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The New Global Order: How Strategic Competition Between the United States and China is Reshaping International Institutions and Middle Powers

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Abstract

Purpose– *The international system is undergoing one of its most significant transformations since the end of the Cold War, driven by intensifying strategic competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China. This study examines how this rivalry is reshaping international institutions and redefining the strategic autonomy of middle powers, with particular attention to their responses within an increasingly fragmented global order.* **Design/methodology/approach**– *This study employs a qualitative research design based on document analysis and comparative case studies. It integrates the theoretical perspectives of Offensive Realism, Institutional Liberalism, and Power Transition Theory to explain changes in global governance and the evolving strategic behavior of middle powers. The analysis draws upon scholarly literature, policy documents, and reports from international institutions published between 2018 and 2026.* **Findings**– *The findings indicate that the contemporary international order is evolving toward a fragmented yet interconnected multipolar system characterized by institutional competition, selective cooperation, technological rivalry, and flexible diplomatic alignments. Rather than functioning solely as neutral governance mechanisms, international institutions have increasingly become arenas for geopolitical contestation between major powers. The study further demonstrates that middle powers are expanding their strategic autonomy through hedging strategies, issue-based coalitions, and diversified partnerships rather than exclusive alliance commitments. Meanwhile, China is simultaneously challenging existing liberal institutions while adapting to them through complementary initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and an expanded BRICS framework.* **Research implications/limitations**– *This study is limited to qualitative analysis based on documentary sources and selected case studies. Future research may incorporate quantitative institutional analysis or longitudinal empirical studies to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of middle-power strategies across different regional contexts.* **Originality/value** – *This study contributes to international relations scholarship by integrating three major theoretical perspectives to explain the simultaneous transformation of global institutions and middle-power diplomacy. It argues that the emerging international order is defined neither by renewed American unipolarity nor Chinese hegemony, but by competitive coexistence within an increasingly multipolar system requiring substantial institutional adaptation to sustain global governance.*

Keywords: *US–China rivalry; middle powers; multipolarity; global governance; international institutions; strategic autonomy; BRICS, Indo Pacific.*

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Introduction

International politics is undergoing a historic transformation that rivals the geopolitical shifts witnessed after the Second World War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. For nearly three decades following the end of the Cold War, the United States occupied an unparalleled position of military, economic, technological, and ideological dominance. This period of unipolarity enabled the expansion of liberal international institutions, globalization, democratic governance, and free-market economic integration (Ikenberry, 2018). However, the extraordinary economic growth of China since the late twentieth century has fundamentally altered the balance of global power. China's emergence as the world's second-largest economy, largest manufacturing nation, leading trading partner for more than 120 countries, and an increasingly sophisticated military power has challenged long-standing assumptions regarding American supremacy (Allison, 2017; Economy, 2024).

The resulting strategic competition between Washington and Beijing has become the defining characteristic of twenty-first-century international politics. Unlike previous great power rivalries centered primarily on military confrontation, contemporary competition extends across multiple interconnected domains. These include advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence and quantum computing, semiconductor supply chains, cyber security, global infrastructure financing, climate governance, trade policy, digital currencies, development assistance, maritime security, and institutional influence. International organizations have become central arenas where this rivalry unfolds. Institutions originally designed to promote cooperation increasingly reflect geopolitical competition. Voting patterns within the United Nations, leadership contests in specialized agencies, reform debates within the World Trade Organization, financing arrangements of the World Bank, and development initiatives through multilateral development banks increasingly mirror broader strategic tensions between the United States and China. Simultaneously, many states traditionally categorized as middle powers have emerged as influential actors capable of shaping global outcomes. Countries such as India, Brazil, Indonesia, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Nigeria, and Australia increasingly resist binary choices between Washington and Beijing. Instead, they pursue diversified foreign policies aimed at preserving strategic autonomy while maximizing economic opportunities.

The emergence of issue-based coalitions, flexible partnerships, minilateral diplomacy, and regional security arrangements suggests that the evolving international order cannot simply be understood through traditional Cold War analogies. Instead, contemporary global politics reflects a more complex system characterized by overlapping institutions, multiple centers of power, economic interdependence, and strategic competition. This article investigates how this evolving rivalry is reshaping international institutions while redefining the foreign policy behavior of middle powers. It contributes to contemporary debates by integrating geopolitical, institutional, and economic dimensions into a comprehensive analytical framework.

2. Background of the Study

The liberal international order established after the Second World War was built upon institutions designed to prevent future global conflicts while promoting economic cooperation and political stability. The establishment of the United Nations in 1945, the Bretton Woods institutions in 1944, and later the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), eventually transformed into the World Trade Organization in 1995, reflected an American-led vision of rules-based international governance (Ruggie, 1998). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, scholars such as Fukuyama (1992) argued that liberal democracy had achieved ideological supremacy, while others predicted the continuation of American hegemony. During this period, globalization accelerated rapidly through expanding trade networks, financial liberalization, technological innovation, and multinational institutions. China's accession to the WTO in 2001 represented a pivotal moment in global economic history. Many policymakers anticipated that deeper integration into the liberal economic order would encourage domestic political liberalization and reinforce existing international norms. Instead, China leveraged globalization to achieve unprecedented industrial expansion while maintaining centralized political control under the Communist Party.

By the late 2010s, China's Belt and Road Initiative had become one of the largest infrastructure investment programs in modern history, spanning Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East. Simultaneously, the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the New Development Bank under BRICS demonstrated China's willingness to complement—and in some cases challenge—the existing Bretton Woods architecture.

The United States responded by introducing policies emphasizing strategic competition. The 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy explicitly identified China as a strategic competitor. Successive administrations maintained export controls on advanced semiconductors, strengthened Indo-Pacific alliances, expanded the Quad partnership, reinforced NATO cooperation in response to global security challenges, and promoted supply-chain resilience among trusted partners.

Meanwhile, international institutions increasingly reflected geopolitical polarization. WTO dispute mechanisms faced paralysis, Security Council divisions intensified over conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, and debates concerning digital governance, artificial intelligence regulation, climate finance, and public health governance revealed growing institutional fragmentation. Middle powers have become particularly significant within this evolving landscape. Unlike smaller states that often align with dominant powers, middle powers possess sufficient diplomatic, economic, and regional influence to pursue independent foreign policies. Countries including India, Indonesia, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Nigeria, and Turkey increasingly engage simultaneously with both Washington and Beijing while expanding cooperation through regional organizations and multilateral forums. Consequently, the emerging international order cannot simply be characterized as bipolar or multipolar. Rather, it represents a hybrid system combining strategic rivalry with deep economic interdependence, institutional competition, and complex patterns of cooperation.

3. Statement of the Problem

The intensifying strategic rivalry between the United States and China presents one of the greatest challenges confronting contemporary international relations. Existing international institutions were largely designed during periods of either bipolar Cold War competition or post-Cold War American predominance. Many of these institutions now struggle to accommodate shifting distributions of power, competing governance models, and divergent strategic priorities. Institutional paralysis has become increasingly evident in several global organizations. Reform of the United Nations Security Council remains stalled despite growing demands for greater representation from Africa, Latin America, and Asia. The WTO's dispute settlement mechanism has experienced prolonged dysfunction, limiting its effectiveness in resolving trade conflicts. Financial institutions such as the IMF and World Bank continue to face criticism regarding voting structures that inadequately reflect contemporary economic realities.

Furthermore, China's creation of parallel institutions raises important questions concerning institutional redundancy, competition, and fragmentation. While initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, AIIB, and expanded BRICS provide alternative avenues for development financing and economic cooperation, they also challenge the traditional dominance of Western-led institutions. For middle powers, strategic competition creates difficult policy dilemmas. Excessive dependence on either Washington or Beijing may compromise national autonomy, yet complete neutrality has become increasingly difficult amid growing geopolitical polarization. Consequently, many states pursue hedging strategies whose long-term implications remain insufficiently understood. Although numerous studies examine U.S.–China rivalry from military, economic, or security perspectives, comparatively fewer integrate institutional transformation with the strategic behavior of middle powers. This study addresses that gap by analyzing how great-power competition simultaneously reshapes international institutions and expands the diplomatic agency of middle powers.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design, employing documentary analysis and comparative case study methods. Data are drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, official government publications, institutional reports from the United Nations, World Bank, IMF, WTO, OECD, NATO, ASEAN, BRICS, AIIB, and the G20, as well as recent scholarly books published between 2018 and 2026. The analytical approach combines thematic content analysis with comparative institutional analysis to evaluate changes in global governance structures. Case studies of India, Brazil, Australia, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Turkey, and Nigeria are used to illustrate variations in middle-power strategies.

Result

5. Theoretical Framework

This study integrates three complementary theories:

5.1 Offensive Realism

John Mearsheimer's (2014) Offensive Realism argues that great powers continuously seek to maximize relative power under conditions of international anarchy. From this perspective, China's growing capabilities naturally generate strategic competition with the United States, which seeks to preserve its dominant position.

5.2 Power Transition Theory

Power Transition Theory (Organski, 1958; Tammen et al., 2000) suggests that periods during which a rising power approaches parity with the dominant power are especially prone to instability. The contemporary U.S.–China relationship reflects many characteristics associated with power transition, including intensified economic rivalry, military modernization, and institutional competition.

5.3 Liberal Institutionalism

Liberal Institutionalism contends that international institutions reduce uncertainty, facilitate cooperation, and mitigate conflict by establishing rules and norms (Keohane, 1984). However, the effectiveness of these institutions depends on the willingness of major powers to uphold them. Increasing geopolitical rivalry therefore places significant strain on institutional effectiveness while simultaneously creating incentives for institutional innovation.

6.1 Evolution of the Liberal International Order

The liberal international order emerged after the Second World War under American leadership and was institutionalized through organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), and later the World Trade Organization (WTO). These institutions promoted rules-based governance, economic liberalization, collective security, and multilateral cooperation (Ikenberry, 2011). Ikenberry (2018) argues that the post-1945 order represented one of history's most institutionalized international systems because it constrained even the hegemonic power through agreed rules and norms. Rather than exercising raw power alone, the United States embedded its influence within multilateral institutions, making its leadership more acceptable to allies. Keohane (1984) similarly contends that international institutions reduce uncertainty, facilitate cooperation, lower transaction costs, and encourage long-term compliance among states. Liberal institutionalists therefore argue that institutions remain relevant even when power distributions change because they create mutual benefits that transcend immediate national interests.

However, critics argue that the liberal order disproportionately reflected Western interests. Acharya (2017) notes that many emerging economies viewed post-war institutions as insufficiently representative of contemporary global realities. Voting structures within the IMF and World Bank continue to favor advanced Western economies despite dramatic shifts in global economic production. Similarly, Mearsheimer (2018) contends that liberal hegemony became increasingly unsustainable as rising powers challenged American dominance. According to realist scholars, institutions merely reflect underlying distributions of power and inevitably weaken when hegemonic power declines. The financial crisis of 2008 significantly accelerated debates regarding institutional legitimacy. While Western economies experienced severe recessions, China sustained high economic growth through state-led investment and rapidly expanded its global influence. This shift marked an important turning point in perceptions regarding alternative development models (Nye, 2022). Consequently, many scholars argue that the liberal international order is neither collapsing nor remaining static but undergoing substantial transformation driven by changing power dynamics.

6.2 China's Rise and the Emergence of Strategic Competition

China's extraordinary economic transformation has fundamentally altered international politics. Since initiating economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping in 1978, China has lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty while becoming the world's largest exporter and manufacturing economy (World Bank, 2024). Allison (2017) describes this transformation through the concept of the "Thucydides Trap," arguing that competition between rising and established powers historically increases the likelihood of conflict. Although critics question the deterministic nature of this argument, the framework has significantly influenced policy debates concerning U.S.–China relations. China's economic modernization has increasingly translated into geopolitical influence. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced in 2013, has financed transportation infrastructure, ports, railways, digital connectivity, and energy projects across Asia, Africa, Latin America, Europe, and the Middle East.

Rolland (2020) argues that the BRI represents more than infrastructure financing; it constitutes a long-term geopolitical strategy aimed at enhancing China's global connectivity and strategic influence. Through infrastructure investment, Beijing strengthens economic partnerships while expanding diplomatic relationships. Meanwhile, the United States has interpreted many Chinese initiatives through a strategic lens. The U.S. National Security Strategy (2017) and subsequent National Defense Strategies identified China as America's principal long-term strategic competitor.

Campbell and Doshi (2021) argue that U.S.–China competition differs fundamentally from Cold War bipolarity because both countries remain deeply integrated through trade, investment, education, and global supply chains. Consequently, complete economic decoupling remains both politically difficult and economically costly. Rather than direct military confrontation, strategic competition increasingly manifests through technological innovation, artificial intelligence, semiconductor production, cyber capabilities, biotechnology, quantum computing, rare earth minerals, and digital infrastructure. Economy (2024) observes that China's governance model increasingly combines centralized political authority with technological modernization, creating an alternative development pathway that appeals to several developing countries seeking rapid economic growth without liberal democratic reforms.

6.3 Institutional Competition and Global Governance

One of the defining characteristics of contemporary strategic competition is institutional rivalry. Rather than abandoning existing international organizations, China has pursued a dual strategy of increasing influence within established institutions while simultaneously creating complementary institutions reflecting its own strategic priorities. Johnston (2019) argues that China has become increasingly active within the United Nations, contributing more personnel to peacekeeping missions, increasing financial contributions, and expanding diplomatic engagement across specialized agencies. However, China has simultaneously established new multilateral institutions.

Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)

Established in 2016, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank represents one of the most significant institutional innovations in global development finance. Despite initial American skepticism, numerous U.S. allies—including the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia, France, Canada, and South Korea—joined the institution. Humphrey (2020) argues that the AIIB demonstrates China's preference for institutional diversification rather than outright replacement of existing financial organizations. The bank often co-finances projects alongside the World Bank and Asian Development Bank.

Belt and Road Initiative

The Belt and Road Initiative represents perhaps the largest infrastructure investment initiative in modern history. According to Hillman (2020), BRI investments have expanded Chinese influence through transportation corridors, logistics networks, telecommunications infrastructure, industrial parks, and energy projects. Critics have raised concerns regarding debt sustainability, transparency, procurement practices, and environmental standards. Nevertheless, many developing countries continue participating because of limited alternative financing sources.

BRICS Expansion

The expansion of BRICS has further altered international institutional dynamics. Originally comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, BRICS has expanded its membership to include additional emerging economies from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. Stuenkel (2024) argues that expanded BRICS reflects growing dissatisfaction among developing countries regarding Western dominance of global governance institutions. Rather than seeking revolutionary change, BRICS increasingly advocates greater representation, reform of Bretton Woods institutions, expanded use of local currencies, and enhanced South-South cooperation.

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)

Initially established for regional security cooperation, the SCO has evolved into one of Eurasia's most influential multilateral organizations. The organization now addresses counterterrorism, economic cooperation, energy security, regional connectivity, and political coordination among member states. The growing participation of India, Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asian states illustrates increasing institutional pluralism beyond traditional Western alliances.

6.4 Technology as the New Arena of Strategic Competition

Technology has emerged as perhaps the most significant dimension of contemporary geopolitical competition. Unlike previous industrial revolutions, leadership in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, biotechnology, semiconductor manufacturing, cyber capabilities, and digital platforms increasingly determines national power. Segal (2021) argues that technological superiority now influences military capability, economic competitiveness, intelligence collection, and diplomatic influence simultaneously. Semiconductor production illustrates this transformation. The United States has imposed export controls limiting China's access to advanced semiconductor manufacturing technologies while strengthening cooperation with allies such as Japan, South Korea, and the Netherlands. China has responded by accelerating domestic semiconductor production through extensive industrial policy and investment. Artificial intelligence similarly represents an emerging geopolitical frontier. Schmidt (2022) argues that AI competition increasingly influences national security, economic productivity, public administration, surveillance, healthcare, and military modernization. Digital governance has also become contested. Competing approaches toward data sovereignty, internet governance, digital currencies, cybersecurity standards, and telecommunications infrastructure increasingly reflect broader geopolitical competition.

6.5 Economic Statecraft and Supply Chain Competition

Economic interdependence no longer guarantees political cooperation. Farrell and Newman (2019) introduce the concept of "weaponized interdependence," arguing that dominant states increasingly exploit positions within global networks for strategic purposes. Trade restrictions, investment screening, export controls, sanctions, and supply chain diversification have become common policy instruments. COVID-19 exposed vulnerabilities associated with concentrated supply chains, particularly for pharmaceuticals, medical equipment, semiconductors, and critical minerals. Consequently, governments increasingly pursue "friend-shoring," "near-shoring," and "Chinaplus-one" strategies aimed at reducing strategic dependence without abandoning globalization entirely.

The Inflation Reduction Act, the CHIPS and Science Act, and similar industrial policies demonstrate renewed state intervention within advanced economies. Meanwhile, China's "Made in China 2025" strategy similarly emphasizes technological self-sufficiency. These developments suggest that globalization is evolving rather than reversing.

6.6 Middle Powers in the Emerging International Order

Middle powers occupy an increasingly significant position within contemporary international politics. Traditionally, middle powers were viewed as states possessing moderate material capabilities but disproportionately large diplomatic influence (Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993). Recent scholarship emphasizes strategic autonomy rather than alliance dependence. Rather than choosing between Washington and Beijing, many middle powers pursue diversified diplomatic strategies.

India

India simultaneously participates in BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and the Quad. Pant (2023) argues that Indian foreign policy increasingly reflects issue-based alignment rather than ideological commitment.

Brazil

Brazil continues strengthening South-South cooperation while maintaining economic relations with both China and the United States. Its participation in BRICS reflects support for institutional reform rather than anti-Western positioning.

Indonesia

Indonesia promotes ASEAN centrality while avoiding formal alignment with either major power. Jakarta consistently emphasizes regional stability, economic integration, and strategic neutrality.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has diversified strategic partnerships by expanding economic cooperation with China while maintaining longstanding security relations with the United States. Its participation in BRICS illustrates growing flexibility within Middle Eastern diplomacy.

Nigeria

Nigeria increasingly balances infrastructure cooperation with China alongside security and investment partnerships with Western countries. As

Africa's largest economy and most populous country, Nigeria seeks greater influence within global governance institutions while avoiding dependence on any single external partner.

Australia

Australia represents a contrasting example. Although economically dependent upon China, Canberra has strengthened defense cooperation with the United States through AUKUS and the Quad while maintaining extensive trade with Beijing. This illustrates the complexity facing middle powers in managing simultaneous economic and security relationships.

6.7 The Future of International Institutions

Scholars remain divided regarding the trajectory of international institutions. Optimists argue that institutional adaptation will preserve multilateral cooperation despite geopolitical rivalry (Keohane, 2020). Realists predict increasing fragmentation as major powers prioritize relative gains over institutional cooperation (Mearsheimer, 2018). Constructivists emphasize evolving international norms regarding climate governance, digital regulation, artificial intelligence, and sustainable development. Acharya (2023) proposes the concept of a "multiplex world," where multiple regional and global institutions coexist without a single dominant hegemon. This perspective appears increasingly consistent with contemporary developments, including the expansion of BRICS, the emergence of minilateral partnerships, regional development banks, and issue-specific coalitions. Rather than replacing existing institutions, new organizations increasingly complement, compete with, or selectively cooperate alongside established institutions.

6.8 Research Gap

Although substantial scholarship examines U.S.–China strategic competition, three important gaps remain.

First, much of the literature examines military rivalry or economic competition independently, with insufficient integration of institutional transformation and global governance. A more holistic analysis is needed to understand how strategic competition simultaneously reshapes international organizations, economic institutions, and diplomatic norms. Second, existing studies often portray middle powers as passive recipients of great-power rivalry. However, recent evidence demonstrates that many middle powers actively shape international outcomes through hedging strategies, issue-based coalitions, regional leadership, and institutional entrepreneurship. Greater attention to their agency is therefore warranted.

Third, many analyses focus on the Indo-Pacific or transatlantic regions while giving comparatively limited attention to Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. Examining countries such as Nigeria, South Africa, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, and Indonesia broadens understanding of how diverse middle powers navigate strategic competition. This study addresses these gaps by integrating geopolitical, institutional, and regional perspectives into a comprehensive framework that explains the evolving relationship between U.S.–China strategic competition, institutional change, and the strategic behavior of middle powers.

7. Empirical Analysis: Strategic Competition and the Transformation of International Institutions

7.1 Introduction

The strategic competition between the United States and China has increasingly shifted from conventional military rivalry to competition over the institutions, rules, and norms that govern international politics. While the post-Second World War international order was largely designed under American leadership, the rapid rise of China has introduced a second center of global influence capable of challenging, complementing, and in some instances reshaping the institutional foundations of global governance.

Unlike the Cold War, when competing institutions reflected rigid ideological divisions, the present international environment is characterized by overlapping institutional memberships, economic interdependence, and selective cooperation. China participates actively in many existing institutions while simultaneously establishing new multilateral organizations that reflect its development philosophy and geopolitical interests. The United States, in turn, has responded by reinforcing alliances, promoting institutional reforms, and creating new strategic partnerships to preserve the rules-based international order. This section analyzes how this rivalry is transforming the world's most important international institutions and governance mechanisms.

7.2 The United Nations: Competition within the Global Political Architecture

The United Nations remains the most comprehensive institution of global governance, encompassing peace and security, humanitarian assistance, sustainable development, human rights, and international law. However, increasing rivalry between Washington and Beijing has complicated the organization's effectiveness. China has substantially expanded its role within the UN over the last two decades. It is now one of the largest financial contributors to the UN regular budget and peacekeeping operations and has increased its influence across specialized agencies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the

United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), and the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) (Johnston, 2019). This growing influence reflects China's broader strategy of shaping international norms from within existing institutions rather than replacing them entirely. Beijing has promoted concepts such as the "Global Development Initiative," the "Global Security Initiative," and the "Global Civilization Initiative" within UN forums, presenting them as complementary frameworks for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The United States remains the principal architect of the UN system but increasingly views China's expanding institutional influence with concern. Washington argues that certain Chinese initiatives may dilute established norms relating to human rights, transparency, democratic governance, and the rule of law.

The rivalry has become particularly visible within the Security Council. Permanent members have increasingly exercised veto powers regarding conflicts involving Ukraine, Syria, and the Middle East, limiting collective responses to major international crises. This paralysis illustrates how geopolitical competition among major powers constrains the effectiveness of collective security mechanisms. Nevertheless, despite these disagreements, both countries continue cooperating within UN agencies on issues such as climate change, pandemic preparedness, sustainable development financing, and peacekeeping operations. This coexistence of competition and cooperation demonstrates the complexity of contemporary great-power relations.

7.3 The World Trade Organization: Crisis in the Rules-Based Trading System

The World Trade Organization represents one of the institutions most directly affected by U.S.–China competition. China's accession to the WTO in 2001 significantly accelerated global trade integration. American policymakers anticipated that market liberalization would encourage political and economic convergence. Instead, China's manufacturing competitiveness expanded dramatically, contributing to substantial shifts in global production networks.

By the late 2010s, growing American concerns centered on:

- Industrial subsidies
- State-owned enterprises
- Intellectual property protection
- Forced technology transfer
- Digital trade restrictions
- Market access limitations

These concerns culminated in the U.S.–China trade war beginning in 2018. Although tariff escalation has moderated, broader strategic competition continues through export controls, investment screening, industrial policy, and technology restrictions. Perhaps the most serious institutional consequence has been the paralysis of the WTO Appellate Body. The United States blocked appointments of new appellate judges, arguing that the dispute settlement mechanism exceeded its mandate and inadequately addressed contemporary trade challenges involving state capitalism. Without a fully functioning appellate mechanism, the WTO's ability to resolve trade disputes has weakened considerably.

China, meanwhile, presents itself as a defender of globalization while simultaneously pursuing industrial policies that many developed economies consider inconsistent with competitive neutrality. The resulting tension illustrates broader questions regarding whether existing trade rules remain appropriate for a global economy increasingly characterized by digital commerce, state intervention, strategic technologies, and supply-chain security.

7.4 The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank

The Bretton Woods institutions continue to play central roles in international development and financial stability. However, strategic competition increasingly influences debates regarding governance reforms, voting rights, development financing, and institutional legitimacy. China has become one of the largest contributors to global economic growth yet remains underrepresented relative to its economic size within IMF voting structures. Emerging economies similarly argue that governance arrangements no longer reflect twenty-first century economic realities. Repeated reform discussions have produced only incremental changes. Consequently, dissatisfaction among developing countries has encouraged support for alternative financial institutions.

Nevertheless, the IMF and World Bank remain indispensable during financial crises. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these institutions mobilized unprecedented financial assistance for developing economies. Rather than replacing them, China increasingly participates simultaneously in Bretton Woods institutions while strengthening parallel financial mechanisms. This dual strategy reflects institutional diversification rather than institutional replacement.

7.5 The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB): Complement or Challenger?

The establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in 2016 represented one of the most significant developments in international financial governance. Initially viewed by some Western analysts as a direct competitor to the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, the AIIB has instead adopted a cooperative operational model. Many projects receive joint financing from multiple development institutions. The AIIB addresses a major infrastructure financing gap across Asia estimated in trillions of dollars over coming decades.

Its emphasis on:

- Transportation
- Renewable energy
- Water infrastructure
- Urban development
- Digital connectivity

aligns closely with sustainable development objectives.

Importantly, numerous American allies—including Germany, France, Australia, Canada, Italy, and the United Kingdom—joined the institution despite initial U.S. reservations. This outcome illustrates an important feature of contemporary strategic competition: countries increasingly reject exclusive institutional alignment. Instead, states participate simultaneously in multiple institutions serving complementary purposes.

7.6 The Belt and Road Initiative as Institutional Statecraft

Although technically not an international organization, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) functions as an institutional framework linking infrastructure investment, development finance, diplomatic engagement, and regional integration. Since its announcement in 2013, more than 150 countries have signed cooperation agreements under various BRI frameworks.

Projects include:

- Railways
- Highways
- Deep-sea ports
- Airports
- Energy pipelines

- Fiber-optic networks
- Digital infrastructure
- Industrial parks

Supporters argue that the initiative addresses long-standing infrastructure deficits across developing countries while enhancing trade connectivity.

Critics emphasize concerns regarding:

- Debt sustainability
- Procurement transparency
- Environmental safeguards
- Political influence
- Dependence on Chinese financing

Empirical evidence suggests outcomes vary considerably across countries. Some projects have generated significant economic benefits through improved logistics and energy access. Others have experienced cost overruns, governance challenges, or financial difficulties. Therefore, simplistic narratives portraying the BRI as either entirely beneficial or inherently exploitative fail to capture its diversity. Rather, the initiative represents an evolving mechanism through which China expands both economic partnerships and institutional influence.

7.7 BRICS and the Reconfiguration of South-South Cooperation

The expansion of BRICS marks another significant institutional response to changing global power distributions. Originally established to promote dialogue among major emerging economies, BRICS has evolved into a broader platform advocating:

- Reform of global governance
- Greater representation for developing countries
- Increased South-South cooperation
- Financial diversification
- Expanded use of local currencies

Recent membership expansion demonstrates growing international interest in alternative diplomatic forums outside traditional Western institutions. Importantly, BRICS members differ considerably regarding political systems, security priorities, and foreign policy preferences.

Consequently, BRICS should not be interpreted as an anti-Western alliance. Instead, it functions as a coalition seeking greater influence within an increasingly multipolar international system. The establishment of the New Development Bank further illustrates this approach by providing additional financing options alongside existing multilateral development banks.

7.8 The G20: A Forum for Competitive Cooperation

The G20 increasingly occupies a central position in global governance. Unlike organizations dominated by either developed or developing countries, the G20 brings together advanced economies and emerging powers.

The United States and China both recognize the G20's importance for addressing:

- Financial stability
- Climate change
- Global health
- Debt sustainability
- Food security
- Digital governance

Despite broader geopolitical tensions, the G20 has remained one of the few forums where sustained dialogue continues. However, summit communiqués increasingly reflect difficult negotiations over geopolitical language, sanctions, development financing, and institutional reform. The G20 therefore illustrates both the possibilities and limitations of multilateral diplomacy under conditions of strategic competition.

7.9 ASEAN and Indo-Pacific Institutional Competition

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as the principal geographical arena of U.S.–China strategic rivalry.

China seeks regional influence through:

- Belt and Road investments
- Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)
- Maritime connectivity
- Infrastructure financing

Meanwhile, the United States promotes:

- The Quad
- AUKUS

- Indo-Pacific Economic Framework
- Expanded defense partnerships

ASEAN has responded by emphasizing "ASEAN Centrality." Rather than aligning exclusively with either power, Southeast Asian countries seek inclusive regional institutions that preserve strategic autonomy. Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam, and Malaysia all maintain significant economic relations with China while strengthening security cooperation with the United States and regional partners. This balancing strategy increasingly characterizes middle-power diplomacy.

7.10 The African Union and Africa's Strategic Importance

Africa has become an increasingly important arena for strategic competition. China remains Africa's largest bilateral trading partner and a major source of infrastructure financing.

Chinese investment spans:

- Railways
- Ports
- Roads
- Telecommunications
- Mining
- Renewable energy

The United States has responded through initiatives emphasizing:

- Democratic governance
- Digital infrastructure
- Health cooperation
- Private-sector investment
- Security partnerships

African governments increasingly reject Cold War-style alignment.

Instead, many pursue diversified partnerships aimed at maximizing development opportunities. The African Union similarly advocates reform of global governance institutions, including permanent African representation on the United Nations Security Council. These demands align with broader calls from the Global South for a more representative international order.

7.11 Institutional Fragmentation or Institutional Evolution?

One of the central debates in contemporary international relations concerns whether current developments represent fragmentation or adaptation.

Three competing perspectives dominate the literature.

Institutional Fragmentation

Some scholars argue that competing institutions reduce coherence, create overlapping mandates, and weaken global governance through duplication and geopolitical polarization.

Institutional Adaptation

Others contend that institutional diversity increases resilience by providing alternative mechanisms for cooperation where traditional institutions face political deadlock.

Institutional Pluralism

A third perspective suggests the emergence of a pluralistic international system in which multiple institutions coexist.

Rather than replacing one another, organizations increasingly specialize according to comparative advantages. Empirical evidence increasingly supports this third interpretation. Countries frequently maintain simultaneous membership across institutions associated with both Washington and Beijing. This reflects pragmatic diplomacy rather than ideological alignment.

7.12 Synthesis

The evidence presented above demonstrates that U.S.–China strategic competition is not dismantling international institutions but fundamentally transforming them. Rather than a simple contest between existing and emerging organizations, the evolving global order is characterized by institutional layering, functional overlap, and competitive coexistence. China is pursuing a dual strategy of increasing influence within established institutions while constructing complementary mechanisms such as the AIIB, the Belt and Road Initiative, the New Development Bank, and an expanded BRICS. The United States, meanwhile, seeks to reinforce the liberal rules-based order through alliance networks, institutional reforms, and new regional partnerships.

For most states—particularly middle powers—the emerging order is defined less by binary choices than by strategic flexibility. Governments increasingly participate in multiple institutions simultaneously, leveraging different forums to advance national interests while preserving autonomy. This pattern suggests that the future international system is unlikely to resemble either the post-Cold War unipolar moment or the rigid bipolarity of the Cold War. Instead, it points toward a more complex, networked, and institutionally plural global order.

8. Middle Powers in the New Global Order: Comparative Case Studies

8.1 Introduction

One of the defining characteristics of the emerging international order is the growing strategic importance of middle powers. During the Cold War, many middle-income and regional powers aligned themselves with either the United States or the Soviet Union for ideological, military, or economic reasons. In contrast, today's middle powers increasingly reject binary alignments and instead pursue strategic autonomy, hedging, and issue-based partnerships. Middle powers possess sufficient economic, diplomatic, military, or regional influence to shape international outcomes without possessing the comprehensive capabilities of great powers (Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993). Their growing importance stems from three interrelated developments. First, the diffusion of global power has reduced the dominance of any single hegemon. Second, globalization has diversified economic partnerships, allowing states to engage multiple major powers simultaneously. Third, contemporary international institutions provide middle powers with opportunities to influence global governance through coalition-building and multilateral diplomacy. This section examines how eight influential middle powers—India, Brazil, Australia, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, South Africa, and Nigeria—have responded to U.S.–China strategic competition.

8.2 India: Strategic Autonomy in Practice

India represents perhaps the most significant example of contemporary strategic autonomy. As the world's most populous country, a rapidly growing economy, and an emerging military power, India occupies a pivotal position in Indo-Pacific geopolitics. Historically, Indian foreign policy emphasized non-alignment during the Cold War. Although the international environment has changed substantially, New Delhi continues to prioritize policy independence rather than formal alliance commitments. India simultaneously participates in multiple institutions that include both the United States and China:

- BRICS
- Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)
- G20
- Quad (with the United States, Japan, and Australia)
- Indo-Pacific Economic initiatives

This overlapping institutional participation illustrates India's multidimensional foreign policy. Economically, China remains one of India's largest trading partners despite persistent border disputes. Simultaneously, India has significantly expanded defense cooperation with the United States through intelligence sharing, logistics agreements, military exercises, and technology partnerships. Pant (2023) argues that India's foreign policy increasingly reflects multi-alignment, enabling cooperation with different partners across distinct policy domains. Rather than choosing between Washington and Beijing, India seeks to maximize strategic flexibility while enhancing its own status as an independent great power.

8.3 Brazil: Reform Through Multilateralism

Brazil has long advocated reform of international institutions while avoiding ideological polarization. As Latin America's largest economy, Brazil seeks greater representation for developing countries within global governance institutions.

Its foreign policy traditionally emphasizes:

- Multilateral diplomacy
- South-South cooperation
- Peaceful conflict resolution
- Institutional reform

Brazil maintains extensive agricultural and commodity exports to China while preserving important political, financial, and technological relationships with the United States and Europe. Within BRICS, Brazil supports reform rather than replacement of the Bretton Woods system. Brazilian diplomacy illustrates that institutional diversification does not necessarily imply opposition to the existing liberal order. Instead, Brazil advocates a more representative and equitable international system.

8.4 Australia: Economic Interdependence and Security Dependence

Australia demonstrates the complexity of balancing economic interests with security commitments.

China has become Australia's largest trading partner, particularly in:

- Iron ore
- Natural gas
- Agricultural exports
- Education

- Tourism

However, Australia's security architecture remains closely integrated with the United States.

Recent initiatives include:

- AUKUS
- Expanded Quad cooperation
- Intelligence sharing through the Five Eyes alliance
- Enhanced defense modernization

Periods of diplomatic tension between Canberra and Beijing have illustrated the risks associated with excessive economic dependence upon a strategic competitor. Consequently, Australia has accelerated trade diversification while strengthening domestic resilience. The Australian case demonstrates that economic interdependence does not eliminate strategic competition. Instead, states increasingly compartmentalize economic and security relationships.

8.5 Indonesia: ASEAN Centrality and Strategic Balance

Indonesia occupies a unique position within Southeast Asia. As ASEAN's largest member and one of the world's fastest-growing economies, Indonesia consistently promotes regional stability through inclusive diplomacy.

Rather than aligning with either Washington or Beijing, Jakarta emphasizes:

- ASEAN Centrality
- Regional dialogue
- Maritime security
- Economic integration
- Strategic neutrality

Indonesia benefits significantly from Chinese infrastructure investment while simultaneously expanding defense cooperation with the United States, Japan, Australia, and European partners. Its approach reflects what scholars describe as hedging—maintaining productive relations with competing great powers while avoiding excessive dependence upon either. Indonesia's diplomacy demonstrates that regional organizations can provide middle powers with collective bargaining power.

8.6 Saudi Arabia: Diversification Beyond Traditional Alliances

Saudi Arabia illustrates the transformation occurring within Middle Eastern diplomacy. For decades, Riyadh maintained an exceptionally close strategic partnership with the United States centered on energy markets and regional security. Recent years have witnessed significant diversification. China has become one of Saudi Arabia's largest energy customers and an increasingly important investment partner.

Saudi Arabia has expanded cooperation with China in:

- Energy
- Digital technology
- Infrastructure
- Artificial intelligence
- Manufacturing

Meanwhile, security cooperation with the United States remains extensive. The Kingdom's participation in BRICS reflects broader efforts to diversify diplomatic partnerships while preserving strategic flexibility. This multidirectional diplomacy exemplifies how middle powers increasingly maximize opportunities arising from great-power competition.

8.7 Turkey: Strategic Autonomy Within NATO

Turkey presents another important example of strategic balancing. Although a longstanding NATO member, Ankara has pursued increasingly independent foreign policies.

Turkey maintains:

- Defense cooperation with NATO
- Economic engagement with China
- Energy partnerships with Russia
- Expanding diplomatic influence across Africa and Central Asia

Its procurement of Russian S-400 missile systems despite NATO objections illustrates willingness to pursue autonomous security decisions. Simultaneously, Turkey continues participating in Western institutions while strengthening commercial ties with Asia. This demonstrates that alliance membership no longer guarantees complete strategic alignment.

8.8 South Africa: African Leadership and South-South Cooperation

South Africa remains one of Africa's most influential diplomatic actors.

As a BRICS member, South Africa advocates:

- Reform of global governance
- Increased African representation
- Development financing
- South-South cooperation

China has become South Africa's largest trading partner.

Nevertheless, South Africa maintains strong commercial, educational, and political relationships with Western economies. Pretoria frequently emphasizes non-alignment regarding major geopolitical disputes. Rather than choosing sides, South Africa seeks institutional reforms that increase opportunities for developing countries. Its diplomacy reflects broader African preferences for inclusive multilateralism.

8.9 Nigeria: Africa's Emerging Middle Power

Nigeria possesses unique strategic importance due to its demographic size, economic potential, and regional influence. As Africa's most populous country and one of its largest economies, Nigeria increasingly occupies an important position within contemporary global governance discussions.

Nigeria's foreign policy has historically emphasized:

- African regional leadership
- Peacekeeping
- Multilateral diplomacy
- Economic development
- Strategic autonomy

China has become a major infrastructure partner through investments in:

- Rail transportation
- Highway construction
- Telecommunications
- Power infrastructure
- Manufacturing

Simultaneously, Nigeria maintains important partnerships with the United States in:

- Security cooperation
- Counterterrorism
- Education
- Technology
- Private investment

Rather than viewing these partnerships as mutually exclusive, Nigeria increasingly adopts diversified engagement strategies. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) further strengthens Nigeria's regional economic importance.

Nigeria also supports reforms including:

- Permanent African representation on the UN Security Council
- Greater African voting power within Bretton Woods institutions
- Expanded development financing
- Fairer international trade rules

As competition between major powers intensifies, Nigeria's diplomatic leverage is likely to increase because both Washington and Beijing recognize Africa's growing strategic significance.

8.10 Comparative Analysis of Middle-Power Strategies

The eight case studies reveal several common patterns.

Strategic Autonomy

None of the examined middle powers seeks exclusive dependence upon either the United States or China. Instead, governments increasingly pursue diversified partnerships.

Hedging

Middle powers cooperate with different major powers across separate policy areas.

Examples include:

Policy Area	Preferred Partner
Security	Often United States
Trade	Often China
Infrastructure	China and Multilateral Banks
Technology	Multiple Partners
Climate Cooperation	Both
Development Finance	Multiple Institutions

This issue-specific cooperation represents one of the defining characteristics of the emerging international order.

Institutional Multiplicity

Middle powers increasingly belong simultaneously to institutions associated with competing powers.

For example:

India belongs to:

- BRICS
- Quad
- SCO
- G20

Australia participates in:

- AUKUS
- Quad
- WTO
- G20

Saudi Arabia participates in:

- G20
- BRICS
- OPEC+

These overlapping memberships illustrate institutional pluralism rather than ideological alignment.

Economic Diversification

Countries increasingly seek diversified investment sources. Rather than replacing one major partner with another, governments maximize competition among investors.

9. Implications for Africa

Africa has become one of the principal arenas where strategic competition is reshaping international relations. Unlike previous periods characterized primarily by aid dependence, African governments increasingly negotiate with multiple external partners.

China's engagement emphasizes:

- Infrastructure
- Manufacturing
- Industrial parks
- Transportation
- Energy

The United States increasingly focuses upon:

- Digital infrastructure
- Democratic governance
- Health
- Entrepreneurship
- Private investment

The European Union emphasizes:

- Green transition
- Climate finance
- Sustainable infrastructure

India, Türkiye, Japan, South Korea, and Gulf states have also expanded African engagement. Consequently, African governments possess greater bargaining power than during previous decades.

However, maximizing these opportunities requires:

- Strong institutions
- Transparent procurement

- Debt sustainability
- Effective governance
- Regional integration

The African Continental Free Trade Area represents perhaps the continent's most important institutional response to changing global economic dynamics.

If successfully implemented, AfCFTA could significantly strengthen Africa's collective bargaining position within global governance.

Conclusion

The international system is undergoing a significant transformation driven by the strategic competition between the United States and China, marking a shift from the post-Cold War liberal order to a more complex and multipolar global system. This rivalry extends beyond military affairs to encompass economic governance, technological innovation, institutional influence, development finance, and global norm-setting. Rather than replacing existing international institutions, China's growing influence through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the New Development Bank (NDB), and an expanded BRICS has diversified the global governance landscape alongside established institutions like the United Nations, World Bank, IMF, and WTO.

The study finds that international institutions have become active arenas of strategic competition while remaining essential platforms for cooperation on global challenges such as climate change, health security, and sustainable development. It also highlights the increasing importance of middle powers—including India, Brazil, Australia, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, South Africa, and Nigeria—which are pursuing strategies of strategic autonomy, hedging, and multi-alignment rather than aligning exclusively with either the United States or China. Africa, in particular, has emerged as a key geopolitical arena, presenting both development opportunities and governance challenges as external powers compete for influence.

The analysis concludes that no single international relations theory fully explains the evolving global order, making an integrated approach combining Realism, Power Transition Theory, and Liberal Institutionalism more appropriate. The future international system is expected to be characterized by multiple centers of power, overlapping institutions, and flexible partnerships rather than domination by a single superpower. To maintain global stability, international institutions must become more representative, transparent, and adaptable, while policymakers should strengthen multilateral cooperation and institutional reforms. Ultimately, the new global order represents a decentralized and interconnected system in which both major and middle powers play increasingly important roles in shaping the future of global governance.

11. Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several policy recommendations emerge.

For International Institutions

- Accelerate reform of the United Nations Security Council to improve representation.
- Modernize IMF and World Bank voting structures to reflect current economic realities.
- Restore the WTO dispute settlement mechanism.
- Enhance cooperation between established and emerging multilateral development banks.

For the United States and China

- Maintain institutional dialogue despite strategic rivalry.
- Expand cooperation on global public goods, including climate change, pandemics, and food security.
- Avoid excessive securitization of economic interdependence.
- Promote transparent standards for digital governance and emerging technologies.

For Middle Powers

- Continue diversified foreign policies that preserve strategic autonomy.
- Strengthen regional organizations as platforms for collective bargaining.
- Invest in technological capacity, digital infrastructure, and human capital.
- Utilize issue-based coalitions to shape international norms.

For African States

- Deepen regional economic integration through AfCFTA.
- Improve governance and debt management.
- Negotiate infrastructure projects using transparent procurement standards.
- Expand investment in innovation, education, and industrialization.

- Pursue balanced engagement with all major partners while safeguarding national interests.

Author Contributions

Mukhtar Imam: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration**. Joseph O. Odama**: Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Investigation. **Francis C. Okpo**: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Investigation.

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