

Practically, the study is relevant to policymakers who must navigate a highly competitive and uncertain environment. It is also relevant to international organizations seeking to remain effective and legitimate amid rivalry, and to regional organizations that may serve as alternative forums for cooperation. For developing countries, understanding these changes is vital for safeguarding development priorities, securing access to finance and technology, and avoiding entanglement in rivalries that do not serve their interests. Contextually, the study draws attention to how smaller and middle powers navigate strategic competition. Although these states are often treated as passive objects of great-power rivalry, their alignment choices, hedging strategies, and diplomatic initiatives can shape regional and global outcomes (Acharya, 2018; Kuik, 2008). By placing their agency at the center of the analysis, the study offers a more nuanced and complete account of the new geopolitics of global power and the changing international order.

Literature Review

International Order and Global Power

International order is a central concept in International Relations, yet it is used in varied and sometimes contradictory ways. In this study, international order refers to a relatively stable set of rules, institutions, norms, power relationships, and practices through which states organize cooperation, conflict, trade, security, and governance (Bull, 1977; Ikenberry, 2011). In Bull's classic formulation, order is an arrangement that sustains the elementary goals of the society of states, including survival, sovereignty, and the limitation of violence. More recent research has focused on how order is constructed through hegemonic leadership, institutional design, and shared expectations (Ikenberry, 2001; Hurrell, 2007).

Several closely related terms need to be distinguished. The international system refers to the structure of relations among states, particularly the distribution of material capabilities (Waltz, 1979). International order refers to the governing arrangements among states within that system. World order is a broader term that refers to arrangements among all of humankind, including non-state actors and transnational processes (Bull, 1977; Kissinger, 2014). Global governance refers to the formal and informal mechanisms, institutions, and regimes through which problems that cross national borders are collectively managed; it typically involves international organizations, private actors, and civil society as well as states (Zürn, 2018). These distinctions matter because a shift in the international system, such as a change in the distribution of power, does not necessarily produce a shift in the international order. The rules and institutions of an order may persist, adapt, or erode at different rates from changes in material power (Ikenberry, 2018).

Although it is broadly agreed that order is a product of power, institutions, norms, rules, and shared expectations, scholars emphasize these elements differently. Realist accounts stress that order reflects the interests and capabilities of dominant states (Gilpin, 1981; Mearsheimer, 2019). Liberal institutionalist explanations emphasize how institutions constrain powerful states, lower transaction costs, and lend legitimacy to rule-based order (Ikenberry, 2001; Keohane, 1984). English School and constructivist approaches highlight the importance of legitimacy and shared understandings in sustaining order without coercion (Hurrell, 2007; Wendt, 1999). The most convincing accounts treat these elements as intertwined: power shapes how institutions and norms are designed, while institutions and norms shape how power is exercised and accepted.

International order is also not fixed. Historical scholarship shows that orders have changed in multiple ways, including through major wars, negotiated settlements, institutional innovation, and gradual shifts in material and ideational power (Ikenberry, 2001; Buzan & Lawson, 2015). The “crisis” or “end” of the liberal international order is a subject of debate: some argue that ongoing shifts reflect adaptation within an existing order, while others believe they signal a more profound transformation (Ikenberry, 2018; Mearsheimer, 2019; Lake et al., 2021). This study treats order as a dynamic and contested process, which provides the conceptual basis for analyzing how strategic competition is restructuring it.

Power Transition and the Changing Distribution of Power

Debates about the contemporary distribution of power have produced different characterizations of the international system. After the end of the Cold War, many scholars described a unipolar world in which the United States enjoyed unprecedented dominance (Krauthammer, 1991; Wohlforth, 1999). More recent accounts point to a return of bipolarity centered on the United States and China (Tunsjø, 2018), to an emerging multipolarity with several major poles (Kupchan, 2012), or to hybrid and fragmented configurations that are neither clearly bipolar nor multipolar. The last perspective is reflected in Acharya's (2017) concept of a “multiplex” world order, in which several actors, including regional powers, institutions, and non-state actors, influence outcomes across different issue areas.

China's economic growth, military strength, technological innovation, and diplomatic influence are the most widely discussed drivers of change (Allison, 2017). Other emerging powers, such as India, Brazil, Indonesia, Türkiye, and the Gulf states, have also gained influence regionally and in specific issue areas (Stuenkel, 2016). Opinions differ, however, on the extent to which these trends signal American decline. Some scholars maintain that the United States retains significant and durable advantages in military strength, technological innovation, financial leverage, and alliance networks (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016; Beckley, 2018). Others stress the relative erosion of U.S. power and the growing constraints on its leadership (Acharya, 2018; Cooley & Nexon, 2020). Because of this disagreement, claims of a completed power shift should be treated with caution.

Part of the disagreement stems from different conceptions of power. Power may be understood in economic, military, technological, institutional, diplomatic, normative, or ideational terms (Nye, 2011; Strange, 1988). A state may be strong in some of these dimensions and weaker in others, which makes aggregate judgments about “who is rising” and “who is declining” highly sensitive

to the measures used (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016). Nye's (2004, 2011) work on soft and smart power also shows that attraction, legitimacy, and narrative are important forms of power beyond material capabilities.

Power transition theory has drawn particular attention to the dangers of periods in which a rising power approaches the capabilities of a dominant power (Organski & Kugler, 1980; Gilpin, 1981). Recent discussions have framed U.S.–China relations in terms of a "Thucydides Trap" (Allison, 2017). Critics argue, however, that power transitions do not necessarily result in war (Chan, 2008; Lemke, 2002). Outcomes depend on the satisfaction of rising powers with existing arrangements, the flexibility of institutions, the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons, and economic interdependence. Transitions may instead produce sustained competition, selective cooperation, bargaining over rules, institutional adaptation, or regional realignment (Kahler, 2013). This more open-ended perspective on power transition informs the present study.

Strategic Competition among Major Powers

Strategic competition between the United States and China is one of the central concerns of current scholarship and policy. Official strategic documents in both countries increasingly describe the relationship in competitive terms. The rivalry is portrayed as extending across a wide range of fields, including trade, technology, military posture, diplomatic influence, and competing visions of governance (Allison, 2017). Unlike the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, however, U.S.–China competition takes place amid high levels of economic interdependence. This makes separation more difficult and gives the competition a distinctive character (Farrell & Newman, 2019).

Competition takes place in various arenas. Trade friction and tariffs, a struggle over semiconductors and advanced computing, competition in artificial intelligence, and contests over cyber governance and data control are all prominent issues (Miller, 2022). Competition also extends to critical minerals and energy resources needed for digital and green transitions, to infrastructure and connectivity investments, to financial systems and payment networks, and to military capabilities, especially in the maritime domain (Medcalf, 2020). Much of this competition concerns the rules and standards that will govern emerging sectors, not merely material advantage.

Strategic competition is not, however, limited to two parties. Russia's challenge to the European security order has intensified competition between Russia and the United States and its European partners. The European Union has sought to enhance its economic security and strategic autonomy while balancing its relations with Washington and Beijing . India has adopted a multi-aligned policy, deepening ties with the United States and its allies while maintaining its relationship with Russia and participating in non-Western groupings . Japan has expanded its security role and has supported regional economic and infrastructure development . Other countries, such as the Gulf monarchies, Türkiye, Brazil, Indonesia, and South Africa, exercise significant influence at regional and issue-specific levels.

For these reasons, the literature cautions against representing the world as divided into two rigid blocs (Acharya, 2017). Alignments vary across issues: states may partner with one major power on security while strengthening economic relations with another. Many states do not want a binary choice, and even close allies of the United States maintain significant economic ties with China. Strategic competition is therefore better understood as a multi-layered and cross-cutting contest than as a two-sided conflict.

Institutions, Multilateralism, and Global Governance

Strategic competition has important implications for international institutions and global governance. The UN Security Council has faced divisions among its five permanent members, which have restricted its ability to respond to major crises . The World Trade Organization has struggled to advance negotiations and to keep its dispute-settlement function in working order . There have been longstanding calls to reform the governance of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank so that they better reflect the economic weight of emerging economies (Kahler, 2013; Stuenkel, 2016). The G7 and G20 have taken on significant coordinating functions, but their effectiveness and legitimacy are questioned amid geopolitical tensions .

Meanwhile, emerging powers have established or expanded alternative and parallel institutions. BRICS has evolved from an investment-related acronym into a diplomatic grouping that has created the New Development Bank and expanded its membership (Stuenkel, 2016). The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) are further forums in which non-Western powers play leading roles (Cooley & Nexon, 2020). Regional organizations such as the African Union and ASEAN seek to preserve regional autonomy and collective bargaining power amid great-power rivalry (Acharya, 2018).

Scholars explain these developments in different ways. One strand of literature focuses on institutional fragmentation, forum shopping, and "contested multilateralism," in which states create or use alternative institutions when existing ones do not serve

their interests (Morse & Keohane, 2014). A second strand emphasizes the resilience of the existing order, arguing that rising powers generally seek a greater role within existing institutions rather than their replacement (Kahler, 2013; Ikenberry, 2011). A third line of argument views parallel institutions as instruments of hedging and leverage that allow states both to engage with and to challenge existing structures (Stuenkel, 2016). Common to all these accounts is the recognition that the legitimacy of global governance is increasingly contested and that representation, voice, and authority have become key issues in the evolving international order (Zürn, 2018).

Alliances, Alignments, and Strategic Autonomy

Alliances remain a major component of international security. NATO and U.S. bilateral security partnerships, such as those with Asian allies, have long supported the security dimension of the post-1945 and post–Cold War orders (Ikenberry, 2011). Recent strategic competition has led to the strengthening of traditional alliances and the creation or revitalization of new partnerships. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) among the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, along with the AUKUS partnership among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, are examples of efforts to strengthen cooperation in the Indo-Pacific (Medcalf, 2020). Meanwhile, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and BRICS provide forms of cooperation that are not alliances in the traditional sense but serve as platforms for coordination among non-Western states .

Classic alliance theory offers several concepts for explaining how states respond to shifting power. Balancing involves countering a rising or threatening power, either by strengthening one's own capabilities internally or by forming alliances externally. Bandwagoning involves aligning with a stronger power (Walt, 1987; Schweller, 1994). Many states, however, adopt more ambiguous approaches. Hedging is a mix of cooperative and competitive policies that avoids explicit commitment to either side while preserving flexibility (Goh, 2005; Kuik, 2008). Multi-alignment and strategic autonomy refer to efforts to cultivate relations with several powers simultaneously and to retain independence in foreign policy decision-making .

The literature offers several reasons why many middle powers and developing states avoid permanent alignment with a single great power. Exclusive alignment carries risks, including the loss of economic opportunities, entanglement in conflicts, and reduced freedom of action (Kuik, 2008). Uncertainty about the future distribution of power and about whether great powers will honor their commitments also encourages caution (Goh, 2005). In addition, these choices are shaped by domestic political factors, historical experiences of colonialism and non-alignment, and the aim of securing the greatest benefit from competing offers . Hedging and multi-alignment are therefore widely regarded as rational responses to an uncertain and competitive environment. Some scholars warn, however, that intensifying rivalry may narrow the space for such strategies over time .

Economic Statecraft, Technology, and Geoeconomics

A growing body of literature shows that strategic competition is increasingly conducted through economic and technological means. The use of economic instruments to pursue foreign policy objectives, known as economic statecraft, is not new (Hirschman, 1945; Baldwin, 1985), but it has gained renewed prominence in the current era (Blackwill & Harris, 2016). Its instruments include sanctions, export controls, investment screening, supply-chain restrictions, industrial policy, infrastructure financing, and the setting of technological standards . These tools allow states to exert influence, protect strategic sectors, and constrain rivals without resorting to military force.

The politicization of trade, technology, energy, and critical minerals is a defining feature of contemporary geopolitics. Restrictions on advanced semiconductors and related equipment highlight the link between technological leadership, economic competitiveness, and military strength (Miller, 2022). Energy and critical minerals have likewise become strategic concerns, as states seek to secure and diversify supply chains for the energy transition and to limit their exposure to potential rivals . Infrastructure financing and connectivity initiatives are widely perceived as instruments of geopolitical influence as well as development projects .

The literature also highlights the double-edged nature of economic interdependence. Liberal theory has long held that interdependence raises the costs of conflict and increases the incentives for cooperation (Keohane & Nye, 1977). However, Farrell and Newman (2019) have shown that states controlling central nodes in global networks, such as financial systems, information flows, and supply chains, can exploit these positions for coercive purposes. Interdependence can therefore generate both cooperation and vulnerability (Drezner et al., 2021). Debates about “de-risking,” “decoupling,” and “friend-shoring” reflect efforts to manage this tension, but scholars disagree about the feasibility and costs of reducing interdependence .

Security Dilemmas, Regional Conflicts, and Geopolitical Risk

Strategic competition has important consequences for regional security. The concept of the security dilemma explains how a state's efforts to increase its own security can be perceived as threatening by other states, leading to countermeasures and spiraling tensions even when neither side intends aggression (Herz, 1950; Jervis, 1978). Arms competition, military modernization, and shifts in deterrence postures in several regions can be partly explained through this lens .

From a regional security complex perspective, security dynamics tend to be concentrated within regions but are also shaped by the involvement of global powers (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Maritime and territorial disputes, military modernization, and competing visions of regional order are key issues in the Indo-Pacific (Medcalf, 2020). In Europe, the war in Ukraine has transformed security debates and reaffirmed NATO's focus on collective defense . In the Middle East, regional rivalries intersect with the strategic interests of external powers . In Africa and Latin America, competition is expressed mainly through economic engagement, infrastructure investment, security assistance, and diplomatic outreach rather than direct military confrontation (Alden, 2007).

The literature also discusses risks associated with arms races, deterrence instability, cyber conflict, nuclear proliferation, and proxy competition . Regional conflicts can both reflect and intensify great-power rivalry. Global competition can influence regional conflicts by providing external support to local actors, while regional crises can harden great-power relations and reduce the prospects for cooperation (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). These dynamics suggest that the transformation of international order cannot be analyzed from a global perspective alone; it must also be examined through its regional manifestations.

The Agency of Developing Countries and Middle Powers

Traditional literature on international order has often treated developing countries and smaller states as passive objects of great-power competition. A growing body of scholarship challenges this view by emphasizing the agency of middle powers and developing states (Acharya, 2018; Jordaan, 2003). Middle powers have been defined by their material capabilities, their diplomatic behavior (e.g., coalition-building and mediation), and their identity and role conceptions (Cooper et al., 1993; Jordaan, 2003). Developing states, although often less powerful materially, also pursue active strategies to advance their interests .

These strategies include strategic autonomy, diversified partnerships, the pursuit of development finance and infrastructure investment from multiple sources, and diplomatic balancing among competing powers (Alden, 2007). Regional organizations and coalitions of developing states also provide platforms for collective bargaining and a stronger voice in global governance (Acharya, 2018). Strategic competition may therefore enhance the bargaining power of some developing states, which can use competing offers of trade, investment, security assistance, technology, and development finance to negotiate better terms .

The literature also identifies important risks. Competing offers may come with political conditions, debt burdens, or expectations of alignment . Developing states may face pressure to choose between rival technological systems, standards, and security partners. Rivalry may also divert attention and resources from shared challenges such as climate change, public health, and development financing . Developing countries are therefore active but constrained actors, whose agency is shaped by their material capabilities, domestic politics, regional environments, and the intensity of great-power competition.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on four major theoretical traditions in IR: realism, liberalism, constructivism, and the English School. Each highlights a different aspect of the transformation of international order.

From a realist perspective, strategic competition is primarily about the distribution of power, the pursuit of security in an anarchic environment, and the competitive pressures states face (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). Realist perspectives help explain why shifts in relative power generate rivalry, why states balance against potential threats, and how security dilemmas can escalate (Jervis, 1978). Power transition theory shares realism's emphasis on material power but also highlights the dangers associated with changes in the hierarchy of states (Organski & Kugler, 1980; Gilpin, 1981).

Liberalism emphasizes institutions, interdependence, and cooperation. Liberal institutionalists argue that institutions can promote cooperation even among rivals because they reduce uncertainty, provide information, and establish shared rules of behavior (Keohane, 1984). Liberal perspectives help explain why international institutions persist and adapt, and why economic interdependence matters (Keohane & Nye, 1977; Ikenberry, 2011). Recent scholarship also shows how liberal mechanisms, such as networks of interdependence, can be weaponized for competition (Farrell & Newman, 2019).

Constructivism emphasizes the influence of identities, norms, ideas, and threat perceptions on international politics. From this perspective, rivalry cannot be reduced to material power; it is socially constructed through the identities states adopt and the ways they interpret one another's intentions (Wendt, 1992, 1999). Constructivist approaches help explain how strategic narratives, norm contestation, and competing visions of legitimate order shape state behavior (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

The English School conceptualizes international relations in terms of an international society of states bound by common rules, institutions, and values (Bull, 1977). It is particularly useful for understanding order, legitimacy, and the institutions of international society, including sovereignty, diplomacy, international law, and great-power management (Buzan & Lawson, 2015; Hurrell, 2007). From this vantage point, the study examines contestation over rules and legitimacy and analyzes how such contestation affects the transformation of international order.

Combining these four perspectives enables the study to analyze the material, institutional, and ideational dimensions of order transformation together rather than privileging any single perspective. Because the study is concerned with how actors interpret, narrate, and respond to strategic competition, an interpretive qualitative approach is appropriate. Qualitative documentary analysis allows detailed examination of strategic doctrines, official statements, institutional reports, and scholarly debates. It helps the study identify how different actors construct ideas of power, security, legitimacy, and order (Klotz & Prakash, 2008; Milliken, 1999).

Research Gap

The literature reviewed here on international order, power transition, strategic rivalry, institutions, alliances, geoeconomics, regional security, and middle-power agency offers valuable insights. Major gaps nonetheless remain. First, much existing scholarship emphasizes military competition and the danger of great-power war, viewing the transformation of order primarily in terms of the military balance (Allison, 2017; Mearsheimer, 2019). Second, much of the literature focuses on the bilateral dynamics of U.S.–China rivalry rather than on how other major powers, middle powers, and developing states shape and respond to the emerging order (Acharya, 2018). Third, debates about the liberal international order often focus on whether it will survive, paying less attention to how new arrangements are being negotiated across multiple domains (Ikenberry, 2018; Lake et al., 2021). Fourth, economic, technological, institutional, diplomatic, and security dimensions are often studied separately rather than as interrelated arenas of competition.

The present study aims to fill these gaps by examining the transformation of international order through a multidimensional qualitative analysis of strategic competition. Through interpretive documentary analysis of scholarly literature, official strategy documents, communiqués, institutional reports, and credible think-tank publications, it explores how multiple actors perceive, negotiate, and respond to changes in global power, alignments, and governance.

The literature review is directly linked to the study's research questions. Scholarship on international order and power transition informs the first question, on how the international order is being transformed in an era of strategic competition. Literature on strategic competition, institutions, and alliances informs the second question, on how major-power rivalry reshapes the distribution of power, patterns of alignment, and the functioning of international institutions. Work on economic statecraft, technology, and geoeconomics shapes the third question, on how economic, technological, and institutional competition contributes to order transformation. Research on hedging, strategic autonomy, and the agency of middle powers and developing states informs the fourth question, on how these actors interpret and respond to strategic competition. Finally, debates on multilateralism, global governance, and regional security underpin the fifth question, on the implications of these transformations for multilateralism, development, and international security. In this way, the literature review provides both the conceptual foundation and the analytical perspective for the documentary analysis that follows.



Research Methodology

Research Philosophy

This study adopted an interpretivist research philosophy. Interpretivism holds that social and political reality is not simply an objective structure to be measured; it is constructed and reproduced by actors who give meaning to events, relationships, and institutions (Klotz & Prakash, 2008). In International Relations, many concepts, such as power, security, threat, legitimacy, cooperation, and order, are not fixed. They are constructed and contested by states, institutions, and strategic actors through doctrines, speeches, policies, and practices (Wendt, 1999; Milliken, 1999).

The study sought to understand how these actors construct meaning around power, security, cooperation, legitimacy, and international order in an era of strategic competition. Because geopolitical transformation involves both measurable changes in capabilities and the ways in which these changes are perceived, narrated, and acted upon, an interpretivist philosophy is appropriate. The same development, such as the rise of a new power, may be seen as a threat by some actors and as an opportunity by others. These interpretations, in turn, influence policy decisions and institutional outcomes. Interpretivism allowed the study to take account of these meanings and their implications.

Research Approach and Design

This study adopted a qualitative, exploratory, interpretive, and comparative approach. It is exploratory because the transformation of international order is an ongoing and incompletely understood phenomenon. It is interpretive because it focuses on meanings and narratives. It is comparative because it examines and contrasts the views and responses of various actors, including major powers, middle powers, developing states, and international institutions.

Rather than experiments or surveys, the study used qualitative document analysis. Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating printed and electronic documents in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009). Surveys of policymakers would have been difficult to administer across multiple states and institutions and would not have captured the depth of strategic reasoning reflected in official documents. Experimental designs are unsuitable for studying macro-level political processes that cannot be manipulated or isolated.

This design enabled a detailed analysis of strategic narratives, policy documents, institutional practices, and competing interpretations of international order. Official strategies, summit communiqués, and institutional reports are deliberate statements of how actors perceive their environment and justify their decisions (Prior, 2003). Comparing these documents across actors and over time made it possible to identify convergences, divergences, and changes in how strategic competition and international order are conceived. The study's research questions, which concern how order is being transformed, how actors understand and respond to competition, and what this implies for multilateralism and global governance, are therefore well suited to qualitative document analysis.

Units of Analysis

The study analyzed four interconnected units of analysis. The first comprised the major powers, notably the United States and China, whose rivalry is widely considered the defining feature of contemporary strategic competition. The second comprised other influential actors, including Russia, the European Union, India, Japan, and selected middle powers. The third comprised international and regional institutions, including the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the G7, the G20, BRICS, ASEAN, the African Union, NATO, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. The fourth comprised the documents in which these actors articulate their positions: policy documents, strategic doctrines, official statements, communiqués, and credible institutional reports.

Data Sources

The study used multiple types of qualitative data. These included peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and edited volumes by recognized International Relations scholars, which provided theoretical and analytical perspectives. Primary sources included official government strategy documents and national security strategies, foreign-policy speeches and ministerial statements, and communiqués and declarations from international summits. Institutional sources included reports from the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and regional organizations. Reports from credible research institutions and think tanks provided policy-oriented analysis. Reputable international news analysis was used only as supplementary contextual evidence, for example to establish the timing and context of events, and not as a basis for analytical claims.

Sampling Strategy

The study used purposive sampling to select information-rich and relevant documents (Patton, 2015). Documents were selected using five criteria: (a) direct relevance to strategic competition and the transformation of international order; (b) credibility and institutional authority of the source; (c) representation of different actors and regions, to avoid privileging any single perspective; (d) time relevance to the study's research questions; and (e) availability in English or in credible translation.

Snowball sampling was also used to identify further relevant documents cited in key sources, such as strategy documents cited in scholarly analyses or reports cited in institutional publications. The documents were selected to allow depth of analysis while ensuring an adequate spread of actors, regions, and document types. The final number was guided by thematic saturation: document selection continued until additional documents yielded little new analytical insight relevant to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Documents were included if they directly addressed international order, strategic competition, global governance, security, trade, technology, alliances, or geopolitical realignment. They had to originate from credible governments, international organizations, peer-reviewed journals, academic publishers, or established research organizations, and be available in English or in reliable translation.

Documents were excluded if they were blogs, anonymous websites, unverified social-media posts, or sources without identifiable authorship or editorial oversight. Materials that were irrelevant to the research questions or outdated in ways that limited their analytical value were also excluded, as were sources that could not be verified through original publication details. These criteria follow established standards for evaluating documentary sources in terms of authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning (Scott, 1990).

Data-Collection Procedure

Documents were systematically searched for in academic databases, official institutional websites, and credible research repositories. Academic sources were identified through databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. To ensure authenticity, official and institutional documents were retrieved directly from government websites and the official repositories of international organizations.

The search terms included “international order,” “strategic competition,” “great-power competition,” “power transition,” “global governance,” “multipolarity,” “geoeconomics,” “technological competition,” “alliances,” “strategic autonomy,” and “multilateralism,” used alone and in combination. Each source was recorded in a document-screening matrix that included its title, author, year, document type, issuing institution, relevance to the research questions, and key arguments. The matrix supported transparent selection and comparison across sources and formed part of the study's audit trail.

Data-Analysis Procedure

The documents were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six phases described by Braun and Clarke (2006). In the first phase, familiarization with the data, the researcher read the selected documents repeatedly and noted initial impressions and recurring ideas. In the second phase, initial codes were generated systematically by identifying features of the documents relevant to the research questions. In the third phase, codes were collated into candidate themes by searching for broader patterns of meaning. In the fourth phase, the themes were reviewed for coherence, distinctiveness, and fit with the data, using the coded extracts and the entire dataset. In the fifth phase, the themes were defined and named, and their scope and central concepts were clarified. In the sixth phase, the analytical report was produced, integrating the themes with the documentary evidence and linking them to the research questions and the existing literature.

Coding was both deductive and inductive. Deductive codes, derived from the literature and the theoretical framework, included power transition, strategic competition, institutional contestation, economic statecraft, technological rivalry, alliance formation, regional alignment, security dilemma, multilateralism, and strategic autonomy. Inductive codes emerged from recurring patterns in the documents that were not anticipated by existing theory. A coding framework was developed at the beginning of the analysis and revised throughout as new codes emerged and existing codes were refined, merged, or redefined.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

The study's trustworthiness was ensured by applying the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was supported through triangulation across document types (scholarly, official, institutional, and think-tank sources), actors (major powers, middle powers, developing states, and institutions), and regions. Transferability was addressed by providing a thick description of the geopolitical context in which the documents were produced, enabling readers to judge the relevance of the findings to other settings. Dependability was ensured through a detailed audit trail, including the document-screening matrix, the coding framework, analytic memos, and records of analytical decisions. Confirmability was supported through reflexivity, clear documentation of procedures, and explicit links between interpretations and specific documentary evidence.

Ethical Considerations

The study relied exclusively on publicly available documents and involved no human participants. Therefore, human-participant ethical approval was not required; however, applicable institutional guidance was followed. The researcher cited all sources accurately, avoided plagiarism, respected copyright, and represented the arguments of authors and institutions fairly and in context.

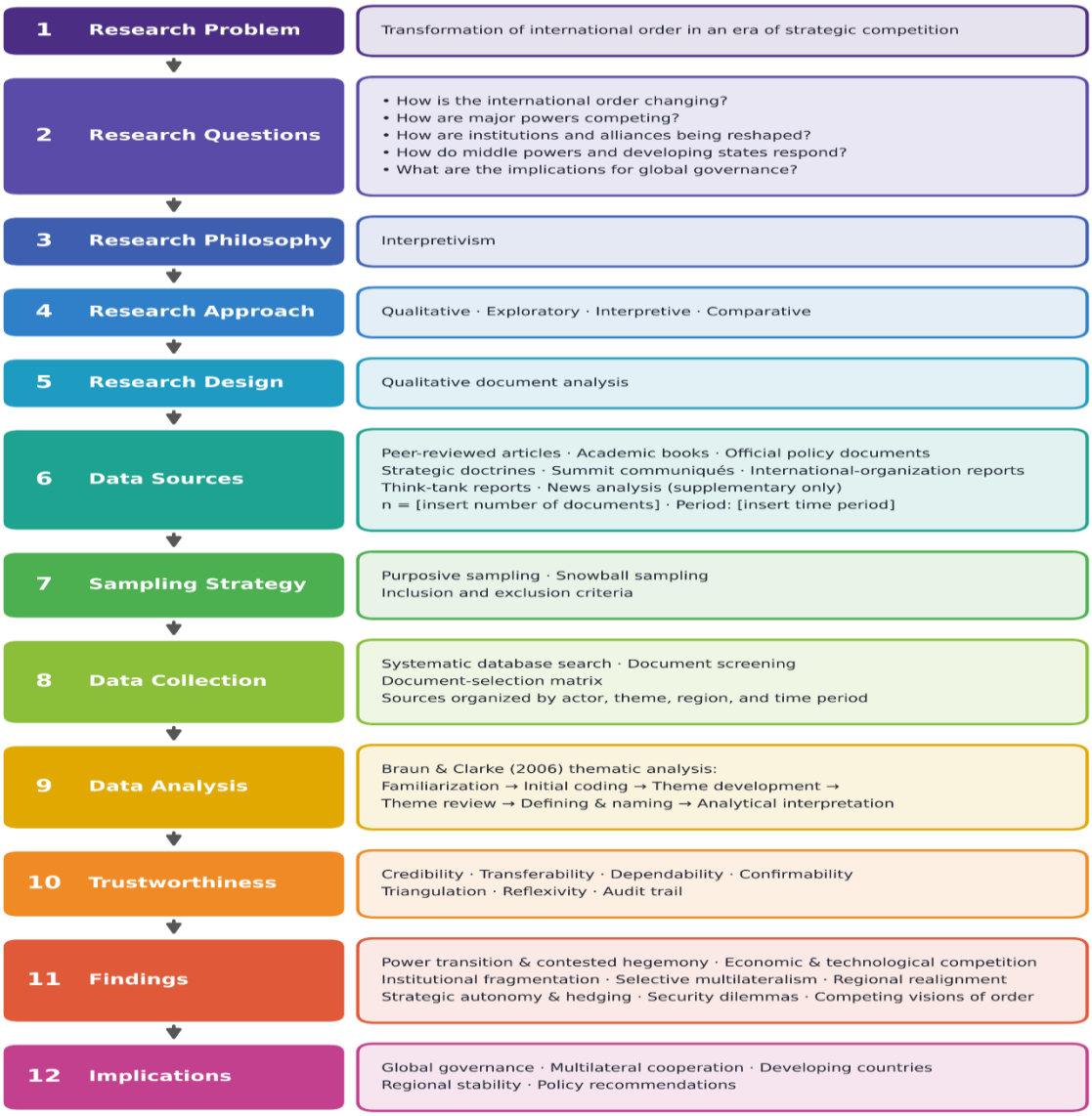
No confidential, classified, or leaked documents were used. Particular care was taken to ensure that the positions of states and institutions were not misrepresented through selective quotation.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. Document analysis cannot capture informal diplomatic negotiations, private deliberations, or classified strategic decision-making, which may differ from publicly stated positions. Official documents may also reflect strategic communication aimed at domestic or international audiences rather than actual policy intentions (Bowen, 2009). Language and translation bias may arise because the study relied on English-language or translated documents, which may under-represent some perspectives. Selection bias may result from the choice of documents, and interpretation bias from the researcher's own theoretical commitments and assumptions.

These limitations were addressed in several ways. Triangulation across document types, actors, and regions reduced dependence on any single source or perspective. The researcher's assumptions and interpretive choices were recorded in analytic memos to support reflexivity. Transparent source selection, documented in the screening matrix, allows readers to assess the scope and balance of the evidence. The findings are presented as interpretive insights into how international order is currently understood and contested, rather than as definitive claims about the intentions or future actions of states.

Figure 1. Research methodology flowchart



Findings and Discussion

findings

Thematic analysis of the selected documentary sources, including official policy documents, strategic doctrines, international-institution reports, summit communiqués, and peer-reviewed literature, produced five themes. Together, they describe an international order undergoing contested and uneven transformation.

Theme 1: Power Transition, Strategic Competition, and the Erosion of Uncontested Unipolarity

This theme captures the documentary representation of a transition from the post–Cold War period of largely uncontested U.S. primacy toward a more competitive and diffuse distribution of power. In both scholarly and official sources, the international environment is often characterized as less dominated by a single actor than in the 1990s and early 2000s. This change is attributed primarily to the economic, military, and technological development of China, the resurgence of Russian power, and the growing influence of regional powers such as India, Brazil, Türkiye, and the Gulf states. The documents do not, however, depict a completed transition. Many sources emphasize the continuing advantages of the United States in military capabilities, alliance networks, financial influence, and innovation, and they view the current era as one of relative rather than absolute change.

Within this evolving balance of power, strategic competition emerges as a central feature of relations among the major powers. U.S.–China rivalry is described as a long-term, multi-domain contest spanning trade, technology, military strength, diplomacy, and governance models. Competition between Russia and Western states is also prominent, particularly in documents concerning European security. The documents typically depict strategic competition as coexisting with limited cooperation on common challenges such as climate change, public health, and financial stability. Several sources emphasize the importance of "guardrails," crisis communication, and risk reduction to prevent competition from escalating into conflict.

Interpretation: The evidence points to a contested and incomplete power transition marked by structural yet bounded rivalry. This is consistent with debates on whether the system is becoming bipolar, multipolar, or multiplex (Acharya, 2017; Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016). It suggests that the order is changing while the hierarchy of power remains unsettled.

Theme 2: Economic Statecraft, Technological Rivalry, and the Securitization of Interdependence

This theme reflects the growing use of economic, technological, and financial instruments for strategic purposes. Documents record the expanded use of sanctions, export controls, investment screening, tariffs, and industrial policy to protect strategic industries and constrain competitors. Trade is increasingly framed not only in terms of efficiency and openness but also in terms of economic security, resilience, and de-risking. Supply-chain security is a major concern, especially for semiconductors, critical minerals, energy, and pharmaceuticals.

Technology emerges as a focal point of competition. Documents frequently link leadership in semiconductors, artificial intelligence, telecommunications, and other emerging technologies to economic competitiveness and national security. They also show growing interest in "digital sovereignty" and competing approaches to data governance and AI regulation. Development finance and infrastructure constitute a further arena of competition. Connectivity initiatives, such as China's Belt and Road Initiative and Western-led infrastructure partnerships, are presented by their sponsors as development assistance and by their rivals as instruments of influence. International economic institutions have warned that geoeconomic fragmentation could reduce global growth and harm developing economies, and they have expressed concern about debt sustainability.

Interpretation: Economic interdependence is increasingly perceived as a source of vulnerability and leverage as well as mutual gain. This is consistent with the concept of weaponized interdependence (Farrell & Newman, 2019) and with the geoeconomics literature (Blackwill & Harris, 2016).

Theme 3: Institutional Contestation, Selective Multilateralism, and Parallel Institutions

This theme addresses the pressures on multilateral institutions and the ways in which states respond to them. Documents frequently mention divisions that hinder the effectiveness of the UN Security Council, problems in the functioning of the World Trade Organization, and ongoing debates on governance reform at the IMF and World Bank. Many sources from emerging and developing states argue that existing institutions do not reflect current economic and demographic weights and that their influence in rule-making should be greater. Documents from established powers usually emphasize the defense of the "rules-based international order," while other sources question whose interests those rules serve.

States respond to this contestation by using multilateral forums selectively. Documents show states participating in existing institutions while also strengthening or creating alternative platforms, such as BRICS and its New Development Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Established powers likewise rely increasingly on smaller, like-minded groupings, such as the G7, and on issue-specific coalitions. These parallel arrangements are often described as complementary to existing institutions. Critical sources, however, warn that they could fragment global governance and weaken joint responses to common problems.

Interpretation: Multilateralism faces a crisis of both effectiveness and legitimacy, but institutions are being reformed, bypassed, and duplicated rather than abandoned. This supports scholarship on contested multilateralism and the contested authority of global governance (Morse & Keohane, 2014; Zürn, 2018).

Theme 4: Regional Realignment, Security Dilemmas, and the Hedging Strategies of Middle Powers

This theme reflects shifts in alignments, regional security dynamics, and the responses of middle powers and developing countries. The documents describe the strengthening of NATO and the deepening of partnerships between the United States and its Indo-Pacific partners, such as AUKUS and the Quad. Other sources describe closer cooperation within BRICS and the SCO among states critical of Western policies. Military modernization, new deterrence postures, arms control, maritime disputes, and cyber operations are recurring issues in the documents. Each side tends to present its own measures as defensive and the other's as destabilizing, which reflects a security-dilemma dynamic. Regional conflicts in Europe, the Middle East, and parts of Africa are described as both shaped by and contributing to great-power rivalry.

These alignments, however, are neither comprehensive nor rigid. Many middle powers and developing states refer to “strategic autonomy,” “multi-alignment,” or “balanced” foreign policies. These states cooperate with one power on security and with another on economic matters, join multiple groupings, and avoid taking sides where possible. They present such strategies as ways of protecting national interests, maximizing economic benefits, and preserving freedom of action. Some sources also acknowledge growing pressure to align more clearly, particularly on sanctions, technology, and security.

Interpretation: Realignment shows bloc-like tendencies in the security sphere, moderated by cross-cutting economic ties and widespread hedging. This supports scholarship on security dilemmas (Jervis, 1978), regional security complexes (Buzan & Wæver, 2003), and hedging as a rational response to uncertainty (Kuik, 2008).

Theme 5: Normative Competition and the Formation of a Fragmented and Negotiated Order

This theme captures contestation over ideas and legitimacy, as well as the overall character of the evolving order. Major Western powers often emphasize the “rules-based international order,” democracy, human rights, and freedom of navigation in their documents. Documents from China, Russia, and some other states emphasize sovereignty, non-interference, development rights, and a “multipolar world.” Many developing states draw on narratives of equity, historical injustice, and Global South solidarity to call for changes to existing hierarchies. Contestation therefore concerns not only who leads but also what the order contains: terms such as “multilateralism,” “sovereignty,” and “rules” are used in different ways by different actors.

Taken together, the documents describe a shift from a relatively stable, U.S.-led liberal order toward a more fragmented, plural, contested, and negotiated order. Many liberal institutions, rules, and practices persist alongside alternative institutions, norms, and issue-specific coalitions. Different issue areas appear to follow different logics: relationships are more bloc-like in security and more overlapping and cross-cutting in trade, finance, and development. The documents do not point to a single successor order; rather, they suggest an ongoing process of bargaining, adaptation, and contestation.

Interpretation: The evidence is consistent with constructivist and English School perspectives on the role of norms and legitimacy in order transformation (Hurrell, 2007; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). It also fits accounts of a multiplex or post-hegemonic order (Acharya, 2017; Cooley & Nexon, 2020).

Discussion

Strategic Competition and the Transformation of Power and Rules

The findings suggest that strategic competition is reshaping international order by altering both the distribution of power and the rules of international interaction. Consistent with the power transition scholarship of Organski and Kugler (1980) and Gilpin (1981), the documents reflect a redistribution of capabilities that has eroded the unchallenged dominance of the United States. The findings also support critics who argue that power transitions do not produce predictable outcomes (Chan, 2008). Rather than a handover

of leadership, the evidence shows an ongoing negotiation over rules, institutions, and norms across several domains. This addresses the study's first and second research questions.

Beyond Bipolarity and Multipolarity: A Fragmented, Negotiated Order

The emerging order is neither simply bipolar nor multipolar. Arguments for bipolarity capture the centrality of U.S.–China competition (Tunsjø, 2018) but neglect the role of other powers and the cross-cutting nature of many relationships. Arguments for multipolarity capture the diffusion of power (Kupchan, 2012) but tend to overestimate the capabilities of secondary powers. The findings are more consistent with Acharya's (2017) concept of a multiplex order and point toward a more fragmented, plural, contested, and negotiated system. It is fragmented because different issue areas follow different logics. It is plural because many actors and visions coexist. It is contested because the validity of rules is challenged. It is negotiated because outcomes result from ongoing bargaining. This perspective extends debates about the "end" of the liberal order (Ikenberry, 2018; Mearsheimer, 2019) by suggesting that the liberal order is being partly transformed and absorbed into a more complex order rather than simply ending or surviving (Lake et al., 2021).

Economic Statecraft and Technology as Instruments of Influence

The findings indicate that economic statecraft and technological competition have become key instruments of geopolitical influence. This is consistent with the literature on geoeconomics and weaponized interdependence (Blackwill & Harris, 2016; Farrell & Newman, 2019) and suggests that the line between economic and security policy is blurring (Drezner et al., 2021). The evidence also cautions against assuming that full decoupling is inevitable: international institutions recognize the costs of fragmentation, and many states continue to value economic openness. This addresses the third research question: economic and technological competition reshapes the order mainly by changing how states manage interdependence rather than by eliminating it.

Institutions: Contested, Reformed, Bypassed, or Duplicated

International institutions are simultaneously being contested, reformed, bypassed, and duplicated. This confirms accounts of contested multilateralism (Morse & Keohane, 2014). It also supports the argument that rising powers generally seek greater voice within existing institutions rather than their replacement (Kahler, 2013). Parallel institutions serve both as alternatives and as bargaining tools (Stuenkel, 2016). The result is a less hierarchical institutional landscape, but one that risks gridlock and a diminished capacity to address global collective-action problems (Zürn, 2018).

Hedging, Regional Security, and the Agency of Middle Powers

Many middle powers and developing states pursue hedging, multi-alignment, and strategic autonomy as deliberate strategies. These strategies reflect uncertainty about the future distribution of power, fear of entrapment, and a desire to maximize benefits (Kuik, 2008; Goh, 2005), and they are also shaped by historical experiences of colonialism and non-alignment (Acharya, 2018). The space for hedging may, however, be narrowing in technology, sanctions, and security. At the regional level, security dilemmas (Jervis, 1978) and regional security complexes (Buzan & Wæver, 2003) interact with global rivalry. Regional crises can harden great-power relations, while great-power competition can prolong regional conflicts. This addresses the fourth research question and highlights the active but constrained agency of these states.

Implications for Developing Countries

For developing countries, strategic competition creates both opportunities and challenges. It can expand their options and strengthen their bargaining power by enabling access to trade, investment, infrastructure financing, and technology from various sources (Alden, 2007). It also carries risks of dependency, debt distress, coercion through economic and political pressure, and exclusion from emerging technological and economic arrangements. Rivalry may also divert attention from shared challenges such as climate change and development financing. The net effect for any state is likely to depend on its institutional capacity, negotiating strategy, and regional context.

Theoretical Implications

For realism, the findings confirm the importance of power and security competition (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001) while showing that competition is increasingly conducted through economic, technological, and institutional means. For liberalism, they show that institutions and interdependence remain important but can also be used as instruments of competition, which challenges the assumption that interdependence necessarily fosters peace (Keohane & Nye, 1977; Farrell & Newman, 2019). For constructivism, they highlight the importance of narratives, norms, and threat perceptions in shaping rivalry and alignment (Wendt, 1999). For the

English School, they confirm the continuing relevance of international society while revealing deepening disagreement over its rules and values (Hurrell, 2007; Buzan & Lawson, 2015). Together, the findings suggest that no single theory fully explains order transformation and that integrated approaches are required.

Practical Implications

Policymakers could focus on crisis communication and risk-reduction mechanisms to prevent competition from spiraling into conflict while maintaining cooperation on common challenges. International organizations could pursue governance reforms that improve representation and legitimacy, which would reduce the incentive to duplicate institutions. Regional organizations could play a more influential role as forums for dialogue and negotiation. Developing countries could build capacity to assess competing offers of finance and technology, ensure debt sustainability and transparency, and coordinate to strengthen their collective voice in global governance. These implications address the fifth research question on the impact of geopolitical change on multilateralism, development, and international security.

Conclusion

This study examined how strategic competition is transforming the international order. Using a qualitative, interpretive, and comparative documentary design, it analyzed official policy documents, strategic doctrines, summit communiqués, international-institution reports, and peer-reviewed scholarship. It sought to understand how major powers, middle powers, developing states, and international institutions interpret and respond to changes in global power, alignments, and governance.

Summary of Main Findings

The findings indicate that the international order is becoming more fragmented, plural, contested, and negotiated. The relatively stable, U.S.-led liberal order of the post–Cold War period has not simply disappeared, but no clear successor has emerged. Although many of its institutions, rules, and practices persist, they now coexist with alternative institutions, competing norms, and issue-specific coalitions. Different issue areas appear to follow different logics: relationships are more bloc-like in security and remain cross-cutting and overlapping in trade, finance, and development.

The study also shows that strategic competition is not limited to military rivalry. It extends to trade, technology, finance, energy, infrastructure, institutions, and diplomatic narratives. Economic statecraft, export controls, supply-chain policies, and technological standards have become important instruments of influence, and interdependence is increasingly treated as a source of vulnerability as well as mutual gain. Major powers are competing not only to build capabilities but also to shape the rules, standards, alliances, institutions, and development pathways that will define the future order.

The findings also highlight the agency of middle powers and developing states. These actors use hedging, multi-alignment, and strategic autonomy to protect their interests, engaging with several major powers without committing exclusively to any one of them. These strategies give them room to maneuver, although pressure to align more explicitly appears to be growing in some domains. Finally, the study shows that multilateral institutions remain relevant but face serious challenges of legitimacy, representation, and effectiveness. States increasingly reform, bypass, or duplicate them rather than abandon them.

Theoretical Contribution

The study contributes to debates on power transition, international order, global governance, and strategic competition in several ways. First, it supports the view that power transitions are open-ended processes that may result in bargaining, institutional adaptation, and realignment rather than inevitable conflict. Second, it suggests that the current order is neither unipolar, bipolar, nor multipolar but hybrid and negotiated. Although polar categories offer important insights into the distribution of power, they overlook the cross-cutting alignments, institutional complexity, and normative contestation that characterize contemporary international politics.

Third, the study demonstrates the value of combining multiple theoretical frameworks. Realism explains the enduring importance of power, security competition, and security dilemmas. Liberalism explains the continuing importance of institutions and interdependence, as well as how they can be used in competition. Constructivism shows how identities, threat perceptions, and strategic narratives shape rivalry and alignment. The English School focuses on international society, legitimacy, and the contested rules of order. Together, these perspectives provide a more comprehensive account of order transformation than any one of them could provide alone.

Policy Implications

The findings have several policy implications. Major powers could avoid zero-sum approaches in their relations, improve crisis-management and communication channels to reduce the risk of miscalculation, and preserve space for cooperation on global public goods even amid competition. International institutions could become more representative, transparent, inclusive, and responsive to emerging powers and developing countries, thereby enhancing their legitimacy and reducing incentives for institutional duplication.

Developing countries could diversify their partnerships, strengthen their institutional capacity to assess and negotiate competing offers of finance and technology, invest in digital and industrial capabilities, and avoid excessive dependence on any single power. Regional organizations could strengthen coordination, conflict prevention, trade integration, and collective bargaining, allowing member states to engage major powers on more equal terms. More broadly, global governance arrangements should protect cooperation in areas where shared interests remain strong, such as climate change, public health, food security, financial stability, and nuclear risk reduction. Strategic competition should not be allowed to undermine collective action on challenges that no single state can address alone.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. As a qualitative and interpretive study based on selected documents, its findings depend on the documents analyzed and the interpretive perspective applied to them. Document analysis cannot capture secret diplomacy, classified decision-making, or the many informal ways in which influence is exercised in international politics, and official documents may reflect strategic communication rather than actual intentions. The study may also be affected by selection bias in the choice of documents, by language and translation bias arising from reliance on English-language or translated sources, and by researcher-interpretation bias. Triangulation, reflexivity, and transparent source selection were used to mitigate these limitations. The findings should therefore be understood as analytically rather than statistically generalizable, offering conceptual insights that may be relevant to similar contexts.

Recommendations For Further Study

Future research could extend this study in several directions. Comparative case studies of specific regions, such as South Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia, would show how strategic competition plays out in different regional contexts. Further studies are needed on the role of middle powers in mediating strategic competition and building bridges between rival blocs. The governance of emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, semiconductors, and cybersecurity, where future rules of order are being negotiated, also deserves close attention. Research on the implications of strategic competition for development finance and debt sustainability would clarify the opportunities and risks facing developing countries. Studies of public opinion, elite perceptions, and media narratives of geopolitical rivalry could deepen understanding of the domestic roots of strategic competition. Finally, the future of multilateral institutions under conditions of great-power competition remains an important area for scholarly and policy research.

In conclusion, the new geopolitics of global power is transforming the international order through ongoing contestation and negotiation across various domains rather than through a single, sudden shift. Understanding this transformation requires attention to the strategies of the major powers as well as to the choices of middle powers, developing states, and international institutions, as these will shape the nature of the emerging order.

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