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Middle Powers and the Global South in a Multipolar Era:

Reconfiguring the Liberal International Order

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Abstract

The LIO has been touted, for most of the post–Cold War era, as a set of universal rules and institutions anchored in U.S. primacy, market openness, and multilateral cooperation. But that order was always, in fact, characterized by power asymmetries, selective enforcement of norms, and uneven benefits across regions. Today, it is under severe strain. Great-power rivalry, war in Ukraine, ongoing violence in the Middle East, economic insecurity, and climate breakdown are remaking how states understand both “hegemony” and “order.”

This article explores the international system poised between an eroding hegemonic order and a messy, emergent multipolarity. It zeroes in on the role of middle powers and developing states, in particular in the Global South, in contesting, adapting, and partly rebuilding the liberal order. The paper first clarifies the core concepts: hegemony, liberal order, multipolarity, middle powers, and the Global South. It then discusses the crisis of the liberal order, with attention to legitimacy deficits and lived consequences for societies confronted with war, debt, and climate vulnerability. A third section examines how middle powers and developing states act in key arenas such as conflict diplomacy, climate negotiations, global health, and economic governance. The article contends that these actors are anything but passive objects of great-power competition; they form increasingly the pivot of a hybrid order in which elements of liberal

institutions, renewed claims of sovereignty, and new forms of South–South cooperation are combined.

The conclusion outlines a research agenda for studying how these states influence norms, institutions, and everyday outcomes, suggesting that the future of international order will be negotiated not only in Washington and Beijing but also in Brasília, New Delhi, Pretoria, Ankara, Jakarta, and beyond.

Keywords: liberal international order, hegemony, multipolarity, middle powers, developing states, Global South, global governance

1. Introduction

The term "rules-based international order" trips off the tongues of Western leaders, but to many in the Global South, it is a hollow slogan. As some societies were falling behind those that seemed to be integrating into a liberal economic and security order, others lived with sanctions, structural adjustment, uneven trade rules, and wars justified by appeals to liberal values.

Meanwhile, people everywhere experienced globalization through the concrete pressures of lost jobs, rising food and fuel prices, fragile health systems, and climate disasters.

The past ten years have seen a succession of crises that have revealed the fragility of that order: the global financial crisis, intervention in Iraq, Russia's annexation of Crimea and full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the escalation of U.S.-China rivalry, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ongoing war and humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza have all undermined claims about the stability, fairness, or universality of the liberal order. The domestic polarizations experienced by key Western democracies have done little to restore faith in liberal models.

But this is not only a narrative of breakdown. At the same time, there has been an upsurge in the level of assertiveness exercised by various middle powers and developing states: challenging

double standards, pressing reform of international institutions, creating or rejuvenating BRICS and the G20 coalitions, conflict mediation, and demanding more say in climate, health, and trade governance. What these states share is perhaps less ideology than an aversion to taking sides in great-power rivalries and a wish to have more space for maneuver.

This article asks how middle powers and developing states-especially from the Global South-influence the transformation of the liberal international order in its journey between hegemony and multipolarity. Rather than assuming a clean transition from one order to another, the paper treats the present moment as one of overlapping, contested orders in which different actors pull the system in divergent directions.

The analysis is primarily conceptual and synthetic, building on existing theories and empirical examples to construct a framework that can inform further research and help link high-level debates about order to the lived experience of people affected by international decisions.

2. Concepts: Hegemony, Liberal Order, Multipolarity, and the Global South

2.1 Hegemony and the liberal international order

In International Relations, "hegemony" usually means a situation wherein one state - or a small group - holds sufficient material and ideational power to shape rules and institutions in its favor. Since 1945, the United States has directed the construction of a web of institutions - like the UN, Bretton Woods system, NATO, GATT/WTO, among others - and propagated a package of liberal norms: open markets, embedded multilateralism, and selectively, human rights and democracy.

This "liberal international order" was never purely a matter of altruism. It served U.S. strategic and economic interests, and many governments in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East experienced it as a mix of opportunity, pressure, and constraint. For some, integration into

global markets and institutions brought growth and relative stability; for others, it meant dependence on volatile capital flows, exposure to external crises, and limited policy space.

2.2 Multipolarity

"Multipolarity" designates a distribution of power where a number of states have significant capabilities and influence. The concept does not by necessity imply balance and equity; most past multipolar systems were unstable. What is unique today is not merely the re-emergence of several centers of power-the United States, China, the European Union, Russia, India, among others-but that they function in an interdependent world embedded in cross-border supply chains, digital networks, and global ecological limits.

Multipolarity in the 21st century thereby brings together traditional concerns about security and hierarchy with new issues about climate governance, data control, and global health, where non-hegemonic states and non-state actors can have disproportionate impact.

2.3 Middle powers

"Middle powers" are states that, while not considered superpowers, do hold remarkable economic, diplomatic, or normative influence. They typically:

Support multilateral institutions and rules, at least rhetorically

Use mediation, coalition-building, and niche expertise to influence outcomes

Present themselves as bridge-builders between major powers and smaller states.

Traditional examples include Canada, Australia, and several European states. In the contemporary Global South, Brazil, South Africa, India, Indonesia, Turkey, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and others often act as middle powers in particular issue areas.

2.4 Developing states and the Global South

The economic category of "developing states" stretches over a very wide range of countries with quite diverse political systems and income levels. The "Global South," in turn, is more explicitly political: it refers to states and societies whose historical experience of colonialism, dependency, and marginalization shapes a common sense of grievance and aspiration, even where their interests diverge.

Not all middle powers are from the Global South, and not all developing states act as middle powers. But many of the most consequential middle powers today are emerging economies in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East that speak the language of Global South solidarity while pursuing their own strategic goals.

3. The Crisis of Liberal International Order

3.1 Structural and legitimacy crises

The liberal order faces at least two intertwined crises:

Structural crisis of power distribution: The relative economic weight of the United States and its close allies has declined, whereas China, India, and other emerging economies have grown.

Russia, although economically limited, has shown a willingness to use force to challenge aspects of the post–Cold War security order. This shift makes it harder for any single power to underwrite global public goods or enforce rules.

Crisis of legitimacy and equity: Many governments and societies see the liberal order as selective and unfair. Military interventions, often legitimized as humanitarian or democracy-promoting, have more often produced devastation rather than stability. Trade and financial rules are viewed as serving the interests of the rich. Responses to crises—the global financial crisis and COVID-19—laid bare double standards: Rich states could marshal enormous fiscal resources, while poorer states faced debt and austerity.

For ordinary people, these crises are not abstract. They manifest in unemployment, rising living costs, fragile public services, and a sense that international rules protect some lives more than others.

3.2 Double standards and contested norms

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 precipitated a very forceful normative response in Europe and North America, with high rhetorical emphasis on sovereignty, territorial integrity, and accountability for war crimes. Many Global South states condemned the invasion but were skeptical of the broader narrative. They quickly drew attention to other situations where international law was perceived as selectively applied, not least the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict and recent military interventions in the Middle East and elsewhere.

This perceived asymmetry has three important consequences:

It undermines trust in the universality of international law and human rights.

It encourages states to hedge rather than fully align with Western agendas.

It opens political space for alternative narratives about order, such as "multipolarity," "strategic autonomy," or "Global South solidarity."

3.3 Multilateral fatigue and functional crises

The global institutional system lacks effective responses to interrelated crises such as climate change, food insecurity, pandemics, financial instability, and technological disruption.

Negotiations are slow, vetoes in the UN Security Council are frequent, and major powers increasingly use informal coalitions, sanctions, and ad-hoc arrangements to bypass cumbersome multilateral processes.

This translates into meager, sometimes fragmented, international responses for vulnerable communities to face existential threats, such as climate-induced disasters or waves of pandemics.

Developing states suffer from a cruel paradox: they are asked to adhere to global rules on emissions, finance, or migration, yet they have little impact on shaping those very same rules.

4. Middle Powers as Bridge-Builders, Balancers, and Entrepreneurs

Middle powers and emerging economies fall into an in-between space between hegemony and marginalization. Their strategies tend to be flexible and dependent on the context.

4.1 Bridge-building and mediation

A number of middle powers position themselves as mediators in conflicts where great-power involvement is too polarized:

In negotiations pertaining to the war in Ukraine, some Global South states have offered to host talks or propose frameworks for peace, even when they have limited leverage over the main belligerents.

Regional middle powers in the Middle East have also played roles in cease-fire talks, prisoner exchanges, and humanitarian access, sometimes coordinating with both Western states and non-Western powers.

These efforts often fail in the short term, but they signal a claim to diplomatic space beyond the traditional “great power–small state” dynamic.

4.2 Selective alignment and strategic autonomy

Many middle powers pursue "strategic autonomy": they maintain defense or security ties with Western powers while deepening economic and technological links with China and others.

Rather than choosing sides, they diversify:

Purchasing arms from various suppliers

Joining Western-led trade or security arrangements while concurrently taking part in BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, or other non-Western forums.

Cooperating on specific security questions with the U.S. while opposing its stances regarding sanctions or intellectual property

This hedging strategy is meant to navigate between hegemonic pressure and the uncertainties of multipolarity.

4.3 Norm entrepreneurship

Middle powers often champion specific norms that correspond to their interests and identities, including:

The "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) promoted by some Western and non-Western middle powers in earlier years

Climate justice and a right to development, particularly for the large vulnerable populations among emerging economies

Data sovereignty and digital rights as some states push back against major tech powers dominance.

By framing these issues in moral and legal terms, they do more than defend narrow interests; they contest and reshape the language of international legitimacy.

5. Developing States and Global South Agency

Developing states are not a monolithic bloc, but many share experiences that inform their behavior:

5.1 Historical memory and grievance

These are histories of colonization, Cold War proxy conflicts, and structural adjustment that have left deep marks on both political elites and publics. Past experiences of imposed economic recipes or selective security partnerships fuel skepticism toward calls for "shared values" when those seem to ignore persistent inequalities.

This historical memory is not merely rhetorical. It influences voting patterns within international organizations, the disposition to join in sanctions, and the terms on which states accept external assistance.

5.2 South–South cooperation and alternative platforms

A reaction to perceived Northern dominance, developing states have strengthened South–South cooperation:

Expanded membership and activity within groupings such as BRICS and the G77.

Increased use of regional organizations by countries in Africa, Latin America, and Asia to handle crises and bargain collectively.

Experimentation with alternative financing mechanisms, such as regional development banks and special funds for infrastructure or climate adaptation.

These initiatives do not substitute for the liberal order; they add layers to it, making the institutional landscape more complex and plural.

5.3 Everyday consequences: debt, climate, and health

Apart from high politics, international order influences daily life in developing countries in the following ways:

Debt and Austerity: Many low- and middle-income states bear a high level of external debt that impedes investments in health, education, and climate resilience.

Vulnerability to climate change: The countries that have contributed least to global emissions are often those facing the severest impacts: droughts, floods, storms, and food insecurity.

Health disparities: The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the blatant inequity in vaccine access and health system capacity.

Developing states use these injustices to argue for changes in global rules: more fair debt restructuring, loss-and-damage finance, more equitable intellectual property regimes for life-saving technologies, and stronger representation in decision-making bodies.

6. Key Arenas of Contestation and Cooperation

6.1 Conflict and international humanitarian law

In conflicts such as Ukraine and Gaza, middle powers, and Global South states have played complex roles:

Some have condemned violations of IHL but refused to join broad sanctions or provide weapons.

Others have favored regional stability or their own security relationships over strong normative positions.

Many have criticized what they see as uneven outrage: intense focus on one conflict and relative silence on others.

These positions add to a larger debate about the credibility of IHL. To the extent rules are seen as the tools of powerful states, their potential to protect civilians is undermined. Some middle powers seek renewed commitment to IHL that is visibly applied to all parties, in an attempt to rescue its legitimacy rather than abandon it.

6.2 Climate negotiations

One of the main fields where tension between hegemony and multipolarity may be visible is climate diplomacy.

Industrialized states focus on the need to reduce global emissions and pledges to reach net-zero.

Developing states emphasize historical responsibility, development needs, and the right to energy access.

In the Global South, many middle powers hold dual positions of being big emitters and also being highly vulnerable to climate impacts. They advocate for:

Larger and more predictable climate finance

Technology transfer and fair rules for green industrialization

Recognition of "loss and damage" and mechanisms for compensation to the most affected countries

These negotiations demonstrate an intersection of normative language on justice, responsibility, and solidarity with material interests.

6.3 Global health

During COVID-19, vaccine nationalism and export restrictions by major powers left many developing states at the back of the queue. Some middle powers with pharmaceutical capacity, for example India, emerged as major vaccine suppliers or advocates for intellectual property waivers.

This episode highlighted the fragility of any notion that liberal globalization might naturally produce shared health security. Global South coalitions now push for reforms in how pandemics are governed, seeking more equitable access to vaccines, diagnostics, and treatments, and more voice in shaping global health rules.

6.4 Economic governance and finance

Debates over reform of the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and international tax rules are at the heart of how hegemony and multipolarity come into play economically.

Some of the key demands include increased voting power and leadership positions in global financial institutions.

States facing chronic debt cycles call for fairer restructuring mechanisms and relief.

Proposals for alternative payment systems and reserve currencies, as discussed in BRICS forums, challenge the dominance of the U.S. dollar and, with that, any single power's ability to wield the monetary system as a geopolitical tool.

Middle powers often lead such initiatives, not because they reject global integration but because they want terms of integration that leave greater policy space.

7. Normative Implications: Justice, Sovereignty, and Solidarity

The international order between hegemony and multipolarity poses difficult normative questions:

Justice: Would a more plural order be capable of tackling deep inequalities in wealth, vulnerability, and historical responsibility, or would power be merely redistributed among various elites in different capitals?

Sovereignty: The calls for respect of sovereignty can protect the weaker states, yet they can also be used in ways to shield abuses. Balancing sovereignty with meaningful protection of human rights remains a central dilemma.

Solidarity: Appeals to Global South solidarity exist alongside national interests and domestic politics. Whether such solidarity translates into concrete cooperation towards climate action, debt justice, or peacebuilding is an open question.

For those living in fragile states, these are not academic questions. They determine whether there is financing for climate adaptation, whether lifesaving medicines are affordable, whether wars wind down or drag on, and whether migration will be framed as a security threat or a human reality.

8. Directions for Future Research

The article has synthesized major debates and indicated the significance of middle powers and developing states in the transition from hegemony to multipolarity. Future empirical research could:

Compare middle-power strategies across regions, such as Brazil vs. Turkey vs. Indonesia, in terms of how domestic politics and regional environments shape their roles.

Map vote patterns and coalition behavior in the UN, WTO, WHO, and climate conferences to explore where the agency of the Global South is most visible and successful.

Undertake interviews and elite surveys among diplomats, officials, and civil society actors in middle-income and low-income countries to gain a better understanding of how they view the liberal order and its transformation.

Investigate the local implications of international decisions; for instance, see how climate finance or debt restructuring agreements result in policies affecting particular communities.

Such research would help connect high-level talk about "order" with the lives of people coping with conflict, economic shocks, and environmental change.

9. Conclusion

The international system today sits uncomfortably between an eroding hegemonic order and a still-uncertain multipolarity. The liberal international order has lost much of its unchallenged authority, but its institutions and norms have not disappeared. Rather, they coexist with new coalitions, alternative financing mechanisms, and a growing insistence from middle powers and developing states that their interests and experiences must shape global rules.

The argument of this article is that these states are anything but marginal spectators. They are bridge-builders in diplomacy, entrepreneurs of new norms, and architects of alternative

institutional arrangements. Yet they are also constrained by domestic needs, regional rivalries, and structural inequalities that delimit how far they are able to transform the system.

The future of the international order will be neither a simple continuation of U.S. hegemony nor a neat replacement by a rival bloc. It will be a layered and contested landscape in which multiple centers of power, diverse norms, and competing claims to justice intersect. Understanding that landscape requires paying serious attention to the strategies, dilemmas, and voices of middle powers and developing states in the Global South – and to the people whose lives are directly affected by the choices these states make.

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