



Reassessing Hegemony: Power Dynamics and Sustainable Development in a Multipolar World

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Abstract

The lessons learned from the failure of America's "unipolar moment" are highlighting the need for lasting and stable international cooperation based on genuine institutions and shared authority that can withstand shifts in global power. After the Cold War, the U. S. had significant power and global acceptance that could have built a strong international order. However, the U. S. relied on its dominant position, and its actions, often disguised as promoting a liberal order, revealed hypocrisy and created great controversy. With the rise of nations like China, India, and Brazil in the early 21st century the world gradually shifted into a multipolar world order. The intricate nature of power distribution in this new era implies that emerging powers might pose a threat to established hegemonies, which could result in instability. However, tensions can be lessened via diplomacy and ultimately "cooperative multipolarity". One of the most important challenges is integrating emerging countries into international frameworks, particularly those pertaining to the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations, without replicating prior hegemonic practices. The accumulation of wealth and the erosion of multilateral agreements are the result of inadequate global governance regulation. As evidenced by the 2008 financial crisis, which demonstrated the shortcomings of multilateralism in addressing financial imbalances, institutions are unable to hold powerful countries and companies accountable. This has resulted in public skepticism about these institutions, as many believe they cater to elite interests rather than serving broader society resulting in a global rise of populism, nationalism and even fascism. Consequently, there is a pressing need for transforming global governance to better reflect today's diverse economic and political landscape.

Keywords: global governance; hegemonic practices; international cooperation multilateralism; sustainability

1. Introduction

This study employs a theoretical synthesis approach to examine power dynamics and sustainable development in a multipolar world. It focuses on how emerging countries fit into international frameworks, specifically the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The goal is to find and explain policy principles that help this integration without copying past global governance practices. It also examines how cooperative multipolarity, with its unique methods of multilateral cooperation and competition, influences the success of the SDGs in different geopolitical situations.

Cooperative multipolarity is a theoretical framework envisioning a future world with multiple, equally powerful entities that can cooperate on global issues instead of competing. This model contrasts with traditional systems prone to conflict due to power imbalances. While fully realized cooperative multipolarity is theoretical, elements can be seen in real-world examples like the G20, which brings together major economies for cooperation, albeit limited by differing national interests. The Paris Agreement illustrates collaboration among major emitters on climate change, despite geopolitical rivalries. Additionally, institutions like the AIIB and BRICS New Development Bank show efforts by emerging powers to create alternative structures to Western-dominated institutions, but their success in global cooperation is still being determined. Challenges remain, as significant competition and distrust among major powers can hinder collaborative efforts, making cooperative multipolarity a normative ideal that requires a shift in perspectives among global actors.

1.1 From Unipolar Moment to Multipolar Moment

After World War II, the international system was influenced by the winning allies and institutions like the United Nations and NATO, leading to Western dominance. However, countries in Asia and Latin America have started to push back, creating a more multipolar world (Ívanov, 2025).

During Cold War I (1947-89), the Political West faced limitations due to the presence of the Soviet bloc. With the collapse of this bloc from 1989-91, the Political West began to claim universal power which created problems. The current global system is facing significant threats. The UN Security Council is now more of a place for great power conflicts than a venue for solving disputes. There are calls for UN reform, but meaningful changes require a shift in international politics. This gives rise to the Political East, a new counter-hegemonic order that aims to oppose Western dominance while upholding important global norms (Sakwa, 2025).

Following the Cold War, the U. S. emerged as a dominant power, and some scholars believed this would promote democracy and global cooperation (Fritzsche & Fukuyama, 1992) and yet, in the early 21st century, new powers like China, India, and Brazil began to challenge this dominance (Nye, 2019).

The radical turn of the Political West after communism has even harmed earlier successes. There is a struggle between sovereign and democratic internationalism. There is a clash between charter liberalism, which promotes a diverse international community, and liberal anti-pluralism, which can exclude non-liberal regimes (Simpson, 2001). The former is about managing diverse communities, while the latter is an exclusive form of liberalism that pushes for a singular liberal doctrine (Sakwa, 2025).

Polarity refers to how power is distributed among states and helps explain cooperation, conflict, and stability. According to Frankel and Waltz (1980) bipolar systems are usually more stable than multipolar ones because of simpler power dynamics but Mearsheimer (2019) argues that unipolarity is unstable as it prompts other states to balance against a dominant power. In contrast, Ikenberry (2011) believes that the post-World War II liberal order can help manage transitions without conflict, but fragmentation may occur if it's not maintained and argues that the decline of unipolarity need not lead to global instability if emerging powers are incorporated into existing frameworks of cooperation and governance. Constructivist views emphasize the importance of ideas and perceptions in these changes. Together, these theories provide various perspectives on the current transition in global power dynamics (Ívanov, 2025).

The postcommunist era saw a clear divide between sovereign internationalism and cosmopolitan universalism. This division reflects a tension between a belief that only one system of ideas is correct, and all others are wrong (Machinean Trap). During the Cold War, while this view was common, there was acknowledgment of the Soviet bloc and despite conflicts, diplomatic norms were maintained, enabling a peaceful end to the Cold War (Diesen, 2017).

In the postcommunist era, the US-led Atlantic power system redefined itself as the liberal international order, claiming universality. This claim was challenged by other major powers, reducing pluralism in international politics. While the US played a key role in creating post-war global governance institutions, such as the UN and the World Trade Organization, these belong to all humanity, not just a single power system. The perception of the 'rules-based order' as a usurpation led to resistance from Russia, China, and many Global South countries. The promise of democracy faded after 1989 (Holmes, 2019). A broader failure occurred in envisioning how to reshape the European security order, build a positive peace from Lisbon to Vladivostok, and develop new politics of development that would blend tradition with innovation (Sakwa, 2025).

After the Cold War, the US-led liberal international order became more extreme (Sakwa, 2024), as there was no strong competitor to challenge it. The Political West became closed off and indifferent to outside views and concerns. This development revealed a sense of arrogance and intolerance towards different social systems and traditional lifestyles (Pabst, 2018). Although this universal approach was destined to fail, it still influenced the era significantly (Dar, 2019).

The postcommunist era has also seen a decline in the value of diplomacy, with more expulsions and closures of diplomatic offices. This situation makes peaceful conflict resolution more difficult (Sakwa, 2025). The Charter system is facing serious threats due to efforts to privatize its institutions or push them aside. However, there is a growing movement to support the 1945 system, and the idea of multipolarity is gaining traction (Sakwa, 2024).

Global power is in crisis and traditional structures of dominance are changing. This change is driven by factors like the shift of influence from the West to the East, a growing global political awareness, and flaws in U. S. foreign policy since the 1990s. The rise of China, India, and other emerging markets are reshaping the geopolitical landscape and weakening the long-standing Western-centered order. This shift is not just economic but also political, as countries in Asia and Latin America seek greater roles in global governance. The rise of digital communication and social media has increased political awareness among marginalized groups, leading to more challenges to established power through protests and calls for a multipolar world (Brzeziński, 2012).

This interregnum indicates a break between past and future periods, often marking the transition between rulers (Ívanov, 2023). One of Gramsci's most quoted phrases is his 1930 statement in the Prison Notebooks that 'the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear'. This has traditionally been taken to refer to the emergence of fascism against a background of capitalist crisis and failure of anti-capitalist forces (Hoare & Mathews, 1978).

A multipolar world may enhance collaborative efforts towards sustainable development, as diverse perspectives can foster innovative solutions (Biermann et al., 2017). By fostering diverse partnerships and collaborative approaches (Simonis, 2017) like the Paris Agreement on climate change exemplifies how multipolarity can facilitate collective action among states with varying interests (Bodansky, 2016).

However, the competition among major powers may lead to fragmented approaches to global issues, undermining collective efforts for sustainable development (Haas & Stevens, 2017). Additionally, the prioritization of national interests over global commitments can hinder progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

1.2 From Divide and Rule to Unite and Prosper

Western powers have historically used a “divide and rule” strategy originating from colonialism. In contrast, China promotes the idea of “unite and prosper,” demonstrated through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has gained global support. China believes this benefits both itself and the wider international community. As the influence and morals of Washington decline, non-Western nations are looking to their own cultural roots, wanting to separate themselves from the criticized American liberal model and its unipolar dominance (Zhang, 2025).

With the Soviet Union's collapse, the fight between communism and capitalism became less important. Instead, Huntington suggested that civilizational differences would take center stage. He believed the West would face challenges from non-Western civilizations that do not accept Western values. Additionally, he argued that globalization, which was thought to unite the world, might actually increase these cultural divides as different civilizations interact while trying to maintain their unique identities (Evans & Huntington, 1997).

This trend shows a shift from traditional nation-states to civilizational communities that reject imposed universal values and support their own cultural standards. The rise of these civilizational states in Eurasia contrasts with the West's struggle with identity as its claim to universal values has been weakened by internal conflicts and global pushbacks. The liberal West appears to be fading, leading to a sense of global disconnection (Maçães, 2025).

In the future, the global order may become more equal, with the West and other regions sharing wealth, power, and ideas. This change could lead to more civilizational communities and a cooperative multipolar world focused on shared values like peace, humanity, and international solidarity (Zhang, 2025).

2. Theoretical Framework and Analytical Approach

2.1 Theoretical Framework: Hegemony and Multipolar Governance

This paper develops a framework for understanding how evolving configurations of global power shape the practice and outcomes of sustainable development governance. Drawing on theories of hegemony and institutionalism, it conceptualizes the international system as transitioning from a predominantly unipolar order toward a more fluid and contested multipolar arrangement.

In classical hegemonic stability theory, dominant powers provide public goods and establish rules that structure global governance. However, in a multipolar context, authority becomes more distributed, and governance increasingly occurs through negotiated coalitions, issue-specific alignments, and institutional experimentation. This shift does not imply the disappearance of power asymmetries, but rather their reconfiguration across overlapping institutional arenas.

2.2 Analytical Approach and Case Selection

This study adopts a qualitative, theory-informed comparative approach. Rather than offering exhaustive empirical testing, it uses illustrative case vignettes to examine how different configurations of power operate across institutional contexts.

The selection of cases is guided by two criteria, relevance to sustainable development governance, particularly in areas where global coordination is essential and variation in institutional structure and power distribution, allowing comparison across different governance models.

The analysis focuses on three indicative cases frequently cited in contemporary governance debates:

- BRICS New Development Bank (NDB), highlighting an alternative governance model
- Climate governance under the Paris Agreement, emphasizing coalition dynamics
- AOSIS - Small-state coalition influence in ocean governance, particularly within SDG 14 processes

These cases are used to illustrate broader patterns rather than to provide exhaustive empirical coverage. Where possible, the analysis references observable indicators such as participation structures, voting arrangements, and compliance patterns to ground theoretical claims.

2.3 Propositions

Building on the theoretical framework, the paper advances the following propositions:

- **Proposition 1:** Emerging multilateral institutions redistribute governance authority by introducing alternative decision-making structures that challenge established power hierarchies.
- **Proposition 2:** Issue-specific coalitions can amplify the influence of actors with limited material capacity when institutional rules allow for agenda-setting or norm entrepreneurship.
- **Proposition 3:** In a multipolar international system, the diffusion of hegemonic power increases opportunities for smaller states to exert influence through strategic coalition-building.

3. Discussion

3.1 Emerging Economies and Global Governance

Building on the shift in global power outlined in Section 1.1, the critical question is how emerging economies are reshaping the structure and functioning of global governance. The new order will resemble the Western model but might not be led by non-Western countries (Zakaria, 2008).

According to Acharya's (2017) theory of multiplexity, these countries, sometimes working with China and sometimes on their own, are increasingly influencing the global agenda and advocating for specific regional interests. They advocate reforms in international institutions to better reflect contemporary political realities, especially in economic and political institutions that govern global affairs and in the political sphere, the UN Security Council with its five permanent members, each carrying a veto right and still resembling the geopolitical situation at the end of World War II. This growing influence is reflected in the increasing economic weight of Global South countries within institutions such as the G20 (Schoeman & Alden, 2024).

Some Western voices warn that this may threaten the liberal order and that countries like China might want to create an alternative. However, there is little solid evidence for this claim. Countries in the Global South are seeking reform in global governance to ensure fairer economic practices. Rather than rejecting globalization, emerging economies are advocating for reforms that would enable more equitable participation in global governance, particularly

in economic and financial institutions (Acharya et al., 2023). These demands are notably strong from China and India, which reflects different realities in trade compared to financial markets. While some argue that globalization is declining, others suggest it is simply evolving with Asia becoming the new driver of growth (Acharya's (2017).

There is a strong call for changes in the international system to better reflect current political situations. There are various campaigns for a restructuring of the Security Council, it is not only countries from the Global South that demand a seat at the table (such as India, Brazil, and South Africa) but also prominent Global North countries, such as Germany and Japan. In fact, Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan constitute the so-called G4 campaigning for permanent seats in the Council. Countries in the Global South want to share global responsibilities without trying to change or be absorbed by existing institutions (Roy, 2023). They emphasize the importance of traditional values like sovereignty and free trade, arguing that these values are being weakened by the Global North. They believe the developing world suffers from unfair trade practices and the effects of new technologies (Acharya et al., 2023). These reform efforts indicate a preference for inclusion and redistribution of authority rather than wholesale institutional replacement.

BRICS is an important group formed by Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, starting in 2009 and expanding to include more countries in 2023. Although some thought it was losing influence by 2017, recent developments indicate that BRICS will significantly impact the global economy. This is mainly because, after its 15th Summit in Johannesburg, the group will represent nearly half of the world's population and a large share of global GDP, surpassing the G7. Additionally, the expanded BRICS will control major maritime routes for shipping. While some analysts see it as mostly symbolic, its members view the group as a strong force for change, despite some internal conflicts. The expansion of BRICS, particularly following its fifteenth summit in Johannesburg, reinforces its role as a platform for coordinating economic and political agendas outside traditional Western-led forums (Brosig, 2021).

The United Kingdom decided to become a founding member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which surprised both the US and China. Following the UK, other US allies like Germany, France, and Italy also joined, along with South Korea, Australia, and Japan. Christine Lagarde, the managing director of the IMF, expressed her eagerness to collaborate with the AIIB. By December 2015, the AIIB had over fifty-five members. The broad participation of both Western and non-Western states suggests that new institutions such as the AIIB are not purely alternatives but function alongside existing frameworks, reflecting an increasingly pluralized system of global financial governance (Drezner, 2019).

3.1.1 Proposition 1: Emerging Multilateral Institutions Redistribute Governance Authority by Introducing Alternative Decision-Making Structures That Challenge Established Hierarchies.

3.1.2 Case vignette A: New Development Bank shareholding and the “no veto” principle

The New Development Bank (often associated with BRICS) offers a contrasting governance model in which founding members' initial subscribed capital was “equally distributed” among them, establishing an institutional logic of parity among founders at the outset.

The bank's official shareholding information details capital structure and subscription shares and provides a transparent baseline for comparing formal authority distribution among members.

The BRICS countries, as founding members of the New Development Bank (NDB), each hold a 20% share of the capital, ensuring they maintain at least 55% of voting rights even with new members. This differs from other multilateral development banks (MDBs) where dominant shareholders like the US and China prevail. Governance norms require unanimous agreement among founders for major decisions, while a simple majority suffices for lower-order decisions. The NDB leadership is rotated among member countries to ensure a more inclusive selection process, contrasting with practices in existing global financial institutions (Hofman & Srinivas, 2024).

3.2 Sustainable development as unifying factor and driver for change

Today's world is interactive and independent. For the first time, issues affecting humanity's survival take precedence over traditional international conflicts. However, many global powers have not yet developed cooperative solutions to the complex challenges that threaten humanity's survival. These challenges include environmental, climate, socio-economic, food-related, and demographic issues (Brzeziński, 2012).

Global warming and climate change are major challenges that require countries to work together. This issue affects all nations, regardless of their size or development level, and cannot be addressed without the participation of the largest polluters. The Paris Agreement of December 2015 recognizes that climate change is a serious threat to people and the planet, highlighting the need for cooperation from all countries (De Aguiar Patriota, 2020).

3.2.1 Proposition 2: Issue-specific Coalitions Can Amplify The Influence Of Actors with Limited Material Capacity when Institutional Rules Enable Agenda-Setting or Norm Entrepreneurship.

3.2.2: Case vignette B: The Paris Agreement Architecture as an Enabling Environment

The Paris Agreement is frequently characterized as a hybrid governance design that combines a bottom-up approach to national pledges with rules for transparency and accountability. A UN legal overview describes how parties nationally determine contributions (rather than having top-down targets imposed), while the agreement still sets detailed procedural expectations that shape compliance and ambition over time.

Within this structure, Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) are explicitly central: UNFCCC guidance states that NDCs are “at the heart” of the agreement and are communicated on a recurring cycle (submitted every five years).

This combination—nationally determined pledges plus common procedural cycles—creates recurring “moments” where negotiating blocs and issue coalitions can attempt to raise ambition, sharpen norms, and push for measurable sectoral commitments, including those linked to oceans and climate risk.

This is achieved through NDC cycle frequency and the procedural requirement to prepare/communicate/maintain successive NDCs and the agreement's bottom-up design plus transparency/accounting logic, as described in UN legal materials.

Because the Paris Agreement institutionalizes iterative pledge cycles and transparency rules, it can function as an “amplifier” for coalition strategies and enabling procedures magnify the influence of norm entrepreneurs.

3.2.2.1 Proposition 3: In a multipolar System, Diffusion Of Hegemonic Power Increases Opportunities For Smaller States To Exert Influence Through Strategic Coalition-Building.

The blue economy focuses on the potential of the ocean for economic growth, emphasizing sustainable use of ocean resources in light of climate change. It is distinct from the ocean economy as it prioritizes environmental sustainability. According to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, coastal states have exclusive economic zones extending 200 nautical miles, which grants them rights to resource exploration and the responsibility to manage and conserve these areas.

There is a shift towards recognizing the oceans as vital for wealth creation, which is changing how power dynamics and regional identities are viewed. Small island developing states, previously seen as vulnerable (Morgan, 2021), are now taking a proactive role in global climate security discussions. Many identify as large ocean states, reflecting the importance of the ocean in their growth. Groups like the Pacific Islands Forum are influential in addressing climate change issues. The recognition of a specific ocean goal within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 14) has enabled these states to effectively represent their interests. The Alliance of Small Island States unites island nations and represents a significant portion of UN membership, influencing international cooperation on various matters (Schoeman & Alden, 2024).

African agency is shown in how the continent, and its groups engage in climate change. The Loss and Damage Fund for Vulnerable Countries agreement was adopted at COP27 in Egypt due to a unified African stance. The Great Blue Wall Initiative, led by the Seychelles and launched at COP26, is gaining global backing (Schoeman & Alden, 2024).

3.2.2.2 Case vignette C: Small-island coalition advocacy at the ocean–climate nexus (SDG 14 and climate processes)

A central illustration of coalition-building capacity comes from the activities and agenda-setting efforts of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) in ocean- and climate-linked policy discussions. In the UNFCCC ocean–climate dialogue context, AOSIS emphasizes that ocean-based targets and “measurable commitments” should be integrated into national plans and tracks obstacles related to means of implementation (finance, capacity building, technology).

This coalition framing is salient because SDG 14— “Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development”—is simultaneously (i) globally consequential and (ii) politically difficult due to fragmentation and under-resourcing. The UN’s SDG 14 overview underscores the ocean’s climate-regulating role and highlights quantified challenges (e.g., marine pollution levels and the gap between current marine protected area coverage and the 2030 target).

The strategic approach of AOSIS has led to important outcomes. They have increased awareness of the vulnerabilities of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) to climate change. AOSIS strengthened cooperation with emerging economies, gaining political leverage and resources. They enhanced global action on SDG 14, advocating for marine conservation and sustainable fisheries. AOSIS empowered local communities in marine resource management and has shown that small nations can influence global sustainability efforts effectively.

AOSIS influence on SDG 14 can be observed across complementary institutional, negotiation, and implementation arenas. In global treaty-making, AOSIS played a consistent role in shaping the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Agreement to align with SDG 14 priorities, emphasizing the conservation and sustainable use of marine

biodiversity beyond national jurisdictions and linking the agreement directly to SDG 14 objectives. At the multilateral negotiation level, AOSIS interventions during UN Ocean Conferences helped shape political declarations and action frameworks by ensuring stronger recognition of small island vulnerabilities, the urgency of ocean protection, and the need for increased financing, thereby influencing the global policy architecture guiding SDG 14 implementation. Finally, at the level of concrete implementation tools, AOSIS has advocated for expanded Marine Protected Areas through calls for dedicated financing, as well as enhanced capacity building, data systems, and scientific support for developing countries, directly contributing to measurable SDG 14 targets such as marine conservation and improved ocean governance. Together, these cases illustrate how AOSIS translates structural vulnerability into strategic influence, shaping both the normative framing and the practical execution of SDG 14 across multiple levels of global governance.

3.3 Operationalizing Cooperative Multipolarity

This paper has argued that the transition toward a multipolar international order is not merely a redistribution of material capabilities, but a transformation in how authority is exercised, negotiated, and institutionalized. However, current governance architectures remain anchored in hierarchical and state-centric models that inadequately reflect this diffusion of power.

The 2008 financial crisis highlighted the weaknesses of current international systems in dealing with global economic issues. It showed that international financial institutions often favor developed countries, leaving developing nations behind (Wade, 2008). This imbalance has led to public mistrust and a rise in populist and nationalist movements, as people feel insecure economically and culturally (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). To create a more cooperative global system, reforms are needed in these institutions. This includes changing voting systems to better represent emerging economies, enhancing accountability for powerful states and corporations (Gorzalak, 2003; Wade, 2008) and increasing transparency in global governance to rebuild trust. The challenges include managing historical grievances and power differences among countries while ensuring that institutions do not serve only the interests of the powerful. The failure of international systems undermines trust and weakens efforts to address global challenges, such as climate change and poverty, creating a cycle of political division (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). Future research should aim to develop clear policy suggestions for different areas like trade and finance and explore the role of civil society in promoting accountability. Overall, achieving a cooperative international environment requires commitment from all parties to work together for shared global goals, recognizing that sustainable development relies on collective efforts.

There are limitations of applying traditional hegemonic models in understanding the current global landscape. While historical analyses often frame international relations through the lens of a dominant power shaping global norms and institutions, the emergence of multiple influential actors necessitates a more nuanced perspective. The study's emphasis on cooperative multipolarity suggests that sustainable development progress is contingent upon fostering multilateral cooperation and managing competition among these actors. This resonates with scholarly work highlighting the diffusion of power and the increasing agency of non-Western states in shaping global agendas (Acharya, 2018; Hurrell, 2006).

To address this mismatch, authority should rather be distributed than concentrated. There should be coalitional agency rather than unitary state dominance and flexible, layered governance rather than rigid institutional hierarchy.

If power is increasingly exercised through coalitions rather than hegemonic actors, then institutions must formally recognize coalitions as decision-making units. This could be done through coalitional agency within multilateral agenda-setting processes and formal coalition

recognition protocols integrated into institutional rules if coalitions meeting clear criteria (e.g., membership, regional representation, or issue alignment) and gain recognized institutional status. Then recognized coalitions receive agenda-setting rights, guaranteed deliberative access, procedural fast-tracking of proposals and secretariat bodies are required to process coalition submissions within defined timelines. This reform moves from a state-centric model of power to a relational, networked model, aligning institutions with the empirical reality of multipolar negotiation dynamics. This will balance the share of agenda items introduced by coalitions, adoption rates of coalition-backed proposals and participation diversity in negotiations.

Authority can be rebalanced through hybrid voting systems. Multipolarity entails not just more actors, but competing legitimacy claims (economic weight vs. vulnerability vs. representation). Authority in decision-making systems can be reconciled by a hybrid voting framework combining material power (financial contributions) and structural position (development status, climate vulnerability). This reflects multipolarity as heterogeneous authority, rather than a simple redistribution of dominance and shifts voting power distribution, aligns decision outcomes and vulnerability indicators and improves inclusion rates of lower-power actors in successful proposals.

Multipolar governance is increasingly fragmented and issue-specific, relying on coalitions and flexible arrangements rather than universal regimes. Effectiveness and legitimacy of plurilateral cooperation frameworks can be enhanced with a tiered compliance and accountability system for coalition-based agreements. Actors commit to differentiated obligations based on capacity and independent review bodies produce public compliance assessments. Instead of imposing rigid universalism, this design leverages flexibility while maintaining accountability, a hallmark of multipolar governance.

These suggestions align with calls for a more inclusive and representative international order (“Taming globalization: frontiers of governance, 2004). UNSC reform, for example, has been a long-standing demand from emerging powers seeking greater influence in global security matters. Similarly, reforms to the voting structures of International Financial Institutions (IFIs) are crucial for ensuring that these institutions adequately reflect the economic realities of the 21st century and are responsive to the needs of developing countries (Winters, 2007). The emphasis on accountability tools further reinforces the need for transparency and responsibility in the implementation of sustainable development initiatives, ensuring that all actors, including emerging economies, are held to agreed-upon standards.

By examining specific geopolitical contexts, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of how cooperative multipolarity manifests in practice and its impact on SDG progress. Such case studies could explore instances where emerging economies have successfully collaborated with established powers to address shared challenges, such as climate change or global health crises. They could also analyze situations where competition among major powers has hindered sustainable development efforts, highlighting the need for effective mechanisms to manage these rivalries.

However, the study acknowledges the inherent challenges in operationalizing cooperative multipolarity. The pursuit of national interests, divergent priorities among actors, and the persistence of power imbalances can all undermine efforts to foster genuine cooperation. Furthermore, the effectiveness of the proposed policy mechanisms depends on the willingness of states to cede some degree of sovereignty and embrace a more collaborative approach to global governance. This requires a fundamental shift in mindset, moving away from zero-sum thinking and towards a recognition that sustainable development is a shared responsibility.

4. Conclusion

Acharya (Acharya et al., 2023) describes the changing international system as a "multiplex world," which includes diverse perspectives, many relevant states, intergovernmental and nonstate actors, and complex interdependencies at various levels. The shift from a Western-centric order to a multiplex order will continue, with power and leadership becoming more spread out, often linked to specific regions or issues. Although great power rivalry will persist, many global matters will not solely depend on them (Petito, 2016). Middle and small powers, including island nations, will increasingly shape the global agenda. This new order may not lead to greater peace or prosperity but will distribute power and responsibility more widely. The effectiveness of global leadership and the restructuring of institutions like the UN will be crucial. The rise of emerging powers indicates a robust but challenging economic globalization. Existing international institutions will need to adapt alongside new ones formed by states pursuing shared goals (Schoeman & Alden, 2024).

Institutions need to be designing for multipolarity by distributing authority across coalitions rather than centralized control. Legitimacy should be multi-dimensional rather than purely material and cooperation flexible but structured, balancing autonomy and accountability. This framework repositions multipolarity from a descriptive diagnosis of global order to a normative and institutional design logic. In doing so, it addresses the central limitation of existing governance systems: their failure to align institutional structures with the relational, fragmented, and dynamic nature of contemporary power configurations. These findings have practical implications for policymakers, development practitioners, and civil society organizations. They suggest the need for a critical review of current governance structures to identify and tackle dominant tendencies. It's important to develop decision-making processes that are inclusive and empower marginalized voices, as well as to promote development models based on local knowledge. Future research should aim to find strategies that lessen dominant influences in sustainable development governance. This might include exploring alternative governance approaches, like networked or polycentric governance (Field & Ostrom, 1992) to achieve fairer and more sustainable outcomes. Understanding how various actors, such as states and civil organizations, can contribute to a fair global order in sustainable development is also crucial. By examining power dynamics in development processes, we can work towards a more sustainable and just future. Hegemonic practices can persist in subtle ways Cox (1981), such as through conditional aid or preference for certain knowledge systems, which can marginalize voices from the Global South. The findings suggest moving away from top-down approaches to more participatory methods that involve multiple stakeholders. Effective governance reforms should focus on enhancing the participation of marginalized actors, promoting knowledge sharing, strengthening local governance, and fostering cooperation among the Global South. Implementing these reforms may face resistance from powerful interests, and achieving coordination in a complex global landscape is challenging. It requires collaboration among all parties to create a more equitable and sustainable future (Field & Ostrom, 1992; Young, 2002). Future research should develop measures to assess governance reforms aimed at dismantling dominance and supporting genuine sustainable development. Ultimately, achieving sustainable development calls for a critical reassessment of power structures to promote a fairer global order.

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