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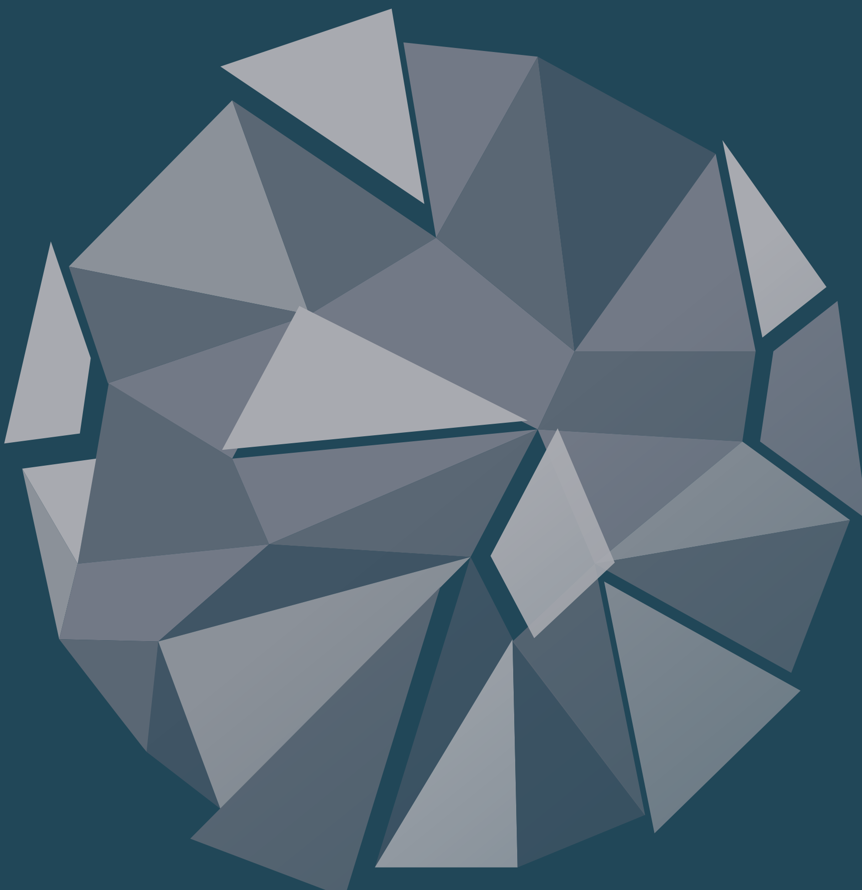

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Journal Description

Global Geopolitics (ISSN 2977-8271, e-ISSN 2977-828X) is a London-based quarterly journal committed to exploring the evolving dynamics of geopolitics in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. With its commitment to inclusivity and accessibility, *Global Geopolitics* publishes articles in English while welcoming submissions in Spanish, French, Chinese and Turkish to ensure global participation in critical discussions.

As an open-access and peer-reviewed journal available in both print and online formats, *Global Geopolitics* is dedicated to disseminating high-quality research widely, reflecting its mission to redefine the study of geopolitics through a globally inclusive lens. By bridging traditional and non-traditional approaches beyond disciplinary boundaries, the journal highlights global connectivity and cooperation alongside conflicts and rivalries, encouraging innovative scholarship that deepens our understanding of international relations, power dynamics, and pressing global challenges. *Global Geopolitics* is owned and operated by Global Geopolitics Ltd.

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Keywords

geoculture; geoeconomics; geopolitics; international cooperation; international relations; international security

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issues and multidisciplinary/interdisciplinary approaches invested in studying competition, rivalry, and cooperation among states and non-state actors by reference to their geographical features. Therefore, we also address a range of pressing global issues such as transnational crime, the repercussions of the Great Recession, the escalating challenges of climate change, and the global migrant crisis.

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Aims and Scope

In recent times, geopolitics has gained renewed significance, driven by the intensification of geostrategic rivalries and a surge in conflicts arising from non-traditional security concerns. This journal aims to address these contemporary challenges by offering a platform for a more globally-oriented perspective.

Global Geopolitics is not just about rehashing established geopolitical narratives; rather, it seeks to supplement them with fresh viewpoints and interdisciplinary approaches. We invite a diverse array of contributions from scholars, practitioners, policymakers, and activists. These contributions are pivotal in transcending traditional boundaries, offering insights that reflect the interconnected nature of global challenges and the necessity for collaborative solutions.

"Global Geopolitics" as a journal title encapsulates our dedication to redefining the study of geopolitics in a way that is inclusive, forward-looking, and reflective of the complex tapestry of global interactions in the modern world. It signals our aim to be at the forefront of academic discourse, where diverse global voices converge to shape a more nuanced understanding of international relations and global affairs. Most importantly, the inclusion of "Global" before "Geopolitics" intentionally shifts the focus from the traditional confines of geopolitical analysis, which often centers on geostrategic rivalries, conflicts, and wars. Instead, it emphasizes a broader, more interconnected perspective. Relatedly, the term "Global" symbolizes our commitment to transcending regional and national boundaries in our approach. It reflects our ambition to incorporate and mobilize the rich intellectual legacies and accumulated knowledge from various countries across all seven continents. This global approach is vital in fostering a diverse, inclusive, and comprehensive understanding of geopolitical dynamics, offering insights that are informed by a multitude of perspectives and experiences.

While acknowledging the enduring significance of traditional geopolitical challenges, such as territorial disputes, power dynamics, and diplomatic relations, *Global Geopolitics* endeavors to broaden the scope of analysis by integrating non-traditional

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Editorial

POWER, ORDER, AND GOVERNANCE IN AN AGE OF MULTIPOLARITY

Efe Can Gürcan

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Few relationships will play a greater role in shaping the future of international order than that between the United States and China. As the world's two largest economies and most influential global actors, the manner in which they manage their differences, expand areas of cooperation, and sustain channels of dialogue will have profound implications for international peace, economic stability, and shared prosperity. In an increasingly interconnected world, fostering a virtuous cycle of constructive engagement remains essential not only for bilateral relations but also for the broader health and resilience of the international system. It is within this wider context of global transformation that the questions explored in this issue acquire particular significance.

With its second issue, Global Geopolitics continues its commitment to fostering rigorous, pluralistic, and genuinely global debates on the transformation of world order. The contributions assembled here examine multipolarity not only as a redistribution of power among states, but also as a transformation unfolding across diplomatic, economic, technological, legal, and cultural domains. Taken together, they speak to a shared concern: how power, order, and governance are being reconfigured under conditions of accelerating multipolarity. In doing so, the issue advances our core editorial ambition: to move beyond reductive binaries and inherited categories, and to develop analytically grounded perspectives capable of grasping a world no longer organized around a single center of authority.

The issue opens with "China's Rise as a Pole in a Multipolarizing World: An Overview of its Evolving Diplomacy" by Jenny Clegg. Situating China's diplomacy within its long-standing engagement with the developing world, Clegg traces the country's evolution from survival-oriented diplomacy to a more proactive international role. The article highlights the importance of South–South cooperation and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, while arguing that China's global posture is best understood not as a bid for hegemony but as part of a broader transformation of the Global South's place in world politics.

The second contribution, "Emerging Forms of Multipolarity: Rethinking Global Stability and Governance," by Arunoday Bajpai and Preeti Sharma, engages directly with debates on the nature of contemporary multipolarity. Reviewing competing conceptual frameworks, the authors argue that current transformations represent a qualitatively new phase of international order characterized by institutional pluralism, issue-based alignments, and the growing influence of middle powers.

In "The Rise of Economic Coercion: Instruments, Illegality, and UN Charter Remedies," Virdzhiniya Petrova Georgieva examines the growing weaponization of trade, finance, technology, and investment in contemporary international relations. Combining international relations scholarship with doctrinal legal analysis, the article assesses the legality of economic coercion under the UN Charter and highlights the underutilized legal and institutional mechanisms available to regulate and deter such practices.

The maritime and technological dimensions of multipolarity are explored in "Sea Power and Its Changing Context in the AI Age" by Hu Bo. Revisiting classical theories of sea power, Hu examines how artificial intelligence is transforming naval competition while demonstrating that geography, institutional capacity, and political economy remain central to maritime strategy. The article offers an important contribution to understanding how technological change is reshaping strategic competition in the twenty-first century.

The issue concludes with "Critical Geopolitics of Internationalization: The Case of Turkish Higher Education" by Özlem Salı and Levent Ürer. Drawing on critical approaches to language, hegemony, and knowledge production, the authors examine how English-medium internationalization can reproduce global hierarchies while marginalizing local epistemologies. Their analysis highlights the cultural and epistemic dimensions of multipolar transformation and reminds us that struggles over power increasingly extend beyond traditional geopolitical and economic arenas.

Collectively, the articles in this issue demonstrate that multipolarity is not a singular condition but a differentiated and contested process, manifesting across diplomatic practices, governance structures, economic instruments, technological domains, and cultural institutions. Whether examining China's evolving diplomacy, the conceptual foundations of multipolarity, the rise of economic coercion, the strategic implications of artificial intelligence, or the geopolitics of higher education, the contributions gathered here underscore the complexity of a world undergoing profound transformation.

China's Rise as a Pole in a Multipolarizing World

AN OVERVIEW OF ITS EVOLVING DIPLOMACY

Jenny Clegg

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Abstract

China's rise to become a major player on the international stage is central to study of the world's multipolar trend. Whilst some predict a world divided in new Cold War-style blocs, China talks of a "shared future for humanity". However, China's own explanations of its intentions are obscured in vague and lofty language. This article seeks to demonstrate the value of a historical approach in clarifying the meanings of the claims to foster a more "inclusive multilateralism" and a "more just and rational world order". China has long seen its future lying together with the developing world confined within unequal structures of world economic and political power, and as a large developing country it has exercised greater capacity to leverage its position. Seeing China's rise as intertwined with the emergence of the Global South, this study highlights the importance for China of its relations with the developing countries, whilst similarly noting China's efforts to promote South-South cooperation. China's diplomacy has evolved step by step from prioritizing national survival to focusing on economic development whilst maneuvering internationally to now take up a world-leading position. The discussion emphasizes the strategic continuities of uniting with the Global South and exploiting divisions within the Global North to suggest a frame of analysis for understanding China's international leadership. Appreciating China's relations with developing countries and its goal for a new-style international relations based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence are still works in progress, some pointers for future investigation are suggested.

Keywords
China's diplomacy; Global South; inclusive multilateralism; multipolarity; South-South cooperation

Introduction

With the US in relative decline, the transition to a multipolar world lies at the core of a tumultuous world transformation. Amidst multiple crises, prolonged wars and economic and political instabilities, the so-called 'Western liberal international order' is unravelling and the search among countries of the Global South for alternative forms of global governance is intensifying.*

At this point in time, China has come forward with bold proposals, calling for a new-type international relations "based on the principles of equality, respect for sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, respect for each country's core interests and major concerns, and respect the peoples' and countries' independent choice of social systems and development paths" (Kewalramani, 2025; Zhao, 2025).

Without doubt, China has become a major actor on the international stage, with its rise having a profound impact on the multipolar process. But how is the emerging multipolarity to be

* Global South is a vaguely defined concept, still in the process of subjective definition. Following Desai (2021), this discussion uses the terms developing countries, Third World and Global South interchangeably. For some discussion of terminology see Marchand (1994, pp. 296-297).

understood? The influential political scientist, John Mearsheimer, sets out the world trend towards rival Yalta-style blocs, yet China's vision of a 'shared future for mankind' clearly obviates this view (Mearsheimer, 2001; Zhao, 2025).

There is a growing literature focusing on South-South cooperation as an alternative to the existing unequally structured international order (Amin, 2003, 2008; Desai, 2021; Gürcan, 2019; Heine et al., 2025; Marchand, 1994). A number of works identify China as a driving force in this trend (Artner, 2022; Clegg, 2009; Murphy, 2022). Yet China's foreign policy pronouncements are broad and vague (Zhang, 2018): how then are its claims to be 'working to promote the development of the international order in a more just and rational direction' to be assessed (AFP, 2022)? Its international role is not uncontroversial and maintaining a critical perspective is vital. But often legitimate concerns are amplified to sow doubts as to China's geopolitical ambitions.

Losurdo's identification of the weakness of Western (Marxist) critical theory in relation to socialist countries like China, is apt: rather than engaging with the 'difficult and drawn out process' of building socialism, they measure up actual practices against 'imagined standards of theoretical or moral purity' (Losurdo, 2024, pp.257-263). This article, following Losurdo, offers a historically grounded reflection on the arduous process as, against the odds, China set about restoring its stature as a major world power, transforming from an isolated revolutionary state in 1949, one of the largest and poorest nations in the world, into a major economic power and an active participant in the international system. This examination is set within the frame of the unevenly developing relations between the Global North and Global South.

Sharing a common past of imperialist domination, China identifies as a developing country, seeing its future as lying together with the developing world in the collective struggle for independence and an equitable world order. China's per capita income, it is worth noting, is below that of Latin America (Heine, et al., 2025, p.151). At the same time, China has never joined nor sought to join the major groupings of the Global South: it remains an observer at the

G77 and has only an association with the Non-Aligned Movement. As the largest developing country, it stands out given its greater capacity to leverage its interests both in terms of its economic capacities in trade and investment and its overall global influence not least as a permeant member of the UN Security Council. Today, in the midst of major global transformations - in technologies, in energy generation as well as in world order and governance - China exercises considerable negotiating power.

How does China conceive the multipolar trend and how does it see its role as an actor in the process? How has China leveraged its rise given the constraints of unequal world economic and political power? To what extent do China's national interests and the interests of the Global South correspond? How is China responding to the US challenge with its increasing unpredictability stoking greater global instabilities and divisions? Discussion of these questions is clearly essential to understanding the emergence of multipolarity, its nature and its future.

Putting the spotlight on China's role as a political actor, this discussion sets its rise in the context of the transformation of the world as a whole from one dominated by post-war imperialist containment of radical anti-colonialism to one driven to the brink of a new multilateral inclusive governance through the rise of the Global South. Whilst relations with Global South have grown in importance for China particularly over the last two decades, their foundation is to be traced back to the Bandung Conference of 1955 and China's support for national struggles against oppression. Searching itself for a peaceful external environment in which to pursue its own development, China's trajectory over the decades has been intertwined with that of the emerging Global South. This discussion aims to highlight the importance for China, in the advance of its international stature, of its relations with the developing world, tracing its agenda for peace and development based on its Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (FPPC) amidst the shifting international context.

China's diplomacy has evolved from securing national survival under Mao to the shift to economic development maneuvering into position through quiet diplomacy in the Dengist period, to now stepping forward as a major international actor under Xi Jinping's presidency. This historical overview of the process traces the methods, policies and strategies China has used in pursuit of goals to leverage its position, managing the constraints, challenges and opportunities presented within the regional and international environment. Drawing lessons from the past, the discussion returns to the opening questions and themes to offer some considerations as well as suggestions for further investigation following through the analysis presented.

The Historical Evolution of China's Diplomacy from 1949

The PRC Amidst the Surging Struggles for National Liberation

The establishment of the people's democratic state in October 1949 saw China set a course towards independence, prosperity and the restoration of the nation's international stature. The defeat of imperialism - first with the ending the Japanese occupation in 1945, and then with the defeat by the CPC armies of the US-backed Nationalist forces in the civil war - had however been enormously costly in lives, of both soldiers and civilians, leaving the economy devastated and impoverished.

Mao, recognizing a compromise was necessary, 'leaned to the side' of the Soviet Union for assistance not least for security. China faced the immediate challenge of the state's survival: the civil war remained unresolved and with the US backing the Nationalist regime in Taiwan, reunification was beyond reach. US refusal to recognize the new state's legitimacy made it a target of direct attack, potentially on a massive scale as US troops amassed across East and Southeast Asia to turn back the spreading tides of revolution.

As the Korean war broke out in 1950, China was isolated internationally and placed under economic embargo. However, by 1953, Chinese volunteers and the Korean People's Army had succeeded in fighting the US-led UN forces to a standstill; the Vietminh followed soon after with victory at Dien Bien Phu. The US and European powers were driven to the negotiating table.

The 1954 Geneva conferences saw the PRC make its first ever international appearance. Detecting divisions between the weakening France and Britain on the one hand, and the US, China's foreign minister Zhou Enlai succeeded in achieving a temporary settlement for both Korea and Vietnam (Gray, 1990, p.321; Li ,1994, pp.48-9). On visits with Nehru in India and U Nu in Burma during the Geneva proceedings, Zhou managed to secure China's borders further with agreement on the FPPC: mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty; mutual non-aggression; mutual non-interference in internal affairs; equality and co-operation for mutual benefit; and peaceful co-existence. These steps set back US plans for its military to fill the vacuum created by the decline of European colonialism. The easing of regional tensions and the development of friendly relations between the three Asian powers, even if short-lived, created an opening for the historic Bandung Conference of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements and governments to be convened in 1955.

From the outset in 1949, the PRC had committed to 'unite with all peace and freedom loving countries and peoples throughout the world…. to oppose jointly imperialist aggression and defend lasting world peace' (The Common Programme of the PRC, see Selden, 1979, p.189). Its first constitution in 1954 set out a foreign policy of extending diplomatic relations with all countries on the principle of equality, mutual benefit and mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Constitution of the PRC, Preamble, 1954). Now at Bandung, Zhou took the opportunity to showcase China's new approach to international relations, successfully allaying suspicions among US-aligned South East Asian states of its intentions to export revolution, with a call on all to set aside differences in ideology and politics and to seek common ground (Montesano, 2008, pp.205-6; Heine et al.2025, pp.51-52).

For China, the conference marked a turning point, breaking through international isolation as it established friendly relations across the wide political spectrum of states and anti-colonial movements from Africa and Asia.* China's presence at this birth of an independent South was also significant: with the US threatening new wars and interventions to re-assimilate the colonial spheres under its indirect neocolonial control, using Cold War division as its means, the incorporation of the FPPC into the 10-point Bandung declaration, set out for the future a new non-aligned international agenda, based on equality and the right to development (Acharya, 2016; Lin Chun, 2022). Even as the US, breaking the Geneva agreement, sought to encircle China through a chain of client states hosting its military bases, as radicalized anti-colonial movements surged in the wake of Bandung, Mao was convinced by 1957 that 'the East wind prevails over the West wind' (Mao, 1998, pp.226-232).

The Call for World Revolution

By 1958, with the USSR on the back foot following its invasion of Hungary, the US turned its focus on ascendant national independence movements endeavoring to create a ring of military bases around the world. With efforts directed in the first place at crisis points in Egypt, Algeria and Indonesia, US interference was to impact on the wider Middle East, North Africa as well as Southeast Asia (Chomsky, 2003, pp.162-5). Still the collective strength of the newly independent states was growing, resisting Cold War division: the first Non-Aligned Conference was convened in 1961; and UNCTAD and the Group of 77 were formed in 1964. Meanwhile China's international position was strengthening as it gained wider recognition across the developing world, and then from France in January 1964, indicating continuing differences within the North (Yahuda, 2011, p.148).

Anticipating US aggression, Mao took advantage of these favorable conditions to reiterate the call in 1964 for the 'broadest united front'…of 'the peoples of the socialist camp, of Asia, Africa, and

* Besides Cuba which attended as a full participant, a number of other Latin American states attended as observers.

Latin America, of every continent of the world, of all the countries in love with peace and all the countries suffering from aggression, control, intervention and bullying from the US' (Mao cited in Lin Chun, 2022, p.204). His calculation was that an upsurge of popular resistance and people's wars would cause the US to overstretch, its warships frantically maneuvering between Mediterranean to control the Middle East and North Africa and the Pacific to cover Asia (Gray, 1990, p.323).

This aim to form a broad united front against imperialism brought China into contention with the Soviet Union which, following the Khrushchev-Kennedy rapprochement of 1963, considered that the Cold War had transformed into a peaceful coexistence of competing capitalist and socialist economic models. Soviet strategy was to extend the socialist bloc into the developing world, but as Mao saw it, building socialism in the Third World was premature whilst on the other hand, opposition to US neo-colonial interference and interventionism was rising (Friedman, 2015, pp. 69-100).

From the Chinese perspective, Soviet détente prioritized its own concerns over nuclear disarmament, giving way to US pressure over the nuclear threat. This conciliation not only betrayed the anti-imperialist cause, its bloc-building was becoming dangerously divisive (Gray, 1990, pp.322-5). When the US bombing of North Vietnam commenced in 1965, bringing war right up to China's border once again, its leadership now called for world revolution, urging radical movements rise up through armed struggle and people's war. The easing of tensions following the Geneva Conference was now at an end as US interference in the region as a whole intensified. China had to focus once again on its own survival: its moderate foreign policy approach no longer an option against a superpower with the wherewithal for a massive attack, given overwhelming military means; and one not inhibited from issuing nuclear threats (Gerson, 2007, pp. 84-9).

If at this time, China's foreign policy became confused and incoherent, its situation, as Lin Chun (2022) points out, was extremely complicated. Some misjudgments as to the imminence of revolution and the strength of the forces of people's war led to some serious mistakes of adventurism and ultra-Leftism, not least in China itself with the excesses of the Cultural Revolution. However, China's radical turn was not without effect in its immediate neighborhood. In 1967, the US military alliance of anti-communist Southeast Asian states, SEATO, disintegrated; instead, ASEAN was formed (Acharya, 2016). Whilst its members clung to their bilateral alliances with the US, ASEAN nevertheless represented a certain degree of autonomy with the US unable to bring Southeast Asia under its military command as it had done Europe through NATO.

The determination of the Indochinese resistance supported by the antiwar movements in the West was weakening the US which, by 1968, was beginning to indicate its interest in negotiations (Chen, 2008, pp.142-3). Meanwhile the influence of developing countries within the UN was growing. In 1971, African states swung the vote in favor of the PRC regaining its lawful seat on the UN Security Council, creating a favorable situation for Nixon's signing of the Shanghai Communique the following year. Acknowledging that Taiwan was a part of China and incorporating the FPPC, the communique set in motion the process of normalization of US-China relations. China was now no longer a target of direct attack. However, the full restoration of US-China diplomatic relations still had to wait until 1979 but when it came, it opened the way for an entirely new era of peace and development not only for China but ultimately for the emergence of a multipolar world.

From Revolution to Reform

The UN declaration on the establishment of a New International Economic Order (NIEO) in 1974 was an indication of the developing countries' growing collective strength (Desai, 2021, pp.1387-8; Marchand, 1994, pp.291-3). Speaking now as a recognized member of the UN, Deng Xiaoping, Vice Premier of the PRC at the time, delivered a speech in support of the NEIO, significant in marking the beginnings of China's shift to a new emphasis on diplomacy and multilateralism (Deng, 1974). The speech set out a counter-hegemonic strategy which relied on Third World unity, regardless of whether or not countries adopted a revolutionary or progressive stance, as the main force against superpower domination and aggression, at the same time looking to exploit divisions within the North. The strategy now included the USSR in the latter camp.*

From China's perspective at this time, with the US withdrawing from Vietnam, the USSR had become the most problematic power: its advocacy of the Brezhnev doctrine, calling for Soviet military intervention to support socialist rule, not only backed the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, but saw Soviet troops amass on the Chinese border. Uneasiness over Soviet policies among developing countries had been rising since the early 1960s (Friedman, 2015, p.100). Conferences held to unite the Third World were to become platforms to fight out the Sino-Soviet dispute, but even though the Soviet Union had stiffened its opposition to US imperialism to give significant aid to North Vietnam, its approach was still seen to subordinate national independence to the demands of its own defense. Dissatisfaction with both superpowers was shaping a Third Worldist identity which, like China, prioritized concerns over the North-South above the East-West divide (Friedman, 2015, p.178).

The restoration of US-China relations in 1979 dramatically changed China's external environment, allowing a fundamental shift in strategic direction effecting radical changes in both domestic and foreign policy. Opening the door gradually to foreign investment and trade to support development alongside step-by-step market reforms, China was to accelerate its advance into a major world economic power. This domestic reorientation, seeking to strengthen independence through development, was to be matched by international reorientation to pursue the transformation of the unequal world order not through revolution but through reform. As

* The speech was elaborated in 1977 into *The Theory of the Three Worlds* and published as "Chairman Mao's Theory of the Differentiation of the Three World's is a Major Contribution to Marxism-Leninism", (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1977).

China acceded to the World Bank and the IMF in 1980, this demonstrated a new pragmatic approach to changing existing structures from within.

In 1982, Deng's declared the adoption of an independent and non-aligned foreign policy. This now brought to an end to the policies of 'leaning to one side,' whereby China had looked to the USSR to balance against US hostility up to 1979 to then lean towards the US following the Soviet invasions of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Afghanistan in 1979. By the mid-1980s, the international situation was undergoing a fundamental shift: the Reagan-Gorbachev arms control agreement; the increasing pressure from mass-based anti-nuclear peace movements forcing a retreat from militarism; the greater assertiveness of Western Europe and Japan, were together seen as demonstrating that the capabilities of the two superpowers to sustain their cold war and maintain their monopoly of world affairs was declining. Deng's declaration that the situation in the world had shifted from a footing of 'war and revolution' to one of 'peace and development' in 1985 was transformational (Deng, 1985). With China's leadership now looking to secure a peaceful environment for development over the long term, a new debate on the question of a multipolar future was underway (Clegg, 2009, p. 53).

Tackling Unipolarity: Looking to the Multipolar Future

Whilst a new door opened for China in 1979, the Third World was fragmenting and US neoliberalism was in ascendancy (Marchand, 1994, pp.293-6). For China, just as relations with the USSR improved, events turned dramatically for the worse as, following the suppression of the Tiananmen demonstrators, the US placed China under sanction again. The collapse of USSR followed, leaving the US the sole world hegemon.

Despite a new wave of US hostility over human rights, China's reaction to the dramatic changes was sober. In fact, diplomatic relations with the US were not completely severed, and relatively few countries complied with the Tiananmen embargo. The door then remained open for China to keep focused on economic development. Meanwhile, Deng cautioned that China should keep its international profile low. The end of the Cold War actually created space in the early 1990s for China to normalize relations US allies in its regional neighborhood as well as with Vietnam, and China was for the first time, invited to attend the ASEAN meeting in 1991, having helped broker a peace settlement in Cambodia (Heginbotham, 2007, p. 193; Yahuda, 2011, p. 274).

As China saw it, US unipolarity was limited to an extent: reliance on allies created a pattern of 'one superpower, four major powers' - namely Europe, Japan, Russia and China - which gave room for maneuver despite the weakness of the developing countries (see Blum, 2003, p. 243). With diplomatic relations now established with more or less all countries around the world, China began to advance relations further through partnerships, in the first instance with the major powers, at the same time fostering regional organizations involving developing countries as new poles in a multipolar order. A foundational Sino-Russian partnership of strategic coordination was agreed in 1996, partnerships with France (1996) and Germany (1997) followed whilst relations with the UK, India and Japan also advanced. If fragile and tenuous, these arrangements helped in securing access to local markets, investment and technology, whist also providing a workable frame to handle differences and resolve disputes so as stabilize relations amidst the ratcheting up of hostility by the US (Clegg, 2009, p.69). The Shanghai Five, the forerunner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, was formed in 1995. That year, ASEAN admitted the Indochinese states as members, ending the Cold War division of Southeast Asia and paving the way for ASEAN plus 3 in 1997 bringing in China, Japan and South Korea. Eventually, China's efforts to maneuver into a stronger position whilst keeping the focus on development, were to pay off when China gained accession to the WTO in 2001. This milestone in China's entry into the international order was to be sure a 'double edged sword': it involved compromise but the overall government kept the initiative in its own hands.

The US invasion of Iraq (2003), following that of Afghanistan in

(2001), aimed to secure its sole superpower status against the rise of potential competitors turned simultaneously a multipolar moment of opposition to US hegemonism as under pressure from grassroots antiwar movements France and Germany joined Russia, India and the majority of developing states to rule the US-led action illegal.*

For China, this moment opened a new strategic opportunity (Eisenman et al., 2002, p. xiv). Even though the secondary major powers soon gave way again to US pressure, US entanglement in wars in the Middle East left China relatively free from external challenges. As developing countries, strengthened by a commodities boom driven not least by China's rapid economic growth, began to regroup, China now gave more priority to developing world relations, not least to secure oil and other raw material supplies. At the same time, coordination between Brazil, South Africa, China and India in WTO Doha round negotiations in 2003 opened new prospects of South-South cooperation (Wallerstein, 2006, p. 91).

Whilst essentially maintaining a low profile, China quietly but significantly increased its role in UN peacekeeping. New principles for a New Political and Economic Order were set out followed by a new concept of common security emphasizing mutuality, common interest and trust to resolve conflicts through dialogue to increase understanding and build consensus through consultation. In these ways, China sought to reassure partners of its peaceful intentions against increasing assertions by the US of the "China threat" (Chen, 2008, p.149; Heginbotham, 2007, p.196). At the same time, with a new trend of regionalization growing, China took the opportunity to establish a series of multilateral cooperative forums - the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000, the SCO in 2001, the China-Arab States Cooperative Forum in 2004, and the China-CELAC forum (the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) in 2005. With the US turning to unilateralism and aggression, therefore, China's response was to counter this

* This was the formula of the "Wolfowitz doctrine" associated with then US Under Secretary of Defense, Paul Wolfowitz, as presented in the 1992 US Defense Guidance Planning document.

through greater emphasis on multilateral diplomacy, reform of the international order and the decision-making role of the UN, outlining, if only in the vaguest terms, alternative ways thinking about peace and development.

Xi Jinping: Taking New Initiatives

Following accession to the WTO in 2001 China's economy grew fast, doubling in size between 2000 and 2010 and then doubling again to 2020. When in 2008, Western capitalism plunged into crisis, China seized the moment to take multipolarization one step forward: its massive injection of state funds to boost its own economy pumped momentum into the wider world economy and the Global North, now realizing its own limits in coping with financial collapse, turned to the G20, so as to draw the larger developing countries, especially China, into a coordinated global response.

Meanwhile, China also began to take a more active role at international negotiations, such as the climate summit of 2009 where it defended the principle of special and differential treatment. Using both resistance and compliance, it sought to deflect US power plays and gain leverage in pursuit of a new fairer international governance (Clegg, 2011).

Even as Obama launched into his Asian pivot, conditions were seen as favorable for China, and Xi Jinping, by 2012 in place as the CPC General Secretary, took the initiative to launch two major international developments - the Belt and Road initiative (2009) and the BRICS (2013) - both promoting multipolarity.

The BRI, an ambitious infrastructure development strategy, was initially aimed to strengthen connectivity between Europe and Asia through a land-based "Belt" and a maritime "Road" route with a view to enhancing trade, investment, and cultural exchange. Today, through a vast array of projects, including roads, railways, ports and energy pipelines with an estimated total value of at least $900 billion, it connects China worldwide, encompassing also its growing economic relations across Africa and Latin America, whilst including a number of smaller developed states in the EU as well as New Zealand. Initially dismissed in the West as lacking a clear plan hence unlikely to be of much consequence, the BRI typifies China's approach to development based on trial and error. Western disparagement was to quickly turn to criticism as China's "no strings attached" approach to lending proved hugely attractive to developing countries, for decades starved of infrastructure funding by the West. However, their warnings of a "debt trap" have been exposed as "mythical" (Brautigam and Rithmire, 2021).

Similarly written off too soon by the West, the BRICS, having recently expanded its membership from five to ten, now comprises 40 per cent of the world population, and holds around 40 percent of world GDP greater than the G7 at less than 30 percent. The original five members, as large developing countries with growing production and markets, were to see mutual benefit in exploring relations in trade and investment. At the same time, they saw advantage in bringing their bargaining power to bear as a collective to call for reform for example to the World Bank and IMF. Less a rival to the G7, they aimed to serve as an important vehicle for advancing North-South dialogue not least in the G20 (Clegg, 2024). In the last decade, the group has been building consensus over issues of development, finance, global health, AI and climate.

Through the BRI and the BRICS, China has gained valuable experience in international development including in world development finance through the New Development Bank (NDB, 2014) serving the BRICS, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB, 2016) serving the BRI. The latter now involves over 140 countries, offering new, if still limited, ways of bringing developed and developing countries together in constructive ways.

Stepping Into the Lead Amidst Turbulent Times

Trump's launch into a New Cold War in 2020 reinforced by Biden's "democracies versus autocracies" agenda, was to unleash a new wave of anti-China hostility alongside a further build-up of US military in the Pacific through the Quad and AUKUS.* In response, Xi took a more proactive role using head of state diplomacy to elevate partnerships to a new level so as to counteract US pressures on others to decouple. In doing so, Xi has made a point of meeting leaders not only from major powers but from all types of states, regardless of size.

It was Xi's speech to the world's business elites at Davos in 2022 that essentially announced China's arrival as a leader on their world stage. Bringing to attention China's vision of the world as a community with a shared future, the speech caused a stir amongst these powers-that-be whose world was becoming engulfed in multiple crises of COVID, climate, debt sustainability (Xi Jinping, 2017a). Then, with the global agenda hijacked once more, this time by the West's "Ukraine cause", developing countries, seeing their interests sidelined yet again, and with alarm bells ringing at the expulsion of Russia from SWIFT, were beginning to intensify their search for alternatives to the failing international order.

In an offer of guidance here, Xi was to refine China's vision of a shared world future with three initiatives: on global development (2021); on security (2022), and on civilizational exchange (2023) (see Kewalramani, 2025). Laying out a series of stabilizing precepts from which to frame a new system of international cooperative governance, the initiatives draw the lessons from past demands for both development and peace as well as more recent experiences of the BRI and BRICS. Whilst the Global Development Initiative essentially revives the 1974 Third World call for an NIEO, the Global Security Initiative now combines the FPPC with the call for security for all - that original proposition of the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE) in Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, that no single nation could effectively address global challenges alone (Clegg, 2024). The Global Civilization Initiative addresses the issue of the world's diversity in a challenge to the New Cold War mentality that different cultures, values and systems are essentially incompatible. Its call for mutual learning can be seen as way to

* For a discussion of the characteristics of the New Cold War, see Woodward, 2017.

balance unity with the world's diversity in accordance with the Bandung way of setting aside differences and seeking common ground as a means of resisting the West's colonial-style and Cold War divide and rule. In this way, China is beginning to step forward as a major power on the international stage.

China's Evolving Diplomacy: Finding Continuities

This account demonstrates how against overwhelming odds, China withstood US hostility to stabilize its external environment, setting its own course of development, whilst maneuvering cautiously to gradually strengthen its position in the wider world. China's course since 1949 was to be a learning process, accumulating experiences to use in refining more flexible ways to manage the balance between confrontation and adaptation as changing configurations of power within and between the Global North and South presented not only challenges but also opportunities.

China's trajectory has intertwined with the emergence of the Global South: from the outset, it has seen its interests in overcoming poverty, realizing economic development, consolidating independence - in its own case achieving reunification, and gaining equal recognition in the world - as shared in common with the rest of the developing world. In pursuing the long-term goal of a "more just and rational order" with the FPPC as its foundation, China has extended its diplomatic reach step by step. As a large developing country, it has been able to deploy particular leverage in a strategy designed to foster as broad a coalition as possible of developing countries including both progressive or reactionary regimes whilst seeking out weaknesses amongst the dominant powers of the North (see Gurtov, 2010, p. 20; Friedman, 2015, p. 39).

It was the initial recognition by the newly independent states that helped China, as it balanced between the two superpowers, to break out of its Cold War isolation and emerge as an independent pole in the world from the mid 1980s. As an opportunity opened, if limited, for economic development, China began gradually to integrate into the international economic order, keeping overall control over its own development trajectory. This allowed a new diplomacy of strategic partnerships, used to lessen the tensions and strains generated by its ongoing rise, allaying fears of a “China threat” whilst demonstrating the advantages of cooperation as well as the costs should relations deteriorate (Clegg, 2009, p.69). At the same time, China further developed its networks, deepening its diplomacy with developing countries also through regional organizations.

In these ways, China found room to maneuver, adjusting to power realignments within the North, so to take the opportunity when US ‘seized the unipolar moment’ to float alternative concepts of international order and security. From there, China began to trial alternative forms of governance in the form of the BRICS and BRI. Acting within the constraints of the external environment, taking each step as preparation for the next, China has been able to do more with its diplomacy the more its economy has grown; at the same time, the stronger the voice of the developing countries as a collective, the more China has also been able to do.

As it shifted from revolutionary change, challenging the international order from without, to calling for reform of the international order from within, China has come to lay increasing emphasis on multilateral diplomacy to counterbalance the worsening unilateralist tendencies of the US. The discussion here has emphasized the continuities with Mao, Deng and his successors, and now Xi, all sharing in the long-term agenda of world peace and development, emphasizing the need for the self-reliance and unity of developing countries as a whole. Others have argued that Mao, in calling for world revolution, abandoned the principled Bandung stand on peaceful coexistence (Chen, 2008, p.141; Benvenuti et al. 2022, p.108). However, these arguments fail to take account of the hostile conditions in China’s immediate neighborhood at the time. Protecting the state’s hard-won independence had to be the priority: peaceful coexistence, understood not as a compromise but as conditional on all five principles including sovereignty and territorial integrity, was impossible. At the same time, opposing the bloc-building strategy of the USSR, Mao’s call for the broadest possible unity across the developing world, as opposed to picking and choosing friends and allies, has remained the fundamental aspect of China's foreign policy.

China and Multipolarity: Mapping Future Directions of Study

Keeping long term goals in mind, China's declarations are notably aspirational. This discussion has aimed to demonstrate the value of the historical approach in understanding China's claims today to "foster a new type of international relations and build a community with a shared future for mankind" (Xi Jinping, 2017b). Exploring the development of China's diplomacy, the overview has traced China's pursuit of its goals within the shifts and changes in global power relations. It has argued that rather than setting itself up as a counter model along the lines of the Soviet Union, China looks to resist the US challenge by driving multipolarization forward, scaling up the economies of the Global South through the promotion cooperative trade and development. By highlighting the consistency of China's strategic rationale in opposing division and calling for the united efforts of the Global South to transform the unequal North-South relationship, this discussion offers an analytical frame within which to interpret China's role in the current multipolar trajectory.

With China now positioned for a global leadership role, how it can become a more effective international actor as its economic and military power grows is a key question for the global future. Murphy, for example, from her study of China's interactions with the Middle East and Africa, has suggested that 'if the current liberal world order crumbles, China has parallel structures to take its place' (2022, p.275). Nevertheless, there is still some way to go in China's quest for an international relations system based on the FPPC.

The focus of discussion here has been on just one dimension: China's political role in the international sphere. Equally of importance is the aspect of China's economic diplomacy which again can be traced back to the Bandung Conference (Liu, 2022). Examining how this has matched the historical pattern of political diplomacy would contribute significantly to furthering understanding of China's global role.

Taking seriously China's understanding that its goals can be realized only in a peaceful international environment and under a stable international order, the line of argument taken here has looked to draw a correspondence, if not complete overlap, of China's national interests and the interests of the Global South as a collective in securing international conditions conducive to development. Nevertheless, the relationship between China and the rest of the Global South is clearly not without ongoing friction. Not only are Chinese exports extremely competitive with the latter's domestic industries, they also can crowd out their export markets (Dittmer, 2010, p.9). Beyond the general approach taken here, a deeper delving into China's partnerships with developing countries could usefully test out the 'win-win' nature of agreements, and the extent to which both parties are learning from experience to articulate their interests and adjust to differences.

In the case of the BRI, criticisms over debt sustainability, transparency, governance, and environmental impact, although often overblown, are not without substance. Nevertheless, China is proving not incapable of learning from mistakes and shortcomings so as to improve sustainability and focus more on local benefit and job creation, orienting towards renewable energy and the digital economy (Gallagher et al., 2025; Martine and du Plessis, 2023).* The extent to which greater BRI connectivity creates opportunities for enterprises and industries in developing countries to break through into competitive world markets is also a matter worth further investigation.

Within the Global South, unity has long been plagued by problems of political synchronization, given the large numbers of countries involved with their diversity in political systems, levels of

* It is to be noted that Gallagher et. Al. find China's exports of low carbon technologies are significantly reducing carbon emissions in the countries they trade with, and provide developing countries with both environmental and technological opportunities.

development, and cultures (Gürcan, 2022, p. 144). China is now looking especially to BRICS+ to play a strategic role in turning the world situation from confrontation to cooperation. Whilst itself made up of different government styles and ideologies, as a far smaller grouping, BRICS+ may find it easier to apply the Bandung spirit to set aside differences, working together to develop a common programme around which the wider Global South can coordinate and unite in dealing collectively with US protectionism and unilateralism. The challenge of analyzing BRICS+ in its diversity, with India as well as China a critical pillar of the Global South, remains at the forefront in study of multipolarization and the prospects for alternative forms of global governance emerging.*

With the international situation trending towards confrontation, China is becoming more active on questions of international security. New developments in diplomacy, such as China's proposal on the political settlement of the Ukraine crisis and the promotion of the new international mediation-based dispute resolution group in Hong Kong open up further areas of research (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 2023; Leung, 2025). Not unsurprisingly, the Ukraine proposal has been completely ignored by the US and EU, but the point is that such efforts provide a collective focus within the UN. Relatedly, Artner (2022) emphasizes the importance of strengthening the United Nations' role as a defender of the interests of the developing world. With China increasingly looking to the UN as the means for counter US unilateralism, exploring its efforts to rebuild the organization from within, strengthening its decision-making role, could test further the correspondence of interest between China and the Global South.

Today China's primary concern is to deflect US hawkishness: so far it is maintaining a positive view of the international trend going forward towards peace and development. Its assessment rests importantly on the calculation that, with global crises multiplying, the

* For a measured response to arguments that view the rise of the BRICS as a replica of the pattern of Northern domination, exploiting inequalities within the Global South, see Desai (2021). See also Clegg (2024).

contradictions between the Global North and South, and within the Global North, will grow sharper. But with continued US military interference stoking tensions in the South China Sea and over Taiwan, will China keep to its peaceful trajectory? As history has shown, conditions in its immediate neighborhood are China's key consideration; at the same time, it sees these conditions as influenced by the overall international balance of power, with the collective strength of the emerging Global South standing out as the critical factor. Meanwhile, China's dual approach—building a more inclusive FPPC-based multilateralism from below while gradually coordinating its bilateral partnerships and regional organizations, and consolidating its position within a multipolar world marked by a more even global distribution of economic power—should move to the center of international studies.

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Author Biography

Jenny Clegg (ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0009-0006-9204-7990) is a specialist on China with long-standing scholarly engagement in the country's political and social development. She first travelled to China in 1971 and has closely followed its domestic transformations and evolving international role over subsequent decades. She received her PhD from the University of Manchester in 1989, with a dissertation examining the relationship between peasantry and revolution in China. Following the completion of her doctorate, she held academic appointments as a Senior Lecturer in Afro-Asian Studies and Asia-Pacific Studies at universities in northern England. Her latest book is *Storming the Heavens: Peasants and Revolution in China, 1925-1949* (Manifesto Press, 2025).

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Emerging Forms of Multipolarity

RETHINKING GLOBAL STABILITY AND GOVERNANCE

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Abstract

Amid intensifying debates over great-power rivalry, institutional fragmentation, and the future of global governance, this article investigates two interrelated questions: (1) Is multipolarity becoming a defining feature of the contemporary international order, and (2) if so, what form is it taking—and with what implications for global stability and governance? The study adopts a literature-based research design and conducts a critical review of major scholarly and policy debates on polarity. It evaluates competing diagnoses of the current system—claims of persistent U.S. unipolarity, emergent U.S.–China bipolarity, and the diffusion of power toward multiple poles—by examining their empirical foundations and analytical limitations. It then surveys leading interpretations of contemporary multipolarity, including unbalanced, complex, polycentric, and multiplex accounts, and assesses how each conceptualization frames the relationship between power distribution and international order. The analysis argues that contemporary multipolarity should not be treated as a simple revival of nineteenth-century balance-of-power politics but as a qualitatively distinct phase marked by strategic autonomy, multi-alignment, institutional pluralism, and transactional diplomacy under conditions of deep interdependence.

Keywords
global governance; global stability; multipolarity; polarity; strategic autonomy

Introduction

The issue of multipolarity is related to the broad patterns of international order as displayed in the distribution of power among states. From a neorealist perspective, any international order rests on at least four foundational elements: the anarchic character of the system, in which sovereign states constitute the primary actors; the existence of norms that regulate interactions among states; the distribution of power within the system; and the degree and nature of interdependence among actors. First, the defining feature of the contemporary international order has been its anarchic structure. Since the treaty of Westphalia, 1648, the sovereign states have been recognized as the primary actors in the international order, though, at present non-state actors and international organizations also play important role in the world order. Second, the existence of shared norms—and a degree of consensus around them—is essential to international order, given the absence of a central authority capable of regulating state behavior. Third, all states do not have equal power. Hence, the distribution of power among the states shapes the operation and nature of international order. Power as a capability to influence the behavior of other actors is the outcome of number of elements-economic, political and military and other such factors which add to the capability of states. The fourth element of international order is related to the nature of interaction and interdependence among states in the world order. It is mediated by a number of key variables like technological and economic development. Ultimately, the international order is shaped by the above four interrelated elements. The material and normative changes in the environment of the international order are reflected in these four foundational elements.

Within this realist framework, the tendency of polarity can be seen as an outcome of the distribution of power among states, which corresponds to the third foundational element of international order. One could distinguish three main types of polarity: unipolarity, bipolarity, and multipolarity. If a single state has preponderance power in the world order, it is termed as unipolar world order. If this preponderant power is shared by two states, it is called bipolar world order. On the other hand, if this preponderant power is distributed between three or more states, it is termed as multipolar world order.

While the practice of polarity has been in existence for long time in world order, the concept of polarity was systematically articulated as an analytical tool by neo-realist thinker Kenneth Waltz in 1979, who was among the first to use it to describe the structure of Cold War politics. He contended that the bipolar system (the US-led alliance vs. the USSR-led alliance) was best suited for stability in world order because it was simple and the behavior of two poles was more predictable (Waltz,1979, pp. 170-171). Thus, the very idea of polarity assumes that there is no equal distribution of power among states, and that there is/are always some state/states, which have more influence in the functioning and management of world order. Thus, polarity implies some degree of hierarchy among states with respect to power, which is invoked by neorealists as contributing factor to stability and peace in an anarchic world order. However, this neorealist version of polarity and its implications have always been debated by scholars of international politics. After the disintegration of USSR in 1991, the US remained the only superpower and the world order was termed as “unipolar” by many in the field. Charles Krauthammer (1990) famously described this period as the “unipolar moment,” a condition in which the United States stood as the sole superpower, enjoying unmatched economic, military, and cultural influence. This phase of unipolarity persisted into the 2000s, albeit with minor adjustments. The neorealist thinkers like

Mearsheimer (2001, pp. 44-45, 77) found unipolarity more suitable for a stable world order in the environment of anarchy.

Unipolarity gradually gave way to multipolarity as the new powers like China, Russia, India, Brazil and other emerged on the horizon of world, challenging the preeminent position of US power in global affairs (Gürcan, 2019b). Indeed, the process of globalization also facilitated the rise of these powers. In 2001, the Goldman Sachs economist Jim O'Neill noticed the growth potential of four economies and termed them BRIC (Brazil, Russia India and China). In a 2003 report by Goldman Sachs, *Dreaming with BRICs: The Path to 2050,* Wilson and Purushothaman (2003) projected that by 2050 the BRIC economies could surpass the G6 (France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United States, and the United Kingdom), fundamentally reshaping the hierarchy of the world's largest economies. This projection, commonly known as the BRIC thesis, led to the formalization of BRIC in 2006, which later became BRICS with the inclusion of South Africa in 2010. Following the 2008 global financial crisis, the G20 was elevated to the summit level in 2009, granting emerging economies a greater voice in the management of the global economy. These economies also channeled their surplus wealth into military modernization, narrowing the capability gap between the United States and emerging powers —most notably China. Together, these developments contributed to the rise of multipolarity as a dominant narrative in the global order.

A multipolar world order essentially involves the existence of multiple great powers. This is not the first time that in world order power is shared by more than two great powers. Many scholars have identified the Congress of Vienna, 1815 and Concert of Europe as the examples of multipolarity, though it was confined to Europe only. This European multipolarity continued by the end of World War I. In the wake of World War II, scholars like Hans Morgenthau and EH Carr discussed the balance of power system involving multiple great powers, albeit without using the term multipolar world order. However, in the context of multiple great powers, the term "multipolar" was for the first time used in 1964 in an article *Multipolar World Systems and International Stability*, written jointly by

Karl W. Deutsch and David Singer (1964). Contrary to the neorealist argument, they concluded that multipolarity is more suitable for stability in the international system. Later, the term became part of international discourse as a new stage of world order succeeding the bipolar and unipolar world orders in the latter half of the last century.

However, the debate about the myth and reality of multipolarity as well as its implications for the stability in the global order goes on unabated among scholars and policy makers. If multipolarity has potential for greater inclusion flexibility and cooperation in the world order, it is also said to be fraught with instability and regional conflicts. This article aims to contribute to this debate by analyzing the emerging nature of multipolarity and its possible impact on the world order. For this purpose, this study addresses the following two questions: Is multipolarity bound to become a defining feature of contemporary international order? If so, what shape it will take? What would be the implications of multipolarity for the stability and governance of international order?

This study is built on a literature-based research design and follows a critical review approach. Rather than offering a descriptive summary of existing work, a critical review interrogates the literature from an interpretive standpoint by identifying its key arguments and underlying assumptions, while also highlighting points of convergence and divergence, conceptual weaknesses, internal inconsistencies, and unresolved controversies in a given field; its purpose is to synthesize what is known and, equally important, to clarify what remains contested so as to provide clearer analytical direction for subsequent research (Otero & Gürcan, 2024, p. 8). In line with this approach, the article critically maps competing positions on whether the contemporary system is moving toward multipolarity (versus persistent unipolarity or emergent U.S.–China bipolarity), evaluates the evidentiary bases and limits of these claims, and contrasts major conceptualizations of multipolarity's emerging forms (e.g., unbalanced, complex, polycentric, and multiplex accounts). On that basis, it develops an analytically grounded assessment of how different configurations of multipolarity are likely to shape prospects for global stability and governance, focusing on mechanisms such as strategic autonomy, issue-based alignments, institutional pluralism, and transactional diplomacy.

This article is organized into two main sections. The first section reviews and critically assesses competing arguments on the emergence of multipolarity, evaluating claims of persistent unipolarity and renewed bipolarity against evidence of power diffusion. The second section examines the implications of multipolarity for international order by advancing an analytically grounded assessment of its consequences for stability, governance, and cooperation in a more pluralistic global system.

The Emergence of Multipolarity: Competing Claims, Conceptual Debates, and Empirical Assessment

One could identify two broad sets of arguments regarding the emergence of the multipolar world order in future. The first set of arguments relates to whether multipolarity is an emerging phenomenon or not? This question is debated due to subjectivity involved in measuring the capabilities of nations to be included under the rubric of new poles. There are still scholars (Oystein Tunsjo, 2018; Brooks and Wohlforth, 2023; Jo Inge Bekkevold, 2023) who deny the emergence of multipolarity either on the ground of persisting unipolarity or emerging Cold War bipolarity between the US and China. Tunsjo (2018) claims that the world is moving towards Cold War bipolarity between the US and China, hence denying the emergence of multipolarity in the near future. According to Tunsjo, no other state in the foreseeable future will be in a position to develop a capability comparable to the US and China. In a similar vein, Jo Inge Bekkevold (2023) argues that the contemporary international system is bipolar rather than multipolar, on the grounds that only two countries—the United States and China—possess the economic scale, military capabilities, and global influence necessary to constitute a pole. Moreover, Brooks and Wohlforth (2023) declare multipolarity as a *myth* as the world will remain unipolar due to "American power's staying power". They focus primarily on the global reach of U.S. defense capabilities and the strength of the U.S. dollar. On this basis, they conclude that the international system is neither bipolar nor multipolar, nor is it on the verge of becoming either. Recent challenges to U.S. hegemony are therefore interpreted as an era of partial unipolarity rather than a transition toward multipolarity. However, the scholars who deny emergence of multipolarity are in minority. Moreover, they largely focus on economic and military capabilities and ignore the rising voice of emerging economies and Global South in shaping the new world order. Furthermore, military capabilities do not necessarily translate into effective global control or reliable deterrence as the US with large number of military bases throughout the world could not tame Taliban in Afghanistan, deter Russia from invading Ukraine or prevent China's overtures in Taiwan or deter smaller states like Iran and North Korea from pursuing nuclear ambitions. These events cast doubt on claims of unipolarity or bipolarity.

By contrast, a predominant view among scholars (Barry Posen, 2009; Dugin, 2021; Ashford and Cooper, 2023; Santis, 2024) and policymakers—including Russian President Vladimir Putin, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva—holds that the world is moving toward multipolarity. This view suggests that a multipolar order is the next stage of the world system after the bipolar era (1945-1991) and the unipolar world order of the post-Cold War era. The evidence cited in support of this argument is the economic and military rise of new powers such as China, Brazil, and India, as well as the re-emergence of Russia, resulting in the redistribution of power among nations and the decline in US hegemonic power, not to mention a retrenchment from its traditional global commitments (Gürcan, 2019b).

Barry Posen (2009), taking into account the emergence of multiple centers of power, the broader shift of economic power from West to East, and the growing role of non-state actors, argues that the international system is likely to experience a prolonged period of multipolarity before any transition toward bipolarity. Russian political philosopher Aleksandr Dugin (2021, pp. 17-48) highlights the philosophical foundations of multipolarity as a radical alternative to the unipolar world. Taking the cue from the Huntington's Clash of Civilizations thesis, he identifies multiple centers of power in the world, based on their respective civilizational ethos. These power centers would not be obliged to follow the Western norms and values in their organization and functioning. Moreover, these centers of power are becoming materially self-sufficient to defend their sovereignty in the face of adversary. Another scholar, Santis (2024), identifies declines in U.S. military power, economic primacy, and political authority, and argues that these developments indicate a shift toward a multipolar world. The comparative *military might* of the US displays signs of decline as Russia is not deterred from attacking Ukraine and China is rapidly modernizing its defense capabilities; America's *economic primacy* is challenged by the economic rise of China, India and others; and U.S. political authority has been weakened to the extent that many countries have defied U.S. sanctions against Russia and have declined to align with Washington in formally designating Russia as the aggressor in the Ukraine war.

Leaders from emerging economies like Putin, Modi and Da Silva have endorsed the emergence of multipolarity in their statements. During the Brazil Summit, July, 2025, the Indian Prime Minister has called for a "inclusive global order" with greater say for the countries of the Global South (Anadolu Agency, 2025). A year back during the extended BRICS Summit in 2024, the Russian President Putin claimed that the BRICS Summit shows that a "multipolar world" is a reality now (Bloomberg, 2024). Brazilian President Lula has long sought a multipolar global order and now "pledges to have relations with everyone". In 2021, Lula said, "Brazil does not US to lead the world. It needs the US to find a new place at the table (Adler and Long: 2023)." Other world leaders like UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, French President Emmanuel Macron and European Union's Foreign policy representative Josep Borrell have also supported the idea of rising multipolarity in the contemporary world order (Pandya, 2024).

The second Trump administration since January 2025 has further strengthened this argument by its policies and statements. It has exhibited signs of U.S. retrenchment from global commitments, including withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement, a reduced willingness to shoulder responsibilities for European security through NATO, exits from organizations such as the WHO and UNESCO, a more confrontational stance toward the WTO, and the unilateral imposition of reciprocal tariffs on multiple trade partners. These developments may be part of the MAGA (Make America Great Again) strategy, but they also underline US retrenchment from the management of the global order which was shaped under its leadership and which still predominantly reflects liberal values and norms. However, while these U.S. policy initiatives and actions may initially appear fragmented or inconsistent, they can also be interpreted as part of a broader strategic adjustment to the emerging reality of multipolarity—one that avoids explicit acknowledgment due to the domestic political costs such recognition may entail. In this vein, some American scholars (e.g., Ashford and Cooper, 2023) have urged U.S. policymakers to move beyond a bipolar framework and to recognize the rise of multipolarity, advocating a reduction in global defense burdens alongside more flexible and selective alliance arrangements. Taken together, these dynamics underscore the emergence of multipolarity as a defining feature of the contemporary international order.

The second set of arguments concerns the form that the emerging multipolar order is likely to take. Is it a replication of the European great-power balance exemplified by the Congress of Vienna (1815) and the Concert of Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, or merely an extension of the bipolar system through the inclusion of additional poles? Alternatively, does it represent a qualitatively distinct configuration unlike any previously observed? The answers to these questions have important implications for global stability.

There is no consensus among scholars regarding the shape of emerging multipolarity. The situation resembles the parable of the blind men and the elephant, in which each observer reaches a different conclusion by grasping only a part of the whole. Similarly, even among scholars who agree that the international order is moving toward multipolarity, interpretations vary widely as to what form this new configuration will take. Ashford and Cooper (2023) focus on level of emerging redistribution of power among nations and describe it as "unbalanced multipolarity" because power is not evenly distributed among various power centers like US, China, India, Russia, Brazil, UK and France. The power distribution is more skewed in favor of two powers (US and China). Turkish scholar Unal Cervikoz (2024) prefers to describe the emerging world order by reference to *polycentrism* rather than multipolarity, because the latter concept historically involves the equal distribution of power among main actors (Concert of Europe, 1815), whereas the present reality is best captured by polycentrism in which major powers have unequal distribution of powers. In other terms, the current world order does not have multiple poles but multiple centers of power. Josep Borrell, the former Vice President of the European Commission, in 2021, describes the emerging global order as "complex multipolarity". Borrell argues that there has been a rapid transformation in the distribution of power around the world over the last three decades. The world order went from a bipolar configuration between 1945 and 1989 to a unipolar configuration between 1989 and 2008, before entering what is now commonly described as a condition of complex multipolarity (Peters, 2022). The complexity of multipolarity emerges from the mismatch between the dislocation of economic powers and centers of geopolitical influence. While there are three major centers of economic power—the United States, China, and the European Union—mid-level powers such as Russia and Turkey exercise disproportionate geopolitical influence, resulting in a mismatch between the EU's substantial economic weight and its more limited geopolitical power.

Indian scholar Amitav Acharya (2014, pp. 108-113; 2017) describes the emerging international order as "multiplex world order," resembling a multiplex cinema complex where multiple films are screened simultaneously. He argues that the US-led liberal world order rested on four fundamental elements: free trade, post-war multilateral institutions, liberal democracy, and liberal values. Citing examples from each domain, he concludes that these elements are in decline. The US-led liberal order will not be eliminated but will be joined other powers and perspectives represented by states like Russia, China, India, international and regional institutions, multinational corporations and non-state actors, resulting in a multiplex world order. Additionally, he finds it misleading to term the present world order as return of the multipolarity of pre-World War I Europe. Acharya lists several differences between the old multipolarity and the present emerging order. Unlike the present order, the past multipolarity was dominated by European colonial powers and entire Global South was excluded. In present order, economic interdependence among nations is more dense and global. Similarly, regional and international institutions in present order are also dense and durable. Finally, challenges to peace and stability in the present order are more complex due to intrastate conflicts and involvement of non-state actors.

Similarly, Gürcan's (2019a, 2019b, 2020) post-hegemonic multipolarity thesis interprets the rise of multipolarity not merely as a geopolitical redistribution of power but as a historically grounded crisis of neoliberal hegemony within global capitalism, unfolding across three interrelated dimensions: a political-economic layer rooted in the contradictions of US-led capitalism, a geopolitical layer marked both by renewed rivalries and conflicts among major powers alongside emerging cooperation dynamics such as South–South cooperation, and a political-sociological and cultural layer shaped by phenomena including right-wing populism and alter-globalization social movements, while emphasizing that the current conjuncture represents an early and potentially reversible phase of multipolarity characterized by significant uncertainty (Gürcan & Otero, 2024).

The reason for this divergence in interpretations of contemporary multipolarity lies in the tendency to anchor current developments to the historical concept of polarity and to situate multipolarity within a linear succession from bipolarity and unipolarity. This approach obscures the distinctiveness of the present international order. Rather than being treated as a mere extension or revival of earlier configurations, the contemporary system should be understood as a new evolutionary phase of world order, marked by characteristics not previously observed—regardless of the labels assigned to it. Several features distinguish the current international order from its earlier incarnations. First, the contemporary international order is not defined by a merely numerical increase in the number of poles; rather, it reflects a qualitative transformation shaped by overlapping networks, fluid and issue-based alliances, and novel structural conditions under which global politics now operates. Second, the constellation of influential actors has expanded beyond traditional great powers to include an increasingly assertive Global South, emerging economies, and a wide range of non-state actors with growing relevance in international affairs. Third, the nature of power and capability has evolved significantly: state power is no longer determined solely by conventional military strength but increasingly by nuclear proliferation, control over global supply chains, access to critical minerals, and advanced technologies (Shapiro, 2021). In this context, nuclear capabilities are now dispersed among a broader set of actors—such as North Korea, Pakistan, India, Israel, and potentially Iran—extending beyond the five traditional nuclear powers. Fourth, new and emerging centers of power are more systematically organized through institutional groupings such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and ASEAN, indicating a level of coordination largely absent during the Cold War. Fifth, and paradoxically, these transformations have unfolded alongside deepening interdependence driven by globalization and advances in information and communication technologies, even as the liberal international order fragments and multilateralism weakens—a tension aptly captured by Josep Borrell's (2023) observation that the world is becoming increasingly multipolar while multilateralism is simultaneously in retreat.

To conclude this section with a critical assessment, the arguments against multipolarity reveal important logical tensions and empirical shortcomings. First, they contend that the world is not multipolar because the international order continues to exhibit a modified form of unipolarity: the United States remains the world's largest economy and retains preeminent military capabilities, including a global military presence and an extensive network of alliances. From this perspective, unipolarity persists, albeit in a more accommodative form. Second, they argue that the international order is not multipolar because it displays tendencies toward bipolarity, with the United States and China emerging as the two principal poles of the system, while other states lag significantly behind in terms of economic and military capabilities.

Logically, these positions acknowledge that U.S.-dominated unipolarity has undergone significant change over the past two decades. Once change is conceded, the critical question becomes the direction of that change. The trajectory points toward multipolarity rather than toward renewed unipolarity or a consolidated bipolar order, given the presence of multiple potential great powers —including Russia, India, Brazil, the European Union, and a rising China. Moreover, the movement toward multipolarity has not stalled; it continues to unfold.

Empirically, there are four compelling reasons demonstrating that the international order is moving toward multipolarity. First, in nominal terms, the GDP of the United States, China, and India in 1990 stood at $5,963 billion, $360 billion, and $320 billion, respectively, meaning that U.S. GDP was sixteen times larger than China's and eighteen times larger than India's. At that time, neither China nor India ranked among the world's top ten economies. This situation has since changed markedly. The current nominal GDP figures for the United States, China, and India are approximately $30 trillion, $19 trillion, and $4.2 trillion, respectively, indicating that the gap has narrowed considerably (Macrotrends, 2025). China and India are now among the world's leading economies. As a result, there has been a substantial shift in the global balance of economic power from the West toward Asia, driven by the worldwide redistribution of wealth. China's share of global GDP has risen from 1.6 percent to nearly 18 percent, while the West's share has declined from roughly 67 percent to less than 40 percent since 1990, reflecting a significant economic shift toward Asia and other emerging markets (Policy Stability, 2024).

Second, the gap in military capabilities has also narrowed, as reflected in patterns of military expenditure. In 2000, military spending by the United States, China, and India amounted to $295 billion, $23 billion, and $15 billion, respectively (SIPRI, retrieved 2025). By 2023, these figures had increased to $916 billion, $296 billion, and $83 billion, accounting for 37 percent, 12 percent, and 3.4 percent of total global defense expenditure, respectively (Statista, 2025). Although the United States continues to command the largest share of global military spending, the gap between the United States and emerging powers has narrowed significantly.

Third, the growing practice of strategic autonomy among states is incompatible with a strictly unipolar or bipolar system and instead signals the emergence of a multipolar order characterized by multi-alignment and issue-based partnerships. Governments across Eurasia and the Global South are increasingly asserting ideological and strategic autonomy. Rather than forming rigid, binary alliances reminiscent of the Cold War, countries such as Indonesia, Turkey, and India have adopted multi-alignment and regional hedging strategies. Even the European Union has begun to explore strategic autonomy vis-à-vis both the United States and China. EU strategic autonomy refers to the Union's capacity to act independently—without reliance on external powers—in strategically important policy domains. In this context, the European Parliament's think tank outlined a Strategic Autonomy Plan for the European Union covering the period 2013–2023 (European Parliament, 2022).

Fourth, the growing prevalence of transactional diplomacy is associated with neither unipolarity nor bipolarity but instead reflects the dynamics of multipolarity. The monolithic multilateralism that characterized the post-1945 international order has increasingly given way to transactional forms of diplomacy. States now pursue national interests through flexible, issue-based alliances and regional groupings—such as BRICS, the Quad, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—rather than relying exclusively on universal institutions like the United Nations or the World Trade Organization (EEAS, 2023). These structural changes have produced a multipolar world in which power is more widely distributed, diplomacy is more pluralistic, and the international order is more fluid and contested.

Ultimately, the debate between unipolarity, bipolarity, and multipolarity is increasingly being resolved in favor of the latter. A growing consensus among scholars and policymakers, supported by compelling empirical evidence, indicates that power is diffusing toward middle powers within the international system and that the world is moving toward multipolarity. Accordingly, international affairs are shifting from a unipolar order dominated by the United States to a multipolar system in which power is more widely distributed across states, corporations, and non-state actors (Muggah, 2024).

With respect to the shape of emerging multipolarity, two observations merit emphasis. First, contemporary multipolarity should not be understood as a replication of the nineteenth-century European system of multiple great powers, nor as a simple extension of unipolarity. Rather, it represents a distinct evolutionary phase of the international order, characterized by the presence of nuclear weapons and non-state actors, unprecedented levels of interdependence among states, and a transformed profile of state power shaped by critical technologies such as artificial intelligence and control over strategic supply chains and critical minerals. Second, it is neither analytically useful nor empirically accurate to reduce contemporary multipolarity to a single, fixed label, as it exhibits multiple, overlapping characteristics and remains highly fluid and adaptable. A more productive approach is to analyze emerging multipolarity through its constitutive features and to refine these analytical categories in light of evolving empirical realities. In this regard, Josep Borrell (2023) conceptualizes contemporary multipolarity as the outcome of three interrelated dynamics: the broader global redistribution of wealth, the growing willingness of states to assert strategic and ideological autonomy, and the rise of an increasingly transactional international system grounded in bilateral arrangements rather than universal rules. This framework not only offers a parsimonious way of capturing the complexity of contemporary multipolarity but also provides a more effective basis for assessing its implications for stability and governance in the international order, a task to which the following section turns.

Multipolarity and International Order: Debates, Evidence, and Implications

Like the debate over the shape of emerging multipolarity, the question of its likely impact on international order remains highly contested. This debate is structured around two broad sets of arguments. The first holds that global peace and stability are better served when the number of poles in the international system is limited; from this perspective, multipolarity is associated with greater complexity, uncertainty, and a decline in stability. The second set of arguments contends that multipolarity does not necessarily undermine peace and stability and may, instead, foster a more inclusive and flexible framework for cooperation and conflict management. These competing perspectives must be examined in turn before any conclusion can be drawn.

The first position maintains that unipolarity or bipolarity is more conducive to global stability, whereas multipolarity is likely to generate conflict and instability. Proponents of this viewpoint to a range of risks associated with multipolar systems, including heightened instability, an increased likelihood of conflict, weakened global governance and cooperation, economic fragmentation and supply-chain disruptions, the proliferation of proxy wars, and the intensification of cultural and ideological rivalries. This line of argument draws heavily on neorealist theory, particularly the works of Kenneth Waltz and John J. Mearsheimer. Mearsheimer (2001, pp. 44–45, 77), drawing on historical examples from nineteenth-century Europe, argues that great powers are inherently insecure and therefore constantly seek to maximize their power, a dynamic that produces intense competition and raises the risk of conflict in a multipolar environment.

Several scholars advance similar concerns (Varisco, 2013;

Stephens, 2015; Shapiro, 2021; Latham & Yu, 2024). Andrea Edoardo Varisco (2013), while acknowledging the emergence of a multipolar order, remains deeply skeptical of its capacity to sustain peace and stability. Referring to the failure of the Concert of Europe—a historical configuration often likened to a multipolar order—Varisco argues that multipolarity is inherently prone to instability and large-scale conflict, as evidenced by the outbreak of the First World War. Beyond the rise of new great powers such as China, Russia, India, and Brazil, critics further highlight the destabilizing role of middle powers and non-state actors possessing nuclear capabilities, which may exacerbate insecurity in an emerging multipolar system.

Shapiro (2021), while offering a more nuanced assessment, similarly cautions that multipolar environments have historically been associated with catastrophic conflicts, notably during the First and Second World Wars. Such conflicts, he argues, tend to arise when states project power beyond their immediate spheres of influence. Latham and Yu (2024) identify three principal challenges of multipolarity: its propensity for large-scale conflict, the inability of international institutions to adapt effectively to a fragmented distribution of power, and the intensification of cultural competition. From a more explicitly normative standpoint, American scholar Bret Stephens (2015) contends that a U.S.-led unipolar system provides the strongest guarantee of global order, warning that the alternative to Pax Americana is global disorder.

Second, proponents argue that multipolarity is more inclusive and opens new opportunities for cooperation. A growing body of scholarship (Lloyd & Dixon, 2012; Shapiro, 2021; Ashford & Cooper, 2023; Latham & Yu, 2024; Ferenczy, 2025) challenges the assumption that multipolarity is inherently conflict-prone, instead presenting it as an international order capable of accommodating diversity and fostering cooperation. Scholars advancing this view emphasize several potential advantages of multipolarity, including a more inclusive distribution of power, greater scope for strategic autonomy and cooperative choice, increased cultural and economic pluralism, expanded opportunities for democratic and plural forms of global governance, a reduced likelihood of large-scale great power wars, enhanced strategic flexibility through practices such as buck-passing, and greater overall stability achieved through economic and political balancing.

Michael Lloyd and Chris Dixon (2012) argue that a unipolar order led by the United States and its allies is ill-suited to sustaining "peaceful stability" at the global level and may give way to a multipolar order better equipped to facilitate constructive and consensual approaches to conflict resolution while preserving essential political and cultural diversity. In a similar vein, Zsuzsa Anna Ferenczy (2025) highlights the growing agency of middle and small powers in shaping emerging multipolarity. She observes that such states are increasingly asserting themselves through debates on global governance reform and the restructuring of the international financial architecture, with countries of the Global South playing a more active role in shaping discussions on multilateralism and multipolarity. At the same time, Ferenczy cautions that a deliberate shift in perceptions is necessary to consolidate a form of multipolar order capable of sustaining cooperation for the collective benefit.

Ashford and Cooper (2023) further challenge neorealist assumptions by suggesting that multipolarity may, in some respects, be less dangerous than bipolarity. Drawing on Dale Copeland's insights, they note that the presence of multiple power centers can increase great powers' reluctance to initiate wars they are uncertain of winning. Shapiro (2021) similarly contends that interactions in a multipolar system are less likely to be governed by zero-sum logic, and that shifting alliances and short-term strategic calculations can help limit both the frequency and the scale of conflict. Latham and Yu (2024) reinforce this view by arguing that a modern "concert of powers" under multipolarity would encourage flexible alliance structures, allowing states to avoid rigid commitments and instead form partnerships that leave room for compromise and de-escalation. Despite the risks inherent in any complex system, they conclude that multipolarity offers a meaningful opportunity to construct a more balanced and resilient international order.

The implications of multipolarity for the international order remain highly contested. Broadly speaking, the debate is structured around two competing viewpoints. The first, advanced by neorealist thinkers such as Kenneth Waltz and John J. Mearsheimer as well as other scholars, holds that unipolarity or bipolarity is better suited to maintaining stability in the international system. From this perspective, multipolarity is seen as inherently destabilizing, as it introduces complex patterns of multiple alignments and increases uncertainty regarding state behavior. Proponents of this view place considerable emphasis on hierarchy as a stabilizing mechanism within an anarchic international order. The second viewpoint contends that a multipolar order is more inclusive and provides states with greater opportunities for cooperation, choice, and consensus-building, thereby enhancing both stability and the quality of global governance.

The neorealist arguments in favor of unipolarity or bipolarity are largely theoretical or draw heavily on the historical experience of European multipolarity—most notably the Concert of Europe—and its eventual failure in the lead-up to the First World War. However, conclusions derived from these theoretical premises and historical analogies suffer from several limitations. First, a number of scholars, including Hans Morgenthau and Karl Deutsch and David Singer (1964), have advanced theoretical arguments suggesting that multipolarity may, under certain conditions, be more conducive to stability than systems with fewer poles. Morgenthau, writing during the Second World War, emphasized the balance of power as a potential instrument for peace and stability in a multipolar context (Morgenthau, 1967, pp. 178–202). Deutsch and Singer (1964) similarly examined the relationship between the number of poles—that is, the diffusion of power—and systemic stability, concluding that multipolarity, through its balance-of-power mechanisms, may offer greater stability than bipolar or unipolar configurations. This conclusion directly challenges the neorealist assumption regarding the relationship between polarity and stability. From a systemic perspective, Deutsch and Singer defined stability as the condition in which the international system preserves its essential characteristics, prevents the dominance of any single state, ensures the survival of most of its members, and avoids large-scale war.

In addition, the theory of Complex Interdependence, developed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye in 1977, challenged the core assumptions of both classical realism and neorealism by emphasizing the growing density of interdependence among states. According to this perspective, increasing international transactions—encompassing flows of goods, capital, people, and information—expand the scope for cooperation among states and non-state actors through multiple channels (Rana, 2015).

Finally, arguments against multipolarity that rely on the European experience of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are of limited applicability to the contemporary international system, which differs fundamentally from earlier forms of multipolarity in terms of its global scope, inclusiveness, and far higher levels of interdependence among states.

Building on the preceding debates, the following analysis develops the article's own assessment by examining how multipolarity operates in practice and how it responds to the principal critiques identified in the literature through concrete mechanisms affecting stability and governance. By dispersing power among several poles, multipolarity can promote stability by preventing any single actor from attaining unrestrained dominance. This mechanism of mutual checking generates a dynamic equilibrium in which flexible and overlapping alliances function as constraints on powerful entities. A prominent illustration can be found in the Indo-Pacific region, where China's growing assertiveness has contributed to the formation and consolidation of strategic arrangements such as the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy, the Quad (India, the United States, Japan, and Australia), and AUKUS. Rather than provoking direct confrontation, these alignments are designed to preserve the balance of power and discourage unilateral hegemony. According to *The Hindu* (2024), such interdependence-based deterrence enhances predictability and reduces the likelihood of miscalculation. When effectively managed, a multipolar system of this kind may prove more stable than unipolarity, as multiple actors serve as reciprocal constraints (Polity Prober, 2025).

Beyond security dynamics, multipolarity also creates opportunities for global governance structures that are more representative and inclusive. Emerging forums such as the G20, BRICS+, and the New Development Bank increasingly amplify the voices of the Global South and middle-income countries, standing in contrast to the earlier G7-dominated architecture. India's G20 presidency in 2023, particularly its successful push for permanent African Union membership, marked a significant step toward more democratic multilateralism. Similarly, the 2024 expansion of BRICS to include Egypt, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Ethiopia illustrates how emerging powers are reshaping international institutions to better reflect global diversity. These developments align with broader calls to adapt global governance to the multipolar realities of the twenty-first century rather than the bipolar structures inherited from the post–Second World War era.

In the context of international norm-setting and institutional transformation, multipolarity has further opened space for diverse perspectives. Rising powers have sought to address longstanding inequities in institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF, and the United Nations. BRICS leaders, for example, have repeatedly called for reforms to the IMF quota system to enhance the representation of emerging economies, while South Africa, Brazil, and India have advocated permanent membership on the UN Security Council in line with evolving norms of equity and representation (Polity Prober, 2025). In contrast to Western liberal frameworks, organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) have promoted region-specific approaches to issues such as digital sovereignty and artificial intelligence governance (ISDP, 2024), underscoring how multipolarity facilitates normative pluralism alongside the diffusion of power.

At the level of conflict management, a multipolar environment enables greater strategic flexibility among major powers, often through practices such as "buck-passing." In such contexts, powerful states rely on regional actors and institutions to manage localized conflicts, thereby avoiding the political and material costs of direct intervention while maintaining strategic presence. The Syrian conflict offers a clear example: the United States' decision not to intervene decisively allowed Russia, Iran, and Türkiye to shape both the military trajectory and political outcomes of the conflict. This pattern illustrates how multipolarity can accommodate indirect forms of engagement that limit escalation while preserving broader systemic equilibrium (Policy Stability, 2024).

Multipolarity also expands the diplomatic maneuvering space available to middle powers such as India, Brazil, and Indonesia. Unlike in a bipolar system, these states are no longer compelled to align rigidly with a single bloc; instead, they can pursue issue-based coalitions, multi-alignment, and strategic hedging. India's simultaneous engagement with the Quad and BRICS exemplifies this flexibility. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasized during the Voice of Global South Summit in January 2023, India seeks to amplify Global South priorities without being constrained by zero-sum bloc politics (MEA, 2023). Such practices highlight how multipolarity nurtures policy pluralism, reinforces sovereignty, and enables diversified global partnerships.

Finally, in the Global South, multipolarity has stimulated new forms of economic cooperation, reshaping patterns of development and integration (Gürcan, 2019a, 2019b, 2020; Gürcan & Otero, 2024). Regional infrastructure initiatives, local-currency financing, and expanding South–South trade have become increasingly prominent. Institutions and projects such as the New Development Bank, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, and China's Belt and Road Initiative exemplify intra-BRICS and South–South financial arrangements designed to promote self-reliant growth while reducing dependence on traditional Western-dominated institutions. CPEC, for instance, has enhanced connectivity and employment in Pakistan through more than $60 billion in foreign direct investment, while the New Development Bank has sought to weaken the dollar-centric financial system by issuing loans in local currencies such as the South African rand and the Brazilian real (Reuters, 2023). The expansion of BRICS at the 2025 Rio de Janeiro Summit to include

Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Ethiopia, and Iran further institutionalized multipolarity by broadening the group's geographic and developmental reach. This transformation signals a shift away from Western-centered governance models toward more inclusive and pluralistic frameworks, while also providing an alternative platform for advancing Global South priorities and strengthening South–South cooperation.

Conclusion

Our analysis reveals that multipolarity is no longer a myth. It is a reality of contemporary world order, even though scholars may differ about is shape and nature. Additionally, the contemporary multipolarity is distinct from its earlier avatars like the Concert of Europe (1815) in the sense that it is more inclusive and global in character, underlined by more pervasive and deeper interdependence among states and non-state actors, and enduring and extensive institutionalization of global order. Its operational features are strategic autonomy, multi-alignment, short-term, flexible and issue-based alliances, transactional diplomacy and orientation towards democratic inclusiveness in management of international order. Hence, contemporary multipolarity needs to be analyzed as a distinct evolution in international politics. There is no sound logic or evidence to prove that multipolarity is inherently prone to disorder and instability. The present multipolarity has potential for positive contribution to international order as it may limit the possibility of "great wars" and provides opportunity for inclusive and democratic governance and multiple networks for cooperation and consensus building to address the contemporary global challenges.

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The Rise of Economic Coercion

INSTRUMENTS, ILLEGALITY, AND UN CHARTER REMEDIES

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Abstract

The growing recourse to economic coercion in contemporary international relations has raised fundamental questions about its implications for international peace and the legal limits imposed by the UN Charter framework. Based on the relevant international relations literature and doctrinal legal analysis, this article examines the contemporary rise of economic coercion, the instruments through which it operates, and the extent to which such practices may be considered unlawful under the UN Charter, as well as the legal and institutional mechanisms available within the UN system to deter and respond to them. The findings suggest that the contemporary rise of economic coercion is driven by strategic competition within conditions of deep economic interdependence, where states increasingly weaponize trade, finance, technology, and investment networks to gain geopolitical leverage. While not universally recognized as "force" under Article 2(4), many forms of economic coercion violate the principle of non-intervention under Article 2(7) and may constitute internationally wrongful acts. Meanwhile, the UN system—through countermeasures, self-defense doctrines, Security Council action, and regional arrangements—provides existing but underutilized legal and institutional tools to regulate and deter such practices.

Keywords
economic coercion; economic sanctions; international law; non-intervention; United Nations

Introduction

Since its creation during the San Francisco Conference in 1945, the main objective of the UN (1945), according to the preamble of its constitutive treaty, has been to promote international peace and security by saving "succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind". Following the antecedent of the Briand-Kellogg Pact, article 2-4 of UN Charter establishes a general prohibition to use force in the relations between states. Pursuant to article 1-1 of the charter, the organization's function in the maintenance of international security is aimed at preventing and alleviating threats to peace, breaches of peace and acts of aggression, and, by virtue of article 24 of the charter, its main political organ- the Security Council- holds the primary responsibility in the fulfillment of this function. The UN Charter does not contain a definition of "threats to peace", "breaches of peace" or "acts of aggression". Yet, in the practice of the organization and the resolutions of the General Assembly and the Security Council, these terms have mainly been used to refer to situations involving the use of armed force between states. Therefore, the UN's role in the maintenance of international peace and security has traditionally been understood as primarily concerned with preventing and responding to situations involving the use of armed force between states.

However, the maintenance of international peace and security does not rely only on the absence of military conflicts. The word security etymologically derives from the Latin *sine cura* (without care, without concern) and implies that individuals should be able to act without fear and worry, minimizing harm, deprivation, suffering, and anguish. For international relations scholars, international security entails alleviating threats to shared values of the members of the international community. For international law scholars, international security implies responding to threats to the interests and territorial integrity of states (Williams, 2009, p.6). This vision of international security traditionally involves a state-centered perspective which identifies it with national security. In a broad understanding, the concept of national security deals with resilience against any threat to the autonomy, internal stability or territory of the nation-state, encompassing both military and non-military threats (Retter, 2020). According to a 2005 report of the UN High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change (UN, 2005), the threats to international peace and security in the twenty-first century include not just international war and conflict, but civil violence, organized crime, terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. They are also related to poverty, deadly infectious diseases, and environmental degradation, since these can have equally catastrophic consequences (Simma, 2024).

In a globally interconnected and interdependent world order, the economy is intimately connected with both national and international security (US Department of Commerce, 2018), because powerful countries no longer abide by the primacy of economics and use economic coercion as a geopolitical arm (Edler et al., 2023). From a general perspective, economic coercion can be defined as the use of economic means to force a country or entity to act against its will or change its policies. It involves leveraging economic power to compel a target to concede to demands, often through economic threats or the imposition of "economic pain". In other words, economic coercion relies on the use of economic measures as an instrument for forcing another nation to adjust its national or foreign policy or for obtaining economic advantages over or concessions from the victim State (Katz Cogan, 2024). According to article 2 of the 2023 EU Regulation on the Protection of the Union and its Member States from Economic Coercion by Third Countries, economic coercion exists when a state: "interferes in the legitimate sovereign choices of the Union or a Member State by seeking to prevent or obtain the cessation, modification or adoption of a particular act by the Union or a Member State (…)" (European Union Regulation 2023/2675). According to a 1953 Soviet draft definition of an "act of economic aggression": "State shall be declared to have committed an act of economic aggression which first commits one of the following acts: (a) Takes against another State measures of economic pressure violating its sovereignty and economic independence and threatening the bases of its economic life; (b) Takes against another State measures preventing it from exploiting or nationalizing its own natural richness; (c) Subjects another State to an economic blockade" (U.N. Doc. A/AC.66/L.2/Rev.1, 1953).

This article asks what explains the contemporary rise of economic coercion and through which instruments it operates, whether and to what extent such practices can be regarded as unlawful under the UN Charter, and what legal bases and institutional mechanisms the UN system provides to deter and respond to them. Based on the relevant international relations literature, the first part of the article will explain the reasons behind the increasing use of economic force in international relations and will analyze the new goal and the tools of economic violence that negatively impact international peace and security. The remainder of the article is devoted to our doctrinal legal analysis (Egan, 2018), grounded in the close examination of authoritative legal texts and relevant scholarly commentary to interpret the meaning of legal provisions and resolve ambiguities and inconsistencies in doctrine and jurisprudence, by applying structured deductive, analogical, and teleological reasoning to synthesize coherent legal principles. Against this backdrop, the second part of the article will (re)assess the illegality of the use of economic coercion under articles 2-4 and 2-7 of the UN Charter. Finally, the third part will study the actions that the UN can take to prevent the use of economic coercion and to restore international peace and security through the adoption of measures of individual or collective self-defense.

The Increasing Use of Economic Coercion and Its Impact on International Peace and Security

The increasing use of economic coercion in inter-state relations is a response to a completely new characteristic of the global economic order: strategic competition in midst of economic interdependence (Sullivan, 2023, p. 8). After the end of the Cold War, international law had promoted openness for trade and investment flows to foster economic interdependence between states (Ikenberry, 2020, pp. 17-18), which was considered essential to achieve development (Miller, 2021, p. 1351). In the Kantian vision of international law, economic interdependence was a tool for (perpetual) international peace and security (Russett, 2001), because of the low costs of trade and investment as means for the appropriation of productive resources, considering the high costs of using military force (Miller, 2021, p. 1335). However, after the global economic and financial crisis, also known as the "Great Recession" in 2008, global inequality rose and it became clear that the economic interdependence advanced by international law reduced poverty, eliminated hunger and fostered prosperity for the few, but not for the lot (La Vía Campesina, 2021). Global inequality generated strong social conflicts and transformed drastically the domestic and international political map of the world. Economic interdependence began to be challenged by populist and nationalist movements in many countries across the globe (e.g. Italy, US, Brazil, Mexico, India, Hungary, Bulgaria, Türkiye, Zimbabwe, South Africa, etc.), whose agendas are aimed at ensuring congruence between the state and its people, ideally by breaking its ties to "external control" (Paul, 2021, p. 1328). In international politics, states are now engaged in a new and intense geopolitical struggle between a declining hegemonic power- the US- and new competing power poles. The military and non-military conflicts involving the US, China and other states such as Russia, India, Brazil or South-Africa (founding members of the BRICS group) are (re)-establishing geopolitical confrontational lines between (trustful) "allies" and "enemies", or at least "strategic competitors".

Strategic competition is a complex dynamic which can involve contending with adversaries across economic, technological, military or ideological fields without using armed force (US Department of State, 2024). Historically, the concept of strategic competition emerged amidst the *détente* era of the 1970s and was used to refer to the competition between the US and the USSR (Winkler, 2023, p. 333). Nowadays, it is employed to name the competition between the US and China, mainly in the economic sphere. The strategic competition between these two great powers is putting “competitive pressure” (Banasik, 2024, p. 29) on all the other states, forcing them to deploy competitive strategies to protect their essential interests (Leonard, 2019).

To be able to strategically compete within a deeply interdependent and interconnected global economy, states are using economic coercion to reach geopolitical attacks against strategic rivals. In the same logic, states are having recourse to economic force to protect themselves against other contenders’ adversarial economic actions and to reinforce their own economic capacity. In other words, states are increasingly deploying economic attacks against geopolitical rivals and are using economic violence to respond to risks of economic attacks from strategic competitors. The use of economic coercion, therefore, serves to protect states’ essential economic interests and to impose these interests on other states. This new dimension of economic coercion arises from the knowledge that in the context of extreme economic interdependence, states’ domestic economies have become too reliant upon the geopolitical actions of potential adversaries, with this excessive reliance posing a threat to national security.

In fact, in the context of strategic competition, economic interdependence is no longer a tool for (perpetual) peace, but rather an instrument for war (Schindler 2024, p. 10), as states can geopolitically leverage this interdependence, i.e. they can use economic interdependence as a geopolitical weapon to coerce strategic rivals. States have grown increasingly aware of the risks of trade, financial and supply chains dependencies arising from economic interdependence, as these dependencies provide states with power over each other, that can be geopolitically exploited. (World Economic Forum, 2016). In consequence, the main reason for the increasing use of economic coercion in the current global conjuncture arises from the "weaponization of economic interdependence", or its use as a tool for economic attacks or even economic wars against strategic competitors.

Excessive reliance on economic interdependence in the midst of strategic competition and geopolitical rivalry can be concealed as a "vulnerability", especially if states are not equally or symmetrically interdependent. In fact, states can be interdependent economically, but they do not depend on each other equally, as the "core" states, or the states in a "dominant position" from an anti-trust law perspective, can constrain the less powerful (or "peripheral") economic partners (Waltz, 2010) by inflicting (or threatening to inflict) some level of "economic pain" on them. In Thucydides' words, in a situation of asymmetrical economic interdependence, "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must (Thucydides, 1999)." From this perspective, in a scenario of asymmetrical economic interdependence, economic interdependence can be used as a weapon of economic coercion. In this context, the "weaponization of economic interdependence" can be defined as a "condition under which an actor can exploit its position in an embedded network to gain a bargaining advantage over others in a contained system" (Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs Capstone Report, 2020). In a "weaponized economic interdependence" situation, states with political authority over central economic nodes "can weaponize networks to gather information or choke off economic and information flows, discover and exploit vulnerabilities, compel policy change, and deter unwanted actions" (Farrell, 2019, p. 42).

In the current context of strategic competition, powerful countries have not hesitated to leverage their economic dominance for geopolitical gain though the deployment of economically coercive measures. Many countries around the world have been put under economic attacks in a worldwide effort to weaponize states' economic power. This weaponization has been achieved through new forms of economic coercion that represent a major challenge to international peace and security and to a ruled-based global order.

Economic coercion can imply the use of multiple tools (Gürcan, 2024). It can take the form of compulsive measures or economic sanctions such as boycotts, embargoes, or attempts by rival nations to freeze the victim-state's assets or dry up its markets on a global scale. States can also employ their foreign aid program coercively by offering aid as a reward for another country's pursuit of desirable policies and by withholding aid as a punitive measure to discourage the adoption of foreign policy action (Bucheit, 1974). Economic coercion can imply the use of even more sophisticated means such as extraterritorial sanctions, import or export controls or sensitive data transfers (Hackenbroich, 2020).

Frequently, economic violence relies on the implementation of trade or investment related tools (Regulation (EU) 2023/2675). In this context, "trade weaponization" can be defined as "the employment of trade tools to induce a trade partner to change its practices in any issue-area (including economic policy and diplomatic relations) by exploiting its economic vulnerabilities (Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs Capstone Report, 2020)." In other words, "trade weaponization" consists in the use of trade tools by a state that possess "centric" economic power to force (or extort) a "peripheral" state to obey the political will of the first. In a 2023, Joint Declaration Against Trade-Related Economic Coercion and Non-Market Policies and Practices, adopted by the Governments of Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the US, trade-related economic coercion was defined as a strategy which "uses, or uses the threat of, measures affecting trade (…) in an abusive, arbitrary, or pretextual manner to pressure, induce or influence a foreign government into taking, or not taking, a decision or action in order to achieve a strategic political or policy objective, or prevent or interfere with the foreign government's exercise of its legitimate sovereign rights or choices" (USTR, 2023). The Joint Declaration was adopted after the G7 meeting in 2023 during which the member states of the group expressed strong concerns about being victims of the "weaponized trade" practices of China. China, on its part, has argued that the response of the G7 member states to this practice has also implied the use of "trade weaponization" methods (Nguyen, 2023).

"Weaponized trade" practices were developed in the US-Japan relations in 1940, during the "chicken wars" between the US and the EEC in the 1960s or in the US-OPEC countries relations during the Oil Crisis in the 1970s (Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs Capstone Report, 2020). There have been other recent examples of trade-related economic coercion in the relations between Russia and the EU after the beginning of the War in Ukraine, (Ruggi, 2023), China and Taiwan (Chaisse, 2024), Iran and the US (Ruggi, 2023), the US and China (Hopewell, 2022), and more generally the US and the rest of the world. For example, the asymmetrical economic interdependence developed in the North American Free Trade Area created "a perfect storm" conditions for "weaponized interdependence", which permitted to US President Donald J. Trump to use trade-related economic coercion against Mexico during his first administration from 2017 to 2021 and after his second arrival at the White House in 2025. The main strategy of the US "weaponizer" has been to use the imposition of tariffs and/or the threat of imposition of tariffs to interfere with Mexico's sovereign right to choose its domestic policies in two areas: migration and drug traffic control.

The use of export or import controls as a new form of trade-related economic coercion is currently being deployed by many states to limit strategic adversaries' access to critical technologies. It is mainly used as a form of defensive strategy against the threat of economic coercion from rival states. For example, the US has begun to impose targeted import restrictions based on national security concerns that have prohibited the use of equipment from Chinese state-owned telecom megacompanies Huawei and ZTE in US telecommunications networks. In addition, the US Government announced measures that enable the Commerce Department to limit the import or use in its territory of a range of information and communications technology products and services. These measures served to limit the distribution of Chinese-owned apps TikTok and

WeChat (CNAS, 2023). The export control measures against these Chinese companies had real impacts on the firms' ability to obtain critical technology and to compete in the US market and at the global level.

Another tool for the adoption of defensive coercive measures against rival economic powers in the investment field are the new forms of investment screening mechanisms. For example, in 2018, the US Congress enacted a substantial expansion of the jurisdiction of the Committee on Foreign Investment in the US (CFIUS), giving it greater powers to review outbound investments and expanding the scope of the type of investments subject to review. CFIUS has not only become more assertive in reviewing prospective investments, but it has also vastly expanded its work to review already-completed investments that had not previously come before the committee, requiring divestment or other mitigation measures in several public cases. In addition, in January 2025, the US Government adopted new Provisions Pertaining to U.S. Investments in Certain National Security Technologies and Products in Countries of Concern, a rule which established a program to "prohibit or require notification of certain types of outbound investments by US persons into certain entities located in or subject to the jurisdiction of a country of concern, and certain other entities owned by persons of a country of concern, involved in specific categories of advanced technologies and products. The Outbound Order identifies three categories of national security technologies and products for the program: semiconductors and microelectronics, quantum information technologies, and artificial intelligence. In an Annex to the Outbound Order, the President identified the People's Republic of China, along with the Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong and Macau, as a country of concern" (US Department of Treasury, 2025). President Trump's "America First Investment Policy" also focuses on the promotion of foreign investment from trustful allies and partners, while seeking to address threats posed by investment from strategic adversaries. In the EU, 24 member states now have national foreign direct investment screening mechanisms and in 2025 the EU Commission called on member states to review past, ongoing and new outbound investments in semiconductors, AI and quantum technologies (EU Commission, 2025).

The use of sanctions against Russia, Iran, and Venezuela is also very emblematic of the new tools of economic coercion that states are using in the current global conjuncture. Sanctions against Iran began after the 1979 revolution and have intensified over time, particularly with the US "maximum pressure" campaign initiated in 2018 (Sadeqi Mohammadi, 2025). Sanctions target various sectors of the Iranian economy, including energy, finance, shipping, and key individuals and entities (Dowlah, 2025, p. 126). The primary goal of sanctions is to coerce Iran to refrain from developing nuclear weapons, curb its support for terrorism, and limit its regional influence in the Middle East. Economic sanctions applied against Russia, mainly by the EU, but also the UK, the US, Canada and Australia are a form of economic coercion used by these nations to influence Russia's actions, particularly in response to its invasion of Ukraine (Morad, 2024). These sanctions involve various measures like trade restrictions, financial freezes, and travel bans. Their declared aim is to weaken Russia's economic capacity to sustain its military operations in Ukraine and to contain its regional and global influence (US Congress, 2025a). The US has also imposed individual, financial, and sectoral sanctions on the Venezuelan government, as well as sanctions on the Maduro government and its supporters. The US Congress enacted an entire law- the Venezuela Defense of Human Rights and Civil Society Act of 2014- to impose sanctions on people responsible for acts of violence, serious human rights abuses, or antidemocratic actions in Venezuela. These sanctions were extended through 2023, and their stated aim is to hasten "a return to democracy in Venezuela", i.e. to change the "nondemocratic government in Venezuela" (US Congress, 2025b).

Recent uses of these new tools of economic coercion have demonstrated their potential to inflict "economic pain" on rival states, even if they have not conducted to the full achievement of their geopolitical goal. Denying economic resources to an adversary or strategic competitor can weaken its economic power, even if the coercion fails to persuade it to change its behavior (CNAS, 2023).

The increasing recourse to these tools has led to economic conflicts between states due to divergent interests, geopolitical goals and policies related to economic matters. The growing number of economic confrontations are hindering global cooperation on economic issues and are creating major risks for the maintenance of international peace and security. Strengthening the role of the UN can provide a platform for resolving the conflicts originating in the use of economic coercion between states. The UN intervention in cases of economic coercion can be based on the UN Charter, as the use of this type of force can be seen as a violation of some of its core provisions.

The Illegality of Economic Coercion Under the UN Charter

The Use of Economic Force as a Breach of Article 2-4 of the UN Charter

Economic coercion might be considered as a violation of the prohibition to use force in international relations, established in article 2-4 of the UN Charter. According to article 2-4: "All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations." It is generally accepted that the term "force" is used in the UN Charter only to prohibit "military force" (Pobjie, 2024, p. 106). However, for some states, a broad interpretation of "force" covering "economic coercion" must be included in the terms of article 2-4. During the San Francisco Conference, the delegation of Brazil proposed to include the threat or use of economic measures under article 2-4 (Batinga, 2024). According to the proposal, this provision was to cover "the threat or use of economic measures in any manner inconsistent" with the United Nations' purposes Doc. 215, I/l/10, 6 U.N.C.I.O. Docs. 527, 559 (1945). The amendment was rejected by a vote of 26 to 2, but the reasons for its disapproval are not clear. The rejection of the Brazilian amendment may have reflected either opposition to the prohibition of use of economic force by article 2-4 or simply the belief of some of the delegates that the Charter already embodied this prohibition (Bucheit, 1974).

In 1965, at the twentieth session of the General Assembly, the Special Committee on Principles of International Law Concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation Among States submitted a report which contained an extensive but inconclusive discussion of the merits of reading into article 2-4 as a prohibition of the use of economic force, at least when it constitutes a threat to the territorial integrity or political independence of the target state. The committee debate focused on four proposals. Two of these proposals, those submitted by Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, explicitly stated that the principle of article 2-4's prohibition of force includes both economic and political pressure. A joint proposal submitted by Ghana, India and Yugoslavia contained the same suggestion, at least by implication. The United Kingdom, on the other hand, sought to limit the meaning of force to armed force and specifically abjured the inclusion of lesser forms of coercion (Bucheit, 1974). After the decolonization process, the Non-Aligned Movement supported discussions on the "economic, political and other forms of pressure or coercion" during the 1967 session of the Special Committee on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Co-operation among States (U.N. Doc. A/5746).

The third report of the Special Committee summarized the main arguments in favor of a broad interpretation of the term "force" including economic coercion as follows: "(f) economic and political forms of pressure were sometimes as dangerous as armed force, particularly for developing countries, new States and peoples under colonial domination, and could accomplish the same illicit results; they constituted a violation of international law and a threat to the maintenance of international peace and co-operation; (g) the existence of international relations based on the free consent of independent sovereign States necessarily implied prohibition both of armed force and of other forms of pressure and coercion; (h) the authors of the Charter, in drafting Article 2, paragraph 4, had used the generic term ‘force’ without any qualification, and consequently a broad interpretation of that term was perfectly compatible with the text of that provision; (i) there was nothing in the *travaux préparatoires* of the San Francisco Conference to preclude a broad interpretation of ‘force’ in Article 2, paragraph 4, of the Charter; (j) the very fact that the San Francisco Conference had rejected a Brazilian amendment that a reference to economic forms of pressure be added was proof that such a reference was not considered necessary in view of the broad meaning of the term ‘force’ in Article 2, paragraph 4, of the Charter... (UN Doc A/6799).”

Perhaps the strongest argument for the inclusion of a prohibition to use economic coercion in the relations between states under article 2-4 is to be found in the wording of the provision itself. As shown by the “*travaux préparatoires*” of the charter, its drafters were fully aware that states use many methods to coerce once another, which not necessarily imply the use of armed force. The fact that they did not use any objective to describe the word “force” clearly indicates that they did not have the intention to limit its scope, but rather to leave it open-ended and adaptable to the evolution of international relations and the future diversification or sophistication of states’ coercive arsenal. The drafters of the UN Charter were aware of the difficulties surrounding any possible amendment of the provision of the agreement and were not ignorant of the vagueness inherent to the word “force” in article 2-4, especially because in other provisions of the Charter, such as its preamble and its article 41, they used the term “armed force” to show that what they meant by force for reason of the application of these provisions was “armed force”. In fact, the preamble states that “armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest,” and, according to article 41: “The Security Council may decide what measures not involving the use of armed force are to be employed (…) These may include complete or partial interruption of economic relations (UN Doc A/6799).” This clear distinction of economic pressure from armed force can be interpreted as showing that when the drafters of the Charter wished to refer to both coercive methods, they mentioned both.

Not only the wording of article 2-4, but also its teleological interpretation according to the expressed purposes and principles of the UN Charter, supports the establishment of a general prohibition to use economic force in the relations between states. According to the Charter, the UN member states intend "to practice tolerance and live in peace with one another as good neighbors." By virtue of Article 1-1, the organization's main objective is "to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, (...) and to bring about by peaceful means... adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace (...)." In addition, according to article 1-2, the organization's aim is to develop "friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples (…) (UN Doc A/6799)." Only a more comprehensive reading of article 2-4 could permit the organization to fulfill those purposes. Why would the drafters, after eloquently expressing their desire to promote international peace and security, limit this goal to only one type of threat to this peace- armed force?

The delegates drafting this instrument were undoubtedly aware that armed conflict was frequently preceded by nonmilitary, economic confrontations (Bucheit, 1974), as the topic of economic coercion was a very debated issue during the foundation of the UN legal framework in 1945. In fact, the use of economic coercion in the relations between states was a topic included in the draft of other important treaties of the post-World War II liberal world order. In 1949, the International Law Commission (ILC) began work on a draft treaty to codify the rules of the law of treaties in the new order- the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (VCLT). One of the most contentious issues of its negotiation concerned the definition of "coercion", as a cause for the invalidity of a treaty. Article 52 of the VCLT permits the invalidation of a treaty "if its conclusion has been procured by the threat or use of force (United Nations, 1969)." Delegations from newly independent states argued for a broader definition of coercion to encompass forms of economic pressure used to impose unequal treaties, such as those concluded during the colonial-era or in the immediate aftermath of the decolonization process. In the opinion of the ex-colonies, if international law preserved the right to impose such treaties, it would serve to preserve the economic domination of former colonies and establish a system of neocolonialism. For example, the delegation from the Philippines argued that the failure to regulate economic coercion would produce a system of international law in which "there would be no protection against measures such as economic strangulation, to which, many countries, and especially the developing countries, are particularly vulnerable (Bali, 2024)." Western states delegations rejected the inclusion of economic coercion in article 52 of the VCLT, arguing that the concept of "unequal treaties" was vague and would undermine the stability of treaty relations. These states claimed that "strangling the economy of a country" could not amount to the type of coercion prohibited by the UN Charter. In the end, after closed-door negotiations, the new independent states reached a compromise with the delegations of developed countries: to withdrawal the proposal of amendment to article 52 of the VCLT in exchange for the adoption of a non-binding draft declaration condemning the use of economic pressures (Bali, 2024). The declaration was adopted as part of the Final Act of the Conference and it condemned coercion in any form, military, economic or political. According to the Declaration: "The United Nations Conference on the Law of Treaties (…) solemnly condemns the threat or use of pressure in any form, whether military, political or economic, by any State in order to coerce another State to perform any act relating to the conclusion of a treaty in violation of the principles of sovereign equality of the States and freedom of consent (…) (United Nations General Assembly, (1969)." These arguments must be reassessed to reinforce the UN's function in the deterrence of the growing use of economic violence in the relations between states.

Economic Coercion as a Violation of Article 2-7 of the UN Charter

Economic coercion might also be considered contrary to article 2-7 of the UN Charter. This provision incorporates the general principle of non-intervention in domestic affairs in the following terms: "Nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state or shall require the Members to submit such matters to settlement under the present Charter; but this principle shall not prejudice the application of enforcement measures under Chapter VII (United Nations, 1945)." The principle of non-intervention is a general principle of international law and one of the so-called "five principles of the peaceful coexistence of states". It was first recognized in a treaty between China and India and later included in resolutions of the UN General Assembly. Even if the exact meaning of the principle is uncertain, especially regarding what can constitute an undue "intervention", the prohibited acts include economic coercion.

According to Resolution 2131 of the UN General Assembly, also called "Declaration on the Inadmissibility of Intervention in the Domestic Affairs of States and Protection of their Independence and Sovereignty", adopted in 1965: "1. No State has the right to intervene, directly or indirectly, for any reason whatever, in the internal or external affairs of any State. Consequently, armed intervention and all other forms of interference or attempted threats against the personality of the State or against its political, economic and cultural elements, are condemned. 2. No State may use or encourage the use of economic, political or any other type of measures to coerce another State in order to obtain from it the subordination of the exercise of its sovereign rights or to secure from it advantages of any kind. (…) (United Nations General Assembly, 1965)." The principle was further developed in the Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation among States in accordance with the Charter of the UN, the UN General Assembly Resolution 31/91 on

"Non-interference in the Domestic affairs of States", the UN General Assembly Resolution 36/103 "Declaration on the Inadmissibility of Intervention and Interference in the Internal Affairs of States", and in the Act of Helsinki. The principle is also recognized in article 19 of the OAS Charter. According to this provision: "No State or group of States has the right to intervene, directly or indirectly, for any reason whatever, in the internal or external affairs of any other State. The foregoing principle prohibits not only armed force, but also any other form of interference or attempted threat against the personality of the State or against its political, economic, and cultural elements (United Nations General Assembly, 1965)."

As shown above, in many recent cases of use of economic coercion, its aim is clearly to constrain the target state's "freedom of choice" regarding the implementation of domestic and/or international policies in many fields, ranging from nuclear programs, migration, drug traffic controls or democratic elections. The use of economically coercive measures to force the victim state in order to obtain from it the subordination of the exercise of its sovereign rights to develop domestic and/or foreign policies objectives that best suit its own national interests (and not the geopolitical goals of another state), constitute an undue interference in domestic affairs. The principle of non-intervention is binding for all UN member states according to article 2-7 of the UN Charter and as a customary principle of international law. In addition, the said principle is mandatory for the members of the OAS Charter. Therefore, the use of economic coercion is a violation of states' customary and conventional obligations under general international law and constitutes an internationally wrongful act which can trigger their international responsibility towards the target state.

Even if there is no consensus on the fact that the use of economic coercion in the relations between states constitutes a violation of article 2-4 of the UN Charter, the acts of economic violence are a clear breach of article 2-7 of the UN Charter (and article 19 of the OAS Charter). The state victims of economic coercion can initiate proceedings before the ICJ, ask the Court to determine the international responsibility of the state using this type of force and seek reparation for the international wrongdoing. In addition to the cessation of economic coercion, the victim state can request economic compensation for the injury suffered, in accordance with Article 31 and Articles 34 to 39 of the ILC's Draft Articles of the Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts (ARSIWA). In the event of the victim state obtaining monetary compensation for the injury, it can consider transferring that compensation to the companies that have suffered loss because of the economic coercion.

The violation of the principle of non-intervention in domestic affairs by the use of economic violence can be determined according not only to international law but also pursuant to the domestic law of some developing states that have recently been victims of economic coercion. For example, in March 2025, the President of Mexico, Claudia Sheinbaum, send to the Congress of the Union an initiative to reform articles 40 and 19 of the Mexican Constitution with the objective to expressly prohibit any attempt of foreign intervention in Mexican domestic affairs. The initiative added two paragraphs to constitutional article 40 to make it clear that Mexico will not accept any foreign intervention. This initiative is a direct response to the growing use, by the US, of trade-related economic coercion against Mexico that is harmful to the independent and sovereign right of the country to decide its own domestic policies (Gobierno de México, 2025).

Actions to Address the Use of Economic Force Between States Under the UN System

Individual Self-Defense Against Economic Attacks

The proscription of the use of economic force in articles 2-4 and 2-7 of the UN Charter must lean on concrete actions for limiting and deterring recourse to this kind of coercion in international relations. These actions might be legally based on the right of states victims of economic coercion to exercise individual self-defense pursuant to article 51 of the charter. According to this provision: "Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence, if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security. Measures taken by Members in the exercise of this right of self-defence shall be immediately reported to the Security Council and shall not in any way affect the authority and responsibility of the Security Council under the present Charter to take at any time such action as it deems necessary in order to maintain or restore international peace and security (United Nations, 1945)."

Article 51 establishes that states' inherent right to self-defense is limited to situations in which an armed attack has previously occurred. However, reading article 2-4 to include economic coercion could enable a state victim of an illegal use of economic force to exercise a legitimate right of nonmilitary economic self-defense. By circumscribing the right to resort to military force as a response to a violation of article 2-4 of the UN Charter, the drafters of article 51 sought to narrow the right of armed self-defense to situations involving prior acts of armed aggression. They prohibited the use of military response to nonmilitary aggression but did not necessarily condone other forms of proportionate retaliation or legal sanctions against the use of nonmilitary economic force. States victim of economic coercion may, not inconsistently with the letter or the spirit of the UN Charter, respond to economic coercion with nonmilitary economic measures (Bucheit, 1974). However, some authors have even suggested that, in extreme cases, nothing in the Charter prohibits the unilateral use of military force which is necessary and proportionate, if designed to respond to intense and illegal economic coercion. In this view, Article 51 is a declaratory affirmation of the inherent right of self-defense against coercion of an armed nature, not a renunciation of this right against other forms of coercion violative of the Charter (Zedalis, 1982, p. 495).

In addition, the individual right to self-defense has a customary character and is intimately related to the customary right to impose nonmilitary countermeasures on a state who commits an internationally wrongful act. Customary international law, as crystallized in

Article 22 and Articles 49 to 53 of the ARSIWA, allow states, under certain conditions such as proportionality and prior notice, to legally impose nonmilitary economic countermeasures. (Regulation (EU) 2023/2675) These measures, which would otherwise be contrary to international law, permit a state that has suffered prejudice due to the internationally wrongful act of another state to respond to this illegality and to take actions that seek its cessation. As shown above, the use of economic coercion constitutes a violation of article 2-4 and 2-7 of the UN Charter. Therefore, a state victim of economic violence can legally defend itself by adopting nonmilitary countermeasures. The imposition of countermeasures, as well as the right to legitimate individual self-defense under article 51 of the UN Charter, must be proportional to the economic attack. According to the famous Caroline case and under article 51 of the ARSIWA, "countermeasures must be commensurate with the injury suffered, taking into account the gravity of the internationally wrongful act and the rights in question (United Nations, 1945)."

Accordingly, the deployment of economic countermeasures, as a form of legitimate self-defense based on article 51 of the UN Charter and article 49 of the ARISWA, supposes a prior appreciation of the gravity of the economic coercion and a qualification (and quantification) of the economic prejudice caused to the rights of the target state (and its private sector). When the economic coercion reaches a certain threshold, depending on the form, the effects and the aim of the economic measures, the victim state can respond with nonmilitary countermeasures proportionate to the attack.

The intention to counterattack by imposing costs on the economic aggressor, as a form of retaliation counterstrategy which implies striking the aggressor back, has been a common form of response to economic coercion. For example, during the 1860s, and to protect its essential economic interests, the US invoked the doctrine of self-defense to justify its boarding and searching of vessels, and its subsequent apprehension of their crew, that were allegedly engaged in illegal fishing operations in the Bering Sea. The US explained that "the right of self-defense on the part of a nation is a perfect and paramount right to which all others are subordinate" and could be engaged to justify an interference with the principle of the freedom of the high seas (Buchan, 2023). As mentioned above, following the Ukraine conflict in February 2022, the West imposed severe sanctions on the Russian economy, with the intention to economically coerce Russia to end its war in Ukraine. Russia retaliated immediately by cutting exports of gas via the Nord Stream 1 pipeline (Ruggi, 2023). In the same sense, after the adoption of export controls and investment screening mechanisms by the US against Chinese companies, China counterattacked by restricting the access of US semiconductor firms to the Chinese market, as well as choking off US supplies of gallium and germanium, which are critical for semiconductor production and primarily mined in China (Ruggi, 2023). During the first escalation of the US trade-related economic coercion in 2018, Mexico did not show intentions to retaliate in response to the economic assault of the US. However, in a public statement on 4 March 2025, after the imposition of 25% tariffs to goods imported from Mexico, its president announced that, in the future, Mexico could adopt tariff and non-tariff measures, as a possible retaliation to the US economic coercion (Gobierno de México, 2025).

However, until now, the adoption of unilateral economic measures of self-defense have occurred outside any legal framework. The appreciation of their legality under article 51 of the UN Charter, especially regarding their necessity and proportionality to the economic attack, would help bring more legal certainty in the resolution of the economic conflicts originating from the use of economic coercion. Therefore, the UN should play a central role in regulating the use of economic force in individual self-defense. According to article 51, this right is not unlimited and must not be exercised in an arbitrary manner. The UN's actions under the collective defense system can significantly impact its scope and legality.

Collective Self-Defense Against Economic Attacks

Due to the asymmetries in economic power and the development of an unequal exchange between developed and developing countries, developing member states of the UN, acting on their own, cannot efficiently counteract economic coercion by powerful countries, in a way to cause them the same level of "economic pain". Individual self-defense or the adoption of unilateral nonmilitary countermeasures against the use of economic violence is a good option only for economically powerful countries, such as China and Russia in the preceding examples. Therefore, in some cases, economic coercion can only be deterred by the activation of the UN collective security system.

According to Article 39 of the UN Charter, the Security Council "may take measures to maintain international peace and security" against "a threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression (United Nations, 1945)." As shown above, the use of economic coercion can pose such a threat to peace, breach of peace or act of aggression, and it can be regarded as a breach of the prohibition to use force in international relations under article 2-4 of the Charter. In consequence, the Security Council can take measures against the state that resorts to economic coercion.

The Council's action should start by an examination of the facts, a determination of the existence of economic coercion, and efforts to find a friendly solution to the dispute between the economic aggressor and the victim state. According to article 33-2 of the UN Charter, the "Security Council shall, when it deems necessary, call upon the parties to settle their dispute" by peaceful means. The parties to any dispute arising of the use of economic coercion "shall, first of all, seek a solution by negotiation, enquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, resort to regional agencies or arrangements, or other peaceful means of their own choice" (article 33-1 of the Charter). Clearly, article 33 is activated only by an international situation which rises to the level of a "dispute" and the use of illegal economic coercion by one state against another satisfies that threshold requirement (Zedalis, 1982, p. 495).

If the activation of any or all the methods of peaceful settlement of disputes leads to the suspension of the economic coercion, the economic aggressor and the target state could be invited to conclude an international agreement on the terms of the cease of the acts of violence and the reparation of the prejudice of the victim. Only if all the available means of peaceful settlement of disputes fail and only where such means do not lead to the prompt and effective cessation of the economic coercion, and where action is necessary to protect the economic interests and rights of the UN Member states under international law, the Security Council could impose nonmilitary sanctions on the economic aggressor, such as "complete or partial interruption of economic relations and of rail, sea, air, postal, telegraphic, radio, and other means of communication, and the severance of diplomatic relations" (article 41 of the UN Charter) (United Nations, 1945). The imposition of collective countermeasures can be much more effective in deterring economic coercion from powerful countries than individual self-defense. If the international community unites its strength, international economic peace and security will be better achieved than by having recourse to unilateral countermeasures by the victim state.

Any nonmilitary sanctions imposed by the Security Council should be proportionate and not exceed the economic injury caused to the victim state. The criteria for selecting and designing the collective response measures should consider past experiences of the imposition of economic sanctions of the Council and their effectiveness in inducing the cessation of coercion. It should also ponder the need to avoid or minimize any negative collateral effects on the target state's economic operators and its general population. After the adoption of the collective countermeasures, the UN Security Council should continually assess the situation of economic coercion, the effectiveness of the countermeasures and their effects on the interests of the victim state, to amend, suspend or terminate the measures, if necessary.

Regional collective defense systems might also play a new role in deterring economic coercion. Even if the UE has not established yet a collective defense system, as mentioned above, under its Common Foreign and Security Policy, it has adopted its own 2023 Regulation on the Protection of the Union and its Member States from Economic Coercion by Third Countries. The regulation defines economic coercion and settles the conditions for the adoption of collective nonmilitary countermeasures against the aggressor state. As stated above, article 19 of the OAS Charter can be used as a legal basis for the establishment of similar frameworks for the deterrence of economic coercion between the organization's member states. Other regional institutions that establish collective self-defense systems, such as the Organization of African Unity, can also bear from the EU's initiative and establish concrete frameworks on the protection of their member states against economic attacks. The collective self-defense system of NATO can also be used to deter economic coercion, as Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty states that NATO members commit to: "assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area". The phrase "including the use of armed force" clearly shows that collective self-defense under the NATO treaty can include nonmilitary economic countermeasures (Buchan, 2023). In this sense, some authors have proposed an economic Article 5 among democracies to counter authoritarian economic coercion. A democracy subjected to economic violence by an autocracy could invoke the economic Article 5 to deter economic attacks by the adoption of collective economic self-defense measures (Chicago Council of Global Affairs, 2022).

By virtue of article 52 of the UN Charter, the existence of regional arrangements for dealing with economic coercion, "are appropriate for regional action provided that such arrangements or agencies and their activities", will not be incompatible with the universal collective defense system against economic attacks, as far "as they are consistent with the Purposes and Principles of the United Nations (United Nations, 1945)." Article 52 was intended to permit state members of the regional mutual defense organizations to take forceful measures of collective self-defense whenever the Security Council was paralyzed by the veto of one of the five permanent members. In fact, the use of economic coercion by one of the permanent members (and/or their allies) would paralyze the possibility of collective response to this aggression under the UN system, making preferable the activation of the regional mechanisms.

Conclusion

The increased use of novel tools of economic coercion in the relations between states poses serious risks for the maintenance of international peace and security. The current cases of geopolitical leverage of economic measures increase the probability that a nation victim of economic coercion will seek redress, with armed force, an impairment of its sovereignty achieved by economic means. It is this possibility of military retaliation, always at least theoretically possible, which justifies the improvement of UN's legal arsenal to deter economic force. As shown above, if economic coercion is of sufficient intensity to pose a genuine threat to the sovereignty of the target state, it can be seen as a violation of articles 2-4 and 2-7 of the UN Charter. The destructive character of some aggressive economic policies that states are currently implementing, whatever their motivation is, justifies a (re)assessment of the UN's standards of economic behavior and an improvement of the actions it can adopt to guarantee international economic peace and security.

Therefore, it is important to strengthen the UN's possibility to respond to the new challenges of economic coercion. The organization should be able to provide the victims of economic coercion with new legal antidotes to this growing practice in the current global conflict conjuncture. The overall objective of the UN's intervention in cases of economic coercion should be to identify and deter the use of this type of force through institutionalized attempts to de-escalate the violence and encourage the economic aggressor to end its measures. If these intents to de-escalate the crisis fail, then the UN must develop a new understanding of legitimate individual or collective "self-defense" against economic coercion, where the available countermeasures are proportionate to the attack.

The UN is not endowed with general competences under international economic law. There are other international institutions such the WTO, the IMF, the WB or the OECD which can appear more functionally equipped to deter the use of economic coercion in the relations between states. However, there is no express prohibition to use economic measures as a tool of coercion under international economic law and its norms and principles are facing an existential crisis. If powerful states refuse to abide by the rules of international economic law, and openly violate them, the rules themselves risk becoming meaningless. International economic law is currently at a critical juncture, facing the danger of a descent into lawlessness, where the rules cease to have any meaning and are no longer able to constrain state behavior (Hopewell, 2022). In addition, many of the economic and financial organizations of the post-World War II global order are currently blocked. Over the past ten years, the WTO has been unable to fulfill the functions assigned to it by its founding treaty. The pursuit of a "single undertaking" as a strategy for negotiations, changes in the balance of economic and political power among the organization's members, and the growing proliferation of regional trade agreements are some of the causes of WTO's *impasse*, which is worsened by the blockage of its dispute settlement mechanism (Payosova, 2018, p. 3). The result is a whiter commitment to the WTO's multilateral system, a lesser international judicial control of interstate economic relations, a dispute resolution "*à la carte*" of the geopolitical interests of economically powerful states and the substitution of the rule of law by the exercise of coercive economic power.

In the lack of legal guidelines on the deterrence of economic coercion from the economic and financial organizations of the world order, states can rely only on multilateral cooperation in other forums. As the OECD recently pointed out "international co-operation, including exchanges amongst economies to learn from past cases, will be key in deterring economic coercion and supporting targeted economies" (OECD, 2024). The UN stands at the heart of multilateralism, and forms the "backbone" of the contemporary multilateral system, serving as a platform for dialogue, cooperation, and collective action for addressing global issues such as the use of economic coercion (UN, 2025). The institution was in fact built in a period of the history of international relations characterized by the exercise of economic coercion. It is precisely in response to its negative effects that the members of the international community, with US leadership, decided to build a multilateral order after the Second World War (Irwin, 1993, p. 90). In fact, during the decade of 1930, many countries, including the US, developed preferential and coercive economic measures, which contributed to one of the most severe global contractions in the world economic history. The bourse crack of the "Black Thursday" and the devastation "debts" of the First World War (hyperinflation, huge foreign debts, and high cost of the reconstruction, political and social instability) precipitated the "Great Depression" in the US and its sparrow all over the world. In response, the US government adopted the famous Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act in 1930, which increased the duties and tariffs on imports to the US of more than 20,000 products. Many countries, like Canada, Spain, Italy and Switzerland adopted direct retaliations, imposing tariff, and non-tariff trade barriers to US exports (Bown, 2017, p. 154). These aggressive and coercive economic policies led to the creation of "economic areas", like the "sterling trade zone", the "dollar bloc", the "gold bloc" and the "Nazi bloc", whose main objective was to "poorish the neighbor" and whose direct result was the disintegration of international finance and trade (Comín, 2013).

The disaster of economic coercion as a tool for strategic competition and domination, like the one currently implemented by powerful states in the new global order, strengthened the resolve of international lawmakers after the Second World War to construct a rules-based multilateral system with the UN at its center. It was in everyone's mind in this period that the Nazi Germany was not only a military aggressor but also an economic aggressor state. In fact, the Nazi Germany oriented its foreign trade policy toward a rigid system of bilateral trade and clearing agreements. This system turned successful for German domestic economic growth because of the exploitation and extortion of economically vulnerable states. Germany was the largest economic partner of many smaller European states and issued on this basis a theory on monopolistic power in international trade. The ultimate objective was to build an informal German Economic Empire (Ritschl, 2001, p. 324).

In this regard, by using constantly economic coercion in their relations, states are nowadays testing some of the hardest lessons of the world's legal and economic history. The buildings of multilateralism in international relations and the creation of the UN aimed, above all, to preserve cooperation between states and to maintain "peace through law". The increasing use of economic coercion is possibly bringing the world in the *déjà vu* of the post-World War I context of "economic wars", which preceded the military Second World War. It is a context divided into economic and geo-political blocks, controlled by powerful states with imperialistic ambitions to extend their spheres of influence, in a clear hostility one *vis-à-vis* the others (Ikenberry, 2017, p. 5).

The increasing use of economic coercion, thus, demonstrates that the international economic order is moving back to a system of co-existence of states, where states are acting as antagonistic entities that challenge any authority superior to themselves and which perceive their economic relations as a "zero sum game" (Abi-Saab, 1998, p. 248). One of the greatest thinkers of international law, Wolfgang Friedman, proposed to see the international law that regulated the Westphalian world order as a "law of coexistence", as opposed to the "law of cooperation", which was to govern the growing interdependence between states in the global order after the end of the Second World War (Friedmann, 1964). Perhaps, the new forms of economic coercion that states are implementing in the current context of strategic competition in the midst of economic interdependence are moving international law from a "law of cooperation" to a "law of coexistence". Thus, it is urgent to rethink UN's legal remedies for economic coercion, because otherwise the economic violence between nations can be a prelude to the "scourge of war, which twice" in the world's history "has brought untold sorrow to mankind" (United Nations, 1945).

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Sea Power and Its Changing Context in the AI Age

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Abstract

How has the concept of sea power evolved from Mahan's classical formulation to the 21st century, and what continuities and transformations define its contemporary meaning? In what ways does artificial intelligence reshape the determinants and methods of exercising sea power, particularly in relation to naval force structures, underwater warfare, and strategic competition? To what extent does the integration of AI challenge or reinforce the traditional geopolitical foundations of sea power—such as geography, economic strength, and political capacity—within an emerging multipolar maritime order? Using a qualitative, historical-interpretive analysis that combines conceptual history with analytical synthesis, this study seeks to systematically trace the evolution of the concept of sea power since Mahan, clarify its various interpretations, and examine the key factors shaping sea power in the 21st century. In this context, it is important to consider the role and influence of artificial intelligence on power, which is undoubtedly unprecedented. However, at present, recent transformations do not suffice to overturn the fundamental principles and underlying dynamics of sea power, nor are they powerful enough to completely alter the influence of geographical factors. Meanwhile, the methods of maintaining and exercising sea power are undergoing significant transformations. Contemporary sea power, while building on Mahan's legacy, now encompasses not only naval strength but also institutional capacity, legal frameworks, and technological innovation, with modern navies adopting hybrid force structures to navigate a multipolar maritime order beyond the framework of large-scale conflicts and decisive battles.

Keywords

Alfred Thayer Mahan; artificial intelligence; decisive battle deterrence; sea power; underwater warfare

Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI), since its emergence as a branch of computer science in the late 1950s, has been defined in numerous ways. Broadly speaking, these definitions can be distilled into a simple formulation, one that highlights the role of "computer systems capable of performing tasks that typically require human intelligence, such as visual perception, speech recognition, decision making, and language translation (Brass, et. al., 2024, p. 30)". Certainly, AI is by no means a new concept or term; its progress has largely been driven by incremental improvements in data storage and computing power. With the comprehensive improvement in hardware performance and the accumulation of massive datasets in the internet era, however, AI technology has entered a new phase of rapid development in the second decade of the 21st century (Tangredi and Galdorisi, 2021; Feng, 2018).

Certainly, AI is an enabling technology, comparable to electricity or the internal combustion engine. It not only affects specific aspects of military capabilities but also has the potential to reshape global economic power and even the fabric of society itself. The actual impact of AI largely depends on how individuals and organizations choose to utilize it, rather than on the technology alone (Horowitz, 2018, 54; McMaster, 2015). This being said, it would not be an exaggeration to argue that, from a broader perspective, AI will significantly accelerate the pace and expand the scope of conflict. In maritime strategic and tactical competition, AI-enabled unmanned platforms and autonomous systems are playing an increasingly critical role. With substantial advancements in big data, storage technologies, and computing power, these systems are extending the depth and breadth of human operational capabilities. Experts predict that fully autonomous weapon systems will most likely first be deployed in relatively uncluttered maritime environments (Lucas, 2014).

As different from AI, sea power, like land power, air power, and space power, is a geopolitical concept associated with a specific domain, with its core essence rooted in the control and utilization of the seas. It has long been a central subject of strategic discourse. As early as the eras of Ancient Greece and China's pre-Qin period, sea power and its practical applications were already remarkably sophisticated and well-developed. This being said, the theoretical framework of sea power was first systematically articulated by Alfred Thayer Mahan, whose seminal work, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660–1783*, left an enduring mark on global strategic thought. Yet, the concept of sea power is neither static nor confined to a fixed paradigm. Its evolution is shaped by military technology, broader historical conditions, and the shifting dynamics of international politics. Every pursuit of sea power reflects a conscious choice influenced by historical context, technological possibilities, and national endowments—no two sea powers in history have ever been identical. The form and substance of sea power develop through the complex interplay of geography, technology, and norms. Among these, technology has consistently served as the defining force, delineating distinct eras of maritime dominance: the Age of Sail, the Age of Steam, the Mechanical Age, and the current Information Age, which also brings to the fore the strategic significance of AI. Against the backdrop of AI technology, the present article seeks to systematically trace the evolution of the concept of sea power since Mahan, clarify its various interpretations, and examine the key factors shaping sea power in the 21st century.

How has the concept of sea power evolved from Mahan's classical formulation to the 21st century, and what continuities and transformations define its contemporary meaning? In what ways does artificial intelligence reshape the determinants and methods of exercising sea power, particularly in relation to naval force structures, underwater warfare, and strategic competition? To what extent does the integration of AI challenge or reinforce the traditional geopolitical foundations of sea power—such as geography, economic strength, and political capacity—within an emerging multipolar maritime order? Using a qualitative, historical-interpretive analysis that combines conceptual history with analytical synthesis (Skinner, 1969; George & Bennett, 2005), this study addresses its research questions in four sections. The first section examines how artificial intelligence is reshaping naval operations, force structures, and underwater warfare, while noting its limits and ethical constraints. The second section traces the historical evolution of sea power concept from Mahan and Corbett to contemporary theorists, highlighting the interplay of technology, geography, and politics in shaping its meaning. The third section identifies the essential elements of sea power in the AI era—maritime force, geography, economic strength, and political capacity—demonstrating how AI functions as a transformative multiplier rather than a replacement of classical determinants. The fourth section explores the methods through which sea power is acquired and maintained today, emphasizing the hybridization of naval force structures and the increasing importance of diplomacy, law, and norms in sustaining maritime influence within a multipolar order.

Artificial Intelligence and Sea Power

It is important to recognize that AI remains a broadly defined and often ambiguous concept, generally categorized into three tiers: simple AI, narrow AI, and general AI. Simple AI functions primarily as an automated processing tool, lacking self-learning or adaptive capabilities. Narrow AI can self-learn and self-program but remains confined to specific domains. General AI (or "strong AI") mimics human consciousness, enabling decision-making across multiple tasks. Current military applications predominantly rely on simple and narrow AI, meaning that its full potential in naval contexts remains largely untapped compared to its growing influence in the commercial sector (Tangredi and Galdorisi, 2021).

While one could not deny the significance of newly emerging trends in machine learning, industrial robotics, and materials science, their combined impact on future naval warfare remains uncertain (Fu, 2019, 7). This issue has been intensely debated for over a decade (UNIDIR, 2015) and continues to provoke heated discussion today. A prevailing consensus holds that AI will have a revolutionary impact on navies and sea power, comparable to the transformative effect of the Age of Exploration, fundamentally altering organization, doctrine, policy, and operations (Arquilla and Denning, 2019). AI is reshaping strategic balances at sea; navies that achieve AI superiority are expected to dominate the oceans of the twenty-first century, where computational power and algorithmic innovation may decide the outcome of great-power competition.

However, unlike more aggressive approaches to AI integration in other domains, naval applications currently favor human-machine hybrid systems or neural networks. This paradigm reflects the unique challenges of maritime environment awareness, the complexities of situational perception at sea, and the legal and ethical constraints surrounding military AI deployment. As contemporary naval doctrine envisions: "Tomorrow's navies may go into battle with humans and computers fighting side by side—the former providing insight and judgment, the latter offering lightning-swift calculations to guide choices in fast-moving, uncertain situations (Arquilla & Denning, 2019)." The autonomy levels of current systems remain deliberately constrained; they are designed to augment rather than replace existing command hierarchies and platforms.

Indeed, the deployment of autonomous technologies at sea is not a novel development. Highly automated weapon systems, such as the Aegis air defense system, have been operational for over three decades (UNIDIR, 2015). Observing the practices of various national navies reveals several emerging trends. First, AI is changing decision-making processes and efficiency. AI integration into command and combat systems primarily enhances command and control capabilities through intelligent software processes, thereby improving operational performance. AI also supports combat systems by enhancing the targeting and tracking of enemy assets, though final decision-making authority remains with human operators. While major powers actively research autonomous weapons, they maintain significant reservations regarding their deployment. On the one hand, difficulties in environmental perception, particularly in deep-sea environments, limit autonomous platforms' ability to undertake offensive tasks without risking escalation. On the other hand, unresolved ethical and accountability concerns continue to politically constrain their use.

Relatedly, AI is redefining naval force structures. Unmanned platforms—including Unmanned Surface Vehicles (USVs), Unmanned Underwater Vehicles (UUVs), and aerial drones—are increasingly used for reconnaissance, logistics, and mine countermeasure missions. Although most platforms remain under human control, many are demonstrating growing levels of autonomy (Tuneer, 2018). In future procurement strategies, unmanned platforms are prioritized, significantly expanding human capacity for oceanic perception, exploration, and exploitation. In the military domain, underwater competition is already manifesting new operational paradigms. The deep-sea environment—marked by poor visibility, extreme pressure, and complex hydrology—presents unique detection challenges while simultaneously facilitating concealed military operations and surprise attacks. These conditions are being strategically exploited by maritime powers.

Unlike traditional doctrines that primarily relied on submarines for pinpoint strikes or asymmetric deterrence, contemporary underwater warfare increasingly exhibits networked and systemic characteristics (Hu, 2017). In recent years, UUV technology has matured significantly. It is projected that by 2030, UUVs will be capable of executing missions such as minelaying, surveillance, and munitions delivery, while collaborating with manned platforms to enhance sensor coverage, weapons capacity, and countermeasures in anti-submarine warfare operations.

Additionally, AI is transforming the patterns of maritime strategic competition and combat operations. Should UUVs achieve large-scale deployment, the form of underwater warfare will be fundamentally altered. The role of submarines will shift from direct attack platforms to command-and-control hubs for unmanned systems, sensors, and standoff weaponry. This transformation mirrors the mid-twentieth century evolution of naval warfare, when operations shifted from coastal assaults by gun-armed battleships to expeditionary strike forces led by carrier groups and amphibious platforms deploying aircraft, troops, and missiles (Clark, Haynes, Sloman, and Walton, 2017).

Today, maritime unmanned systems are transitioning from experimental phases toward widespread operational deployment. Among these developments, the integration of artificial intelligence, machine learning, autonomous systems, data management, and other advanced technologies will become a critical factor in shaping future maritime strategic competition (Davis, 2020).

Artificial Intelligence and the Basic Concept of Sea Power: From Its Origins to the Present Day

AI has, for the first time, enabled the comprehensive perception, development, and governance of the world's oceans. Rather than diminishing or replacing the strategic role of sea power, AI is poised to enhance its influence and deepen its meaning. Latest technological developments aside, the primary geopolitical significance of the oceans still lies in their function as global passageways. Oceanic connectivity has dramatically increased human mobility—expanding access to markets for labor and technological innovation, facilitating exchanges among civilizations, and significantly enriching the practice of international politics.

Historically, the balance of power in the Mediterranean and surrounding seas played a decisive role in the rise and fall of ancient Greece and Rome. In this context, navies have long served as both the vanguard and the guardians of Western civilization. Since the early modern era—particularly with the onset of the Age of Exploration and the expansion of European colonialism and imperialism—the strategic importance of the oceans as vital corridors has only grown. Control over maritime routes became a key instrument for imperial powers in their competition for colonies and spheres of influence. As a result, the understanding, exploration, and control of the oceans evolved from a regional European concern into a central issue in global politics.

During the ancient Greek period, historians had already begun documenting sea power. However, sea power as a complete theoretical system has only existed for just over a hundred years. In 1890, Mahan systematically proposed the theory of sea power and command of the sea, stating that "sea power means all those things that enable a nation, by means of the sea or through the sea, to become great (Mahan, 2006)." He enumerated six key elements: geographical position, physical conformation including the resulting productivity and climate, extent of territory, number of population, character of the people, and character of the government (Mahan, 2006). He also emphasized the importance of sea power from the perspective of grand national strategy, asserting that "Britain's prosperity stemmed from its unconstrained control of the seas, while France's decline must likewise be attributed to its neglect of sea power (Mahan, 2006)." Therefore, Mahan's principal contribution lies in his pioneering comprehensive examination of sea power as an instrument of grand national strategy, wherein he systematically synthesized previously disparate concepts into a rigorous philosophical framework, while methodically articulating fundamental strategic tenets and principles pertaining to maritime dominance (Wu, 2008; Gürcan, 2021).

Around the same time as Mahan, and drawing on similar historical episodes, Britain's Sir Julian Stafford Corbett and others developed an alternative theory of sea power—often referred to as the "British School". This school of thought emphasized the inseparable link between maritime and land operations, viewing naval actions as integral parts of broader military campaigns. Moreover, it argued that command of the sea is not absolute but relative, typically existing in a state of contestation between rival powers. Both Mahan's and Corbett's theories reflect conceptualizations of sea power shaped by the conditions of the industrial era (Handel, 2000; Gürcan, 2021).

In the strictest sense, the world entered a "post-Mahan era" of sea power development following World War II. Although postwar maritime strategy still retains traces of Mahanian influence, these have become increasingly attenuated as sea power has evolved into the post-industrial—or information—age. Since the end of the Cold War, both the theory and practice of sea power have undergone more complex and multifaceted transformations. According to British maritime strategist Geoffrey Till, the navies of major powers such as China and the United States now represent hybrid systems that blend elements of the "modern navy" and the "postmodern navy". The former continues to focus on traditional missions aimed at securing exclusive and competitive command of the sea. In contrast, the latter emphasizes broader maritime security by promoting good order at sea, rather than engaging in direct contests for sea control (Till, 2009). In this context, sea power has increasingly been exercised through deterrence and peaceful competition, while the prospect of large-scale naval warfare between major powers has become virtually unimaginable. Indeed, such conflicts have not occurred since 1945—not even at the height of the Cold War. While the famous maxim "Whoever controls the sea controls the world" may have always seemed exaggerated, it is now clear that no nation can ascend to great power status—or sustain it—without robust maritime capabilities. In this respect, Mahan's insights remain deeply relevant. In the era of artificial intelligence, the integration of unmanned systems and autonomous weapons into naval operations has not only expanded the conceptual horizons of sea power but also accelerated its development and real-world application.

At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, an increasing number of Chinese scholars have participated in the innovation and debates regarding the concept of sea power. For instance, Ye (2007) defines sea power as "a country's capabilities and influence in maritime space", which may assume both military and civilian characteristics. Essentially, it serves as a tool that can be used both to safeguard legitimate rights and interests and to dominate the world. According to Shen Weilie (2005), "sea power refers to the overall capability of a nation to use military and non-military forces to safeguard national territorial sovereignty extending to maritime areas (including their airspace), protect maritime interests, and exert influence on the willful behavior of maritime actors and other political entities." For Zhang Wenmu (2002), "China's sea power is a form of maritime right subordinate to China's sovereignty, not maritime might, still less maritime hegemony." Liu (2013) argues that, in contemporary terms, sea power refers to a nation's overall maritime strength and serves as a key benchmark for assessing its capabilities at sea. This concept spans multiple dimensions of national development, including political, economic, military, cultural, and scientific-technological spheres. He further asserts that China's advancement as a sea power should follow a path rooted in comprehensive development across all these domains (Liu, 2013).

The conceptual contributions of Chinese scholars to the study of sea power reflect distinctively Chinese characteristics and have meaningfully enriched its theoretical framework. However, it is also evident that some of these contributions have contributed to further conceptual ambiguity or overgeneralization, often conflating sea power with broader notions such as "maritime power". It is important to reaffirm that the core of sea power remains sea control, even if its substance, expressions, and objectives differ across historical periods and national contexts. One should resist the impulse to dismiss sea control simply because it has historically been associated with maritime hegemony. Nor should one attempt to construct forms of sea power that exclude the element of control—such as so-called "rights-based sea power" or "comprehensive sea power". While it is true that the factors shaping sea power are increasingly diverse, and that a growing number of scholars acknowledge sea power cannot be reduced to a purely military construct, it remains the case that sea power continues to rest on a multidimensional foundation. A powerful navy alone does not define a sea power; in contemporary contexts, economic capacity, diplomatic effectiveness, and policy coherence are playing an increasingly important role in shaping a nation's maritime influence. As Geoffrey Till (2007) rightly notes, the functions of modern navies have become more diversified, and postmodern naval forces must operate with a global outlook oriented toward collaboration and collective action.

Drawing from the literature, sea power can be understood through at least three conceptual dimensions: physical strength, power relations, and capability. As physical strength, sea power refers to the physical assets that can operate at sea, including fleets, merchant vessels, fishing boats, aircraft, and other maritime platforms. This encompasses not only naval and coast guard forces but also civilian maritime assets and even support from other military branches such as air and space forces. As a power relationship, sea power reflects a state's relative advantage at sea in comparison to others—its ability to influence or coerce behaviors at sea or even on land through maritime superiority. In this sense, sea power is inherently relational and often confrontational, depending on a nation's position within the global maritime order. As a capability, sea power represents an essential element for maritime states—akin to air or water—and includes the full range of elements necessary to achieve naval dominance, particularly those that contribute to strategic supremacy at sea, including the ability to use resources and relations effectively.

Importantly, regardless of interpretation, sea power is fundamentally a political concept, distinct from legal categories such as maritime rights or interests. While enhancing sea power helps protect a nation's maritime rights and interests, sovereignty over islands, exclusive economic zones, and other legal entitlements do not in themselves constitute sea power. Rather, sea power provides the strategic foundation for becoming a maritime power but does not encompass all dimensions of that status.

Despite its conceptual ambiguity and the evolving conditions in which it is exercised, two aspects of sea power remain constant. First, it operates within a defined maritime space, making the delineation of its geographic scope essential to any meaningful analysis. Second, sea power cannot be equated solely with the navy or with sea control; it involves an interplay of military, political, diplomatic, and economic capabilities. In essence, sea power is the capacity to project influence—military, political, diplomatic, and economic—within a given maritime space, commanding recognition or respect from the international community.

Moreover, technological advancements have expanded sea power from a one-dimensional (surface) capability prior to the 20th century to a multi-dimensional one. By the time of the World Wars, it included surface, underwater, and air domains; today, it encompasses five dimensions—surface, air, space, undersea, and electromagnetic. As the international system and regulatory frameworks have evolved, diplomacy, international law, and maritime norms have become increasingly important in the projection of sea power. Command of the sea now involves not only physical command of maritime zones or key chokepoints, but also normative authority—particularly in shaping the rules governing maritime security.

The Essential Elements of Sea Power in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

The systematic classification of factors shaping sea power began with Alfred Thayer Mahan, who identified six fundamental elements influencing a nation's maritime strength: geographic location, physical configuration, territorial extent, population size, national character, and the nature of the government. Notably, Mahan derived these criteria primarily from the historical experience of Britain, particularly during the 17th and 18th centuries. As a result, his framework suffers from a degree of overgeneralization, as it is based on a narrow set of cases, both geographically and temporally. Additionally, Mahan's model is historically bounded: the evolution of sea power is deeply conditioned by the material realities, prevailing modes of production, and broader sociopolitical contexts of his time. Over time, shifts in political, economic, and technological dynamics have altered the relevance of Mahan's elements—some have gained in importance, others have diminished, and a few have ceased to be relevant altogether (Yang, 2013).

In the wake of Mahan's work, numerous maritime theorists have refined and expanded the concept of sea power, typically distinguishing between naval forces and other contributing factors. As Brodie (1943) famously observed, sea power "has never meant merely warships," but rather encompasses the full spectrum of military assets, infrastructure, and geographical conditions that enable a nation to control maritime transportation during conflict. Paul Kennedy (1976) similarly categorized sea power into two components: a formidable naval fleet and a set of auxiliary elements that collectively shape maritime strength.

Since the late 20th century, the concept of sea power has become increasingly generalized, with its components growing more complex and multifaceted. British theorist Eric Grove (1990) expanded the framework to include economic capacity, technological advancement, socio-political culture, geographical position, dependence on maritime trade, and the government's strategic outlook. In China, scholars such as Lü Xianchen and Yang Zhen have also made significant contributions to refining this concept. Lü argues that modern sea power should be viewed as a complex system composed of both material elements—naval forces, maritime administration, marine industries, and technological capacity—and non-material dimensions such as legal frameworks, maritime values, and public consciousness (Lv, 2007). Yang Zhen, focusing on the post–Cold War context, identifies key components of sea power as naval capabilities, maritime governance institutions, marine industrial systems, legal regimes, and scientific-technological development (Yang, 2013). Among these scholars, Geoffrey Till has produced perhaps the most systematic and balanced synthesis for the information age. His framework includes categories such as population, society, and governance; technological and operational means; naval forces; and the maritime environment, encompassing geography, resources, and marine economics (Till, 2009).

Sea power is inherently a relative concept, requiring both longitudinal comparison—tracking a nation's own development over time—and cross-national comparison with other maritime powers. In Mahan's day, the metrics were relatively simple: naval tonnage, trade volumes, and colonial holdings sufficed to gauge sea power. Today, however, in the age of artificial intelligence, AI has emerged as a transformative factor. It not only enhances the effectiveness of naval command-and-control systems but also enables the deployment of advanced maritime platforms, including unmanned and autonomous systems, thereby reshaping naval force structures. In parallel, AI significantly influences national economic performance, which remains the foundation of maritime strength. Accordingly, there is growing recognition that "the navy that masters AI and cyber warfare will control the seas of the 21st century" (Greco, 2024). Building on both classical theories and recent developments, it is now possible to organize the determinants of sea power into four major categories.

The first category is maritime force. Maritime force capability remains the most critical indicator for evaluating a nation's sea power status. Assessing relative maritime strength involves two fundamental dimensions: hardware and software. Hardware refers to platforms, weapons, and sensors, with key metrics focusing on the scale and technological sophistication of principal combat platforms. Software encompasses military systems, professional expertise, traditions, and institutional experience, which can be gauged through C5ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Cyber, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance) system capabilities and the types and frequency of naval operations. *In this light, a nation's maritime strength may be measured through three primary indicators: the scale of advanced principal combat vessels, the capabilities of its C5ISR systems, and the diversity and operational frequency of its mission portfolio.* Importantly, modern maritime forces are no longer limited to conventional navies but also include maritime law enforcement entities such as coast guards and may incorporate land-based air power and missile systems capable of engaging in maritime operations.

Navies worldwide possess combat platforms of varying levels and standards, rendering superficial comparisons of ship, aircraft, or missile quantities largely meaningless. Since the Age of Exploration, naval development has followed an intensive trajectory, with ever more sophisticated sensors and weapons integrated into fewer but more complex platforms—driving up both the cost and strategic value of modern fleets. Constructing a state-of-the-art navy today can require investments in the hundreds of billions of dollars. While recent developments, including anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) doctrines and the rise of artificial intelligence, have promoted a trend toward more distributed force structures (O'Rourke, 2024), major powers continue to prioritize high-value platforms such as aircraft carriers, nuclear-powered submarines, and large destroyers or frigates. Consequently, meaningful cross-national comparisons can focus on elite maritime assets—large principal combat vessels that embody a state's key military hardware capabilities. These include aircraft carriers, destroyers or cruisers with regional air defense capabilities, blue-water frigates, large amphibious assault ships, extra-large unmanned underwater vehicles (XLUUVs), air-independent propulsion (AIP) submarines, and nuclear-powered submarines. These platforms serve as benchmarks for measuring the operational scale and technological sophistication of national fleets.

C5ISR—standing for Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Cyber, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance—forms the central nervous system of modern military forces and functions as a force multiplier that reflects a nation's military software capabilities. At the turn of the century, naval analyst Norman Polmar identified space systems, C3I (Command, Control, Communications, and Intelligence), and personnel quality as the three decisive factors in determining naval strength (Polmar, 1999). In the contemporary era, these factors are largely subsumed under the broader C5ISR framework. Artificial intelligence and algorithmic proficiency now play a decisive role in determining C5ISR effectiveness. However, the operational specifics of these systems are typically classified, making systematic international comparison difficult. Moreover, the absence of high-intensity warfare among major powers limits opportunities for evaluating performance under combat conditions. Still, setting aside human factors and focusing on technological indicators, preliminary assessments may consider national capacities in computing and information technology, space capabilities, AI model development, and the geographic range of sensor and platform deployment. The maturity of a country's computing and information sectors generally reflects the underlying sophistication of its C5ISR systems, while space technology and platform coverage indicate their operational reach. As maritime forces increasingly adopt decentralized, networked configurations, the strategic importance of advanced C5ISR capabilities continues to grow.

Institutional experience and strategic traditions also constitute a vital dimension of maritime force assessment. Peter Haydon (2001) categorized naval missions into six tiers, ranked from most to least demanding: strategic deterrence and coercion, power projection, sea control, naval diplomacy, maritime security, and humanitarian assistance. The higher the tier, the more advanced and capable a navy must be to fulfill its missions. Only a select few navies—such as those of the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, and France—possess the capacity to perform high-end missions like strategic deterrence and coercion. In contrast, nearly all navies are equipped to carry out lower-tier tasks such as maritime security and humanitarian assistance. Additionally, the frequency of mission execution is a key metric. For example, while several navies may be capable of conducting strategic deterrence operations, the U.S. Navy performs these missions with far greater regularity than any of its counterparts, reinforcing its unique operational depth and global reach.

The second category is maritime geography. Maritime geography continues to shape the fundamental geopolitical environment of coastal states—a reality that holds true even in the era of artificial intelligence. Although advances in missile technology, space capabilities, and cyber warfare have somewhat reduced the constraining effects of geography, large-scale power projection still requires careful geographic consideration. Technological progress has not eliminated the significance of distance in military operations; indeed, operational efficiency tends to decline as the distance from a nation's homeland increases. In East Asian littoral waters, for example, the United States faces reduced projection efficiency compared to China. Thus, while certain geographic factors emphasized by Mahan may have diminished in prominence, they have not become obsolete and must now be analyzed through more nuanced, multidimensional frameworks. *Broadly speaking, a nation's maritime geographical conditions are fluid and can be assessed through four core indicators: geographical location, maritime area, number of maritime neighbors, and overseas base presence.*

Geographical location remains a decisive factor. Two classical principles retain their relevance: first, maritime states generally outperform land-sea composite states of equivalent national strength; second, states bordering strategic maritime chokepoints or waterways possess inherent advantages over other coastal nations. In terms of sea power projection, Britain and Japan—both island nations—along with peninsular India and the "continental island" of the United States, have historically enjoyed superior geographical advantages compared to China. While China, France, and Russia are land-sea composite states, China benefits from its position on the western Pacific rim—the focal point of contemporary maritime geopolitics—along with more strategically positioned coastal waters and ports than Russia.

A nation's maritime area also plays a significant role. Countries with larger maritime jurisdictions possess greater strategic space for naval development, and this spatial advantage can amplify the effects of favorable geographic location. States that combine extensive maritime zones with advantageous positioning are inherently more capable of developing into maritime powers.

The number of maritime neighbors also affects geopolitical complexity. Maritime neighbors are generally defined as states located within approximately 400 nautical miles across a shared body of water; beyond this distance, they are no longer considered immediate maritime neighbors. A higher number of such neighbors often indicates a more challenging geopolitical environment, characterized by increased risks to sea lane security, more frequent maritime boundary disputes, and intensified regional competition for influence.

Overseas military bases are another critical component of maritime geography. These installations help offset the logistical, intelligence, and infrastructural limitations that great powers face in distant regions. No sea power can rely solely on domestic assets to support global naval operations; all must depend, to varying degrees, on overseas bases and allied support. The number and geographic distribution of these bases are directly linked to a nation's capacity for expeditionary operations and sustained global presence.

The third category is economic strength. Overseas trade and the maritime economy serve not only as key objectives of sea power development but also as vital determinants of its long-term sustainability. Among the many economic dimensions relevant to maritime strength, *two indicators stand out as particularly significant: the overall scale of the economy and its level of technological sophistication*.

In terms of aggregate scale, the development of sea power demands far greater financial investment and significantly longer time horizons than land power. As such, a nation aspiring to become a sea power must possess a substantial economic base, supported by durable and resilient growth. Sea power cannot be sustained without the fiscal and industrial capacity to fund extensive maritime infrastructure, advanced shipbuilding programs, and global logistical operations.

However, scale alone is not enough—technological sophistication is equally crucial. A large economy without corresponding technological advancement is unlikely to translate its wealth into maritime strength. Historical examples underscore this point. In the early 19th century, Qing China accounted for nearly 30% of global GDP, far exceeding that of Britain, yet it suffered a decisive defeat in the First Opium War (Mayles, 2019). Similarly, during the First Sino-Japanese War, China's GDP was substantially larger than Japan's, yet it sustained devastating losses. These examples demonstrate that true maritime strength depends not merely on economic size but on the quality of the underlying economic system. Economies dominated by agrarian sectors or speculative real estate markets contribute little to the development of sea power. Instead, the foundation must rest on advanced productive forces, including high-value manufacturing, technological innovation, and integrated maritime industries capable of supporting complex naval operations.

The fourth category is political capability. Unlike the three previously discussed categories of factors, political capability operates primarily at an instrumental level—that is, it determines how effectively a state can mobilize and utilize available resources and potentials to advance its sea power. *Political capability encompasses two main dimensions: the efficiency of government institutions and the state's international prestige and influence*. The latter can be observed through various indicators such as the robustness of alliance systems, international political standing, and diplomatic competence.

Governmental efficiency refers to a government's capacity to mobilize financial and material resources and allocate them effectively. While sea power theorists like Mahan expressed a preference for democratic systems, such as those in Britain and the United States, there is little empirical evidence to suggest that democracies are inherently more capable than non-democracies in cultivating sea power. Thus, frameworks based on dichotomies like centralization versus decentralization, or authoritarianism versus democracy, offer limited analytical value in this context. More relevant are indicators reflecting the performance of maritime-related institutions and their efficiency in resource extraction and policy implementation. Since the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), many coastal states have undertaken institutional reforms to align with its provisions—demonstrating a broad international convergence in administrative adaptation and regulatory capacity in maritime governance.

The role of alliance systems is also central. Nearly all sea power states are embedded within alliances, and such partnerships are essential for extending maritime reach. Allies offer logistical and operational support for overseas deployments as well as political legitimacy in times of crisis. A robust alliance network is, in effect, a hallmark of modern sea power. The United States, for example, owes a significant portion of its maritime dominance to the global scale and integration of its alliance structure, which underpins both its military footprint and diplomatic reach.

Diplomatic competence in maritime affairs is another crucial political asset. This includes not only the formulation and execution of maritime foreign policy strategies but also legal acumen, negotiation techniques, and expertise in international law—especially the law of the sea. Diplomatic skill should be distinguished from diplomatic power, as it is not strictly correlated with the size or strength of a state. Smaller nations can outperform larger powers in diplomatic effectiveness, particularly in legal and institutional arenas. Countries like the Netherlands and New Zealand often exert influence in maritime diplomacy disproportionate to their material capabilities. Evaluating diplomatic skill thus requires controlling for national strength and isolating variables more directly linked to legal and diplomatic performance. For instance, the number of citizens serving as judges, arbitrators, or international civil servants in maritime-related organizations can provide some indication of a country's legal influence. However, because such appointments often reflect considerations of regional balance and procedural fairness, they may be less telling than more dynamic indicators—such as the activity levels of a country's legal teams in maritime disputes or its frequency of engagement in shaping international maritime norms and precedents.

Methods for Acquiring and Maintaining Sea Power

The force structure of modern navies—the primary instrument of sea power—is undergoing profound transformations not seen in over a century. Navies of major powers are shifting from a purely intensive model to a hybrid model that combines intensiveness with distribution. Artificial intelligence has accelerated this shift by enabling the deployment of numerous smaller platforms and sensors across wider areas, thereby enhancing resilience and combat effectiveness. For major powers, the imperative is not to choose between these models but to pursue both: large, intensive platforms such as aircraft carriers, nuclear-powered submarines, and advanced destroyers or frigates must be maintained and developed alongside smaller, especially unmanned, systems. For instance, the United States Navy continues to prioritize *Distributed Operations* concepts and invests heavily in unmanned systems, yet it has not abandoned the construction of large-scale platforms. For the foreseeable future, successful maritime strategies will require balancing the dual imperatives of concentration and dispersion in force structure.

At the same time, shifts in military technology and international norms are contributing to a transformation of the maritime order toward multipolarity (Kennedy & Wilson, 2021; Hu, 2023). Sea power, and its application, now faces growing constraints. The relatively peaceful global environment narrows the strategic options available to major maritime powers, making it difficult to identify clear winners in maritime competition over the short term. In parallel, the widespread deployment of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) systems and the rise of distributed naval forces have significantly restricted the freedom of maneuver traditionally enjoyed by dominant maritime powers. Under these conditions, the maintenance of a unipolar maritime order has become untenable, and the emergence of a long-term multipolar maritime structure is increasingly evident. Unlike the extended period of unipolar dominance in the past, the future maritime order will be defined by structural multipolarity, with peaceful transformation supplanting large-scale war as the primary mechanism of systemic change. This shift has made the attainment of absolute sea control progressively more elusive, and in practice, maritime powers are adapting to a framework of relative sea control. This new strategic landscape presents both opportunities and constraints for states seeking to enhance their sea power. It enhances the feasibility and strategic relevance of secondary sea powers and middle-ranking navies, while also delineating the limits within which all major powers must operate (Hu, 2023).

The rise of AI has given rise to a form of technological determinism, with popular slogans proclaiming that "whoever controls AI controls sea power". While such statements highlight the strategic relevance of emerging technologies, they risk oversimplifying the complex nature of sea power, which remains the product of a wide range of interrelated factors. The international AI landscape—though clearly dominated by China and the United States—does not, in and of itself, dictate the shape of the maritime order. Technological advantage is a crucial variable, but it operates within broader geopolitical, economic, and legal contexts that ultimately determine outcomes.

Simultaneously, the processes and pathways through which states pursue sea power are undergoing significant transformation. The presence of nuclear weapons and the logic of nuclear deterrence, coupled with deepening economic interdependence and the influence of global civil society, have significantly diminished the efficacy and legitimacy of war as a tool of international politics. As Gilpin (2007) observes, contemporary global change is increasingly defined by gradual, peaceful transformation rather than violent upheaval. In this context, decisive maritime battles are giving way to prolonged strategic competition, strategic stalemates, and incremental attrition. Major powers are now engaged in sustained probing of each other's red lines—often operating below the threshold of open conflict—which has introduced a high degree of volatility into maritime affairs. While artificial intelligence may exacerbate this volatility and complicate risk management, it is unlikely to reverse the underlying trend toward gradual and non-violent transformation. Under these circumstances, the dual tasks of sustaining presence and exercising deterrence have become central to the maritime strategies of major powers.

That maritime powers now refrain from resolving disputes through large-scale naval conflict does not imply that establishing a stable maritime security order has become easier. On the contrary, the negotiation of rules and norms governing maritime conduct has grown more protracted and complex. The Russia-Ukraine conflict and the operational dynamics in the Black Sea illustrate the stark differences between peacetime and wartime applications of sea power. In peacetime, sea power is maintained through deterrence, forward presence, and diplomacy. In wartime, by contrast, outcomes hinge on battlefield performance and the traditional logic of sea control. Peacetime sea power emphasizes quantity—especially in terms of maintaining presence and visibility—whereas wartime sea power prioritizes quality and combat effectiveness (Erickson, 2018). In today's era of renewed geopolitical rivalry, competition over sea power remains intense, yet it unfolds largely within the boundaries of peacetime, necessitating equal attention to the instruments and strategies suited to this environment.

In this peacetime context, beyond military presence and deterrence, maritime diplomacy has gained increasing prominence as both a critical tool and a strategic arena for competition. The negotiation and eventual signing of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) marked a historic turning point—the first major transformation of the international maritime order achieved through diplomatic negotiation rather than war. Diplomacy thus functions not only as a means but also as an objective of maritime competition. In the 21st century, underpinned by strong economic and technological foundations, the effective and coordinated use of military, diplomatic, and legal tools constitutes the most viable and balanced path to achieving and sustaining sea power.

Conclusion

AI is transforming sea power by enhancing naval operations, reshaping force structures through autonomous systems, and redefining strategic competition at sea. While traditional factors such as geography, economic strength, and political capacity remain foundational to sea power, AI is emerging as a decisive force multiplier—particularly in command systems, unmanned platforms, and surveillance capabilities. However, rather than rendering older paradigms obsolete, AI reinforces the multidimensional and relational nature of sea power, which now unfolds through a complex blend of military strength, diplomatic negotiation, technological innovation, and normative influence.

With each major technological revolution, debates resurface about the continuing relevance of geopolitics—particularly in the digital age and now in the era of artificial intelligence. Claims that "cyber dominance" and "information dominance" have rendered traditional geopolitical logic obsolete have become increasingly prevalent. Yet empirical realities suggest otherwise. Over the past decade, rather than fading, geopolitics has experienced a notable resurgence. This is evident in the geopolitical dynamics surrounding the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the United States' renewed focus on restoring "sea control", and the deepening of strategic rivalry among great powers. Since the earliest stages of human civilization, technological advancements have consistently broken through the boundaries of geography and redefined geopolitical parameters. Nevertheless, they have never fully displaced or invalidated geography's enduring influence. Historical experience, in fact, indicates that great powers and alliances that succeed in fusing technological innovation with geopolitical advantage are those most likely to prevail in strategic competition.

In reality, humanity's knowledge, utilization, and control of the oceans remain in a nascent stage. Over 90% of the deep ocean remains largely uncharted and poorly understood. While the era of artificial intelligence will undoubtedly enhance our ability to perceive, access, and develop maritime spaces, fundamental physical laws and geographical constraints will continue to exert a significant and unavoidable influence. The advent of AI may extend our reach, but it does not eliminate the friction of distance, the challenges of terrain, or the spatial logics that underpin geopolitical strategy.

In the 21st century, sea power is poised to gain renewed momentum in the domain of the deep sea. Rapid advances in marine technology are ushering in a new era of comprehensive oceanic exploration and exploitation, with breakthrough capabilities in deep-sea sensing, undersea system deployment, and subsea warfare on the horizon. These developments are set to transform maritime military competition, expanding it beyond the surface and near-shore underwater zones into a three-dimensional, full-spectrum contest across vast oceanic depths. Future undersea conflict will likely involve complex system-level engagements integrating submarine, surface, aerial, and even land-based forces. In response, major powers will be compelled to address critical deficiencies in their current capabilities for deep-sea sensing, maneuver, and operational readiness, while also unlocking the vast, yet still latent, strategic and military potential of the deep sea.

As the last largely ungoverned and inaccessible frontier on Earth, the deep ocean urgently demands the establishment of robust governance frameworks and regulatory institutions. Its development trajectory will play a pivotal role in shaping the future of global governance and the evolving international order. At present, much of deep-sea exploration and resource extraction occurs in legal gray zones or regulatory vacuums, raising pressing questions about ownership, access, environmental protection, and strategic control. The formation of new norms and rules in this domain will have direct implications for the material interests of states and their geopolitical standing. The latent strategic significance of deep-sea spaces cannot be overstated: the manner in which their governance is institutionalized will exert a profound and lasting impact on the global maritime order and the balance of power in the decades to come.

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Critical Geopolitics of Internationalization

THE CASE OF TURKISH HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

This article critically investigates the internationalization of higher education in Türkiye through the lens of linguistic imperialism and cultural hegemony, emphasizing how English-medium instruction reconfigures academic hierarchies and epistemic autonomy. Against the backdrop of globalization and growing foreign student mobility, Turkish higher education has increasingly embraced English as the dominant language of instruction. While often framed as a neutral and progressive strategy for global integration, this shift raises important questions about linguistic inequality, cultural dependency, and the erosion of academic freedom and equity. Methodologically, the article employs a theory-guided case study approach that integrates Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and Robert Phillipson's theory of linguistic imperialism from a Gramscian lens of hegemony. The findings highlight that English functions as a form of institutionalized cultural capital, disproportionately benefiting socioeconomically privileged groups while aligning Turkish universities with Anglo-

American epistemic norms. Simultaneously, the study reveals how English-medium instruction embeds a form of linguistic colonization that undermines multilingualism and marginalizes local knowledge systems. In doing so, it draws attention to the critical geopolitical implications of language policy in higher education, where choices around medium of instruction increasingly intersect with broader questions of inequalities, national sovereignty, hegemony, and cultural alignment. The article concludes by advocating for pluralistic, inclusive, and multilingual internationalization models that uphold academic autonomy and foster epistemic diversity within Turkish higher education.

Keywords

academic autonomy; cultural hegemony; higher education; internationalization; knowledge colonization; linguistic imperialism; Turkish universities

Introduction

Higher education institutions in the Global South often attach strategic importance to foreign language education and foreign language development programs in order to increase their international presence. As a major Global South country seeking to enhance its global influence, Türkiye has made higher education—particularly foreign language education—a strategic priority. In this context, the present study aims to evaluate the geopolitics of internationalization and foreign languages within Turkish higher education. Additionally, the scope of the study is broadened to include debates on academic freedom, university autonomy, and linguistic imperialism. By evaluating the use of English in Turkish higher education from a theoretical lens, the aim is to present a critical reassessment of the current state of Turkish higher education. Although there are many studies related to foreign language education in the literature, research focusing on geopolitical dynamics from a critical perspective is lacking. Critical geopolitics analyzes how spatial imaginaries, discourses, and social practices construct and legitimize power relations in world politics (Dodds, Kuus, & Sharp, 2016), including the ways in which they reproduce (post)colonial legacies, other forms of dependency, and inequalities. With this in mind, internationalization of higher education is highly relevant to critical geopolitics because it is not a neutral or purely educational process but a geopolitical practice that reshapes cultural alignments, epistemic hierarchies, and sovereignty.

Methodologically, this research offers a theory-guided case study, defined as an idiographic approach that explains cases by applying a clearly defined theoretical framework to structure what is examined and what is set aside. Unlike purely inductive studies, this method uses theory to shape questions, concepts, and causal expectations, directing attention to theoretically relevant features of the case. This explicit grounding enhances analytical rigor: assumptions and normative stances are transparent, causal claims are clearer, internal contradictions are reduced, and findings are easier to corroborate or challenge with evidence (Levy, 2008). As such, this study draws explicitly on established theoretical frameworks such as Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and Phillipson's theory of linguistic imperialism, which structure the analysis by identifying how language policies and internationalization agendas shape power relations and epistemic hierarchies within the academic field.

This article is structured as follows. It begins by establishing the conceptual foundations of internationalization in higher education, situating it within the broader processes of globalization and outlining its strategic, economic, and cultural dimensions. The next section explores the essential relationship between academic freedom and university autonomy, emphasizing their centrality to independent knowledge production. Building on this, the discussion of cultural hegemony and knowledge colonization introduces a critical framework for analyzing the ideological undercurrents of global educational exchange. The subsequent subsections delve into key theoretical debates—Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital and Robert Phillipson's linguistic imperialism—to conceptualize how language hierarchies emerge and are sustained within higher education systems from the lens of hegemony. These frameworks are then applied to the global spread of English and the rise of English as a lingua franca, before culminating in an analysis of the use of

English in Turkish higher education. This progression—from general concepts to national context, and from theoretical framing to applied critique—builds a coherent and layered argument, ultimately revealing how internationalization processes, when mediated through linguistic hierarchies, can reproduce epistemic dependency and undermine academic autonomy.

Internationalization of Higher Education

Internationalization in education is defined as international educational activities carried out within the framework of a specific strategy. These activities encompass educational processes that occur among individuals from different nations and involve cooperation, mobility, interaction, and reciprocal relationships among countries, cultures, and institutions. Internationalization at the level of higher education is considered a subcomponent of this broader concept (Bilgili, 2024, p.53).

According to the definition by the Turkish Higher Education Quality Council (2019), internationalization in higher education refers to the process of incorporating an international or intercultural dimension into higher education activities in teaching, research and development, and societal contribution. As noted by Cantwell (2009), the impact of globalization has deeply shaped the field of education in the 21st century, alongside political, social, and economic factors, leading to the acceleration of internationalization in higher education. Against this backdrop, the foundations of university governance have also been restructured on a global scale (Cantwell, 2009, p.291).

Internationalization in higher education, shaped by the multifaceted effects of economic and social globalization, is considered a dynamic process of development involving the interaction of various components such as politics, the economy, socio-cultural structures, and academia. Accordingly, the process of internationalization in higher education manifests itself in various forms and dimensions across different countries and institutions. Although the initial aims and expectations may be similar around the world, the commercial dimension of international higher education causes the process to diverge based on the specific priorities and capacities of different countries and universities (Metin, 2022, p.59).

The activities carried out in support of the internationalization of higher education are primarily driven by goals such as increasing institutional reputation and visibility, strengthening competitiveness, attracting qualified students and successful academics to the institution, and achieving economic gains. In line with these objectives, the most prominent areas in which internationalization is manifested include the development of joint degree programs, the integration of international components into existing curricula, the offering of online courses, the implementation of collaborative research projects, and student and faculty exchange programs (Özerdem, 2016, p.77).

Knight (1993, p.22) defines the internationalization of higher education as the process of integrating a transnational and intercultural dimension into the functions of teaching, research, and service. According to this approach, internationalization is not merely the aggregation or integration of certain activities; rather, it is a dynamic and continuously evolving process that contributes to the sustainability of the international dimension. This definition is grounded in the core and universal missions of higher education institutions: teaching, research, and community service. While the definition of internationalization in higher education may vary depending on goals and priorities, the dynamic nature of the process is generally recognized as a common characteristic.

When viewed through a cultural lens, one of the primary goals of internationalizing higher education is to promote and disseminate a country's national values on the global stage. From an economic standpoint, moreover, international higher education has gained importance as both a short-term and long-term source of income. While universities are generally regarded as strategic actors in a country's academic and intellectual development, it should not be overlooked that—when cultural and economic dimensions are taken into account—these institutions also form the foundation of a country's regional and global competitiveness.

It is evident that the European Union, along with earlier agreements, has played a significant role in accelerating the internationalization of higher education. Although higher education policies, the content of curricula, and the organization of education systems fall within the jurisdiction of the member states, the European Union assumes a coordinating role in this process and provides various forms of support to member countries. In addition to this support, member states are also obligated to exercise their authority in alignment with the fundamental principles of the European Union. Although the European Union's implementation model does not foresee a direct integration process, it enables the development of common practices under a unified framework despite the existence of different national governance systems. In the field of higher education, the European Union focuses on areas such as student and academic staff mobility, mutual recognition of diplomas and study periods, the promotion of inter-university cooperation, and the development of distance education practices. As emphasized by Tuzcu (2002, p.155–156), these policies indicate that the European Union's objective is not to standardize and integrate the national education systems of member states, but rather to advance toward harmonization within a framework of shared systems (Çetin, 2018, p.37).

The internationalization of higher education is considered a strategically significant phenomenon. While shaping quality processes within their own higher education systems, countries may make strategic decisions by taking into account international expectations, demands, and agendas. In this context, internationalization stands out as a process aimed at achieving more effective and successful outcomes through expertise-based knowledge accumulation. At the same time, it brings structural opportunities such as the residence and employment of international students in the host country. Moreover, internationalization supports cooperation in the fields of foreign policy and development, promotes intercultural and scientific interaction, and enables the transfer of quality and capacity between countries and institutions. This process increases the international mobility of academic staff and enables universities to recruit foreign academics who possess the universal qualifications that institutions require (Seggie & Ergin, 2018, p.61).

Academic Freedom and University Autonomy

While internationalization brings new opportunities and global visibility to higher education institutions, it also raises critical questions about the autonomy of universities and the preservation of academic freedom within increasingly market-driven and externally influenced educational systems. This makes it essential to examine the relationship between internationalization and the core values of academic life, particularly the roles of academic freedom and university autonomy, which are foundational to the mission and integrity of higher education.

Certainly, one of the most fundamental criteria defining the emergence of modern universities is the conduct of scientific research activities. The ability of universities and scientists to successfully fulfill their core duties—such as conducting research, producing scientific publications, and carrying out teaching activities—is only possible within a free working environment. In this context, the development of universities, which are centers of knowledge production, holds great national importance, no less important than the development of industrial and manufacturing facilities. Universities are directly connected to the general structure of society. When a democratic environment and freedom of expression thrive in universities, their positive impact is often reflected across society as a whole. Conversely, the presence of repression and violence within universities may lead to similar negative reflections in society (Güner & Levent, 2020, p.81).

For the establishment of a healthy academic environment, scientists must be able to carry out their duties—such as conducting research, engaging in teaching activities, producing scientific publications, and disseminating knowledge to society—without being subjected to any form of pressure. This understanding of freedom, which is mostly considered within an academic framework, is expressed in the literature as the concept of "academic freedom."

When examining the literature on the concept of academic freedom, it is seen that this concept has a rather complex and controversial structure. The origins of incidents that can be associated with academic freedom date back almost as far as the history of education itself. Academic freedom violations experienced throughout history highlight how essential this freedom is (Doğan, 2025). Due to the historical phases academic freedom has undergone and its multifaceted conceptual structure, it has become quite difficult to define this concept in a definitive and comprehensive manner. Indeed, according to many, there is no clear definition that fully and accurately reflects the complete meaning of academic freedom (Güner, 2017, p.91).

In turn, autonomy in higher education systems can be defined as granting university administrators and academic staff the authority to make their own decisions and act independently in academic, administrative, and financial matters. Universities are institutions that host students and academics from various social segments not only at the national level but also in an international context. Additionally, some universities may be established specifically to respond to the unique needs of the regions in which they are located. This implies that each university is structurally and functionally different from one another. Therefore, managing universities in a similar manner or through a centralized approach may be insufficient to meet the needs of all institutions. Another dimension of the concept of autonomy is financial independence. Particularly in American universities, the intervention of industrialists and businesspeople who provide financial support to universities in management processes and academic activities has raised various issues within the context of autonomy. However, this does not mean that universities and academic staff should possess unlimited autonomy. In democratic societies, the activities of all individuals and institutions must be conducted within a framework of certain oversight mechanisms. In this context, university autonomy is considered as administrators and academic staff having a pre-defined and responsible sphere of freedom in administrative and financial matters (Gedikoğlu, 1990, pp. 26–33).

In the final analysis, one could argue that academic freedom can be examined under two sub-dimensions: individual academic freedom and institutional academic freedom. The protection of academic freedom at the individual level is directly related to the scope of freedom possessed by the institution to which the academic belongs. The ability of academic institutions to conduct scientific activities independently of any external pressure and based on merit is closely connected to the concept of university autonomy. In this context, institutions should use their autonomy rights not to pressure academics but to protect them against external interventions. Therefore, it is a widely accepted view that academic freedom cannot be realized without university autonomy. Additionally, to ensure that institutional autonomy does not override individual academic freedoms, the inclusion of academics in decision-making processes and in the selection of administrators within the university is considered an important factor. Meanwhile, from a critical geopolitical perspective, one should also highlight that the erosion of university autonomy must also be understood in relation to growing forms of foreign dependence—ranging from reliance on external funding and international rankings to the dominance of English as the main medium of instruction. In this sense, linguistic imperialism represents not only a cultural challenge but also a structural threat to knowledge sovereignty, making the defense of autonomy both a national and epistemic imperative.

Cultural Hegemony and Knowledge Colonization: Towards a Critical Geopolitical Framework

Beyond institutional and individual dimensions, discussions of academic freedom and university autonomy must also be situated within broader cultural and ideological structures operating in geographical settings. Hegemony can be defined as the establishment of a common understanding that gains the approval of the masses by creating a cultural and ideological consensus at the social level. This concept provides a functional analytical tool to explain the relationship of consent established between power and society. Various theoretical approaches consider the media as one of the primary instruments in constructing this consent. Within this framework, Netflix, as one of the digital media platforms, stands among the prominent examples.

Dominant classes maintain their power not only through physical force but also by utilizing cultural and ideological tools. The concept of hegemony, based on the ideas developed by Gramsci in the 1920s and 1930s, forms the foundation of his work on culture and ideology. This concept gains its fullest meaning when considered together with terms such as culture, power, and ideology. Gramsci used the concept of hegemony to express the dominance of one social class over other classes within society, citing the hegemonic structure established by the bourgeoisie as an example (Gürcan & Otero, 2025). Stuart Hall, furthermore, argues that media tools construct meanings about events occurring around individuals. According to Hall, rather than directly conveying global developments, the media present them through a process of reconstruction. In doing so, the media restructure realities and, through this process, produce and communicate specific meanings (Yaylagül & Korkmaz, 2010).

Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony offers a framework that includes both the explanation and the re-evaluation of this notion. Hegemony encompasses not only overtly exercised force and power relations but also the establishment or maintenance of dominance through a process of consent and acceptance. From this perspective, the subjugation of the masses occurs not through coercion, but through a certain degree of consent. According to Gramsci, hegemony thereby signifies the construction of consent (Otero & Gürcan, 2024). The concept of cultural hegemony, which is introduced by the Italian thinker Gramsci, highlights the dominance established by the ruling class over society through the guidance and control of economic, political, religious, cultural, or ideological spheres (Fairclough, 2001, p.234).

Cultural hegemony enables the perception that a culture which is demographically in the minority occupies a disproportionately large space within the global range of cultural options, which reveals the relevance of hegemony as an explanatory concept in critical geopolitics. In this regard, Kuisel offers an apt metaphor for globalized culture by describing it as a "buffet." Through this metaphor, it is suggested that while various options are assumed to exist within global culture, the majority of these options tend to gravitate toward American cultural elements. Cultural consumers in different parts of the world emphasize the need to acknowledge that, although the range of cultural choices may appear vast from the outside, in reality, these options are quite limited (Kuisel as cited in Boyd-Barrett, 2020, p.200, p.42).

Pierre Bourdieu and Cultural Capital in Higher Education

While Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony helps us understand how dominant ideologies shape societal consent through media and cultural institutions, Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital provides a complementary lens to examine how such dominance is internalized, reproduced, and legitimized through education. The concept of cultural capital holds a central importance both in terms of Pierre Bourdieu's sociological approach and more broadly within the evolution of the notion of capital. Cultural capital is positioned as one of the fundamental elements that enable the formation and regulation of social hierarchy alongside economic capital. In Bourdieu's works, cultural capital is frequently used as a fundamental conceptual tool, especially in the field of education, for understanding the emergence of social inequalities and the mechanisms through which these inequalities are reproduced (Yanıklar, 2010, p.124).

The concept of cultural capital first emerged in Pierre Bourdieu's analyses within the scope of his studies focused on the field of education. Through this concept, Bourdieu aimed to relate the academic success of students from different social classes to the cultural heritage they inherited from their families. This approach moves away from a narrow perspective that evaluates academic success solely as a product of individual abilities while overlooking the social, cultural, and economic conditions in which individuals find themselves. According to Bourdieu, the reasons behind students' success or failure at school are related to much more complex structures. Traditional perspectives, although they take into account the economic and cultural investments individuals make in education, often overlook the nature, volume, and the means through which these investments are made. According to this understanding, there is a strong relationship between academic success and efforts based on academic investment, and success is mostly explained by natural talents. However, Bourdieu draws attention to a fundamental point neglected by this approach: the cultural capital individuals acquire within their family environment has a decisive effect on academic performance (Bourdieu, 1986, p.17). Cultural capital demonstrates that success within the school context stems from various causes and that numerous different processes related to academic achievement are at play.

From a critical geopolitical perspective, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is highly relevant to understanding the dynamics of higher education and the internationalization process through English as a lingua franca. In global academic settings, especially where English serves as the dominant medium of instruction and scholarly communication, mastery of English functions as a form of institutionalized cultural capital that shapes access to academic opportunities, professional advancement, and international mobility. Just as Bourdieu observed that students' educational success is deeply influenced by the cultural assets inherited from their social backgrounds, the global privileging of English reproduces structural inequalities by favoring those with early and sustained exposure to English-speaking environments—often students from urban, elite, or Western-oriented families. This reinforces educational hierarchies both within and across national borders, as universities that adopt English-language curricula signal greater prestige and global integration, further marginalizing local languages and epistemologies. Thus, cultural capital not only explains domestic educational stratification but also helps expose how internationalization—when centered on English—can perpetuate symbolic domination and epistemic inequality in global higher education.

Robert Phillipson and Linguistic Imperialism

Building on Gramsci and Bourdieu's insights into how cultural capital is unequally distributed and reproduced through education as a hegemonic practice, Phillipson's theory of linguistic imperialism extends this analysis to the global scale, revealing how language itself becomes a vehicle of domination.

The invasion of the Americas, considered one of the most significant developments in world history, is regarded as the starting point of the modern colonial process. This historical event, which profoundly affected Western civilization, also triggered many transformations on a global scale (Chomsky, 2010, p.19). Therefore, to fully understand the effects of globalization on language, it is necessary to carefully examine colonial practices. Colonialism is generally used to refer to the economic and political domination established by European nations over various regions and communities around the world. Although its political and economic dimensions are decisive, colonialism is also seen to have left deep and destructive impacts on cultural structures and languages. In this context, the treatment of non-European languages as inadequate and secondary, the emergence of linguistic forms such as pidgin and creole in the wake of colonialism, and the reinforcement of colonial powers' claims to cultural superiority all serve as examples of the linguistic consequences of these practices. Another crucial term in this regard is language expansion, a concept directly related to linguistic imperialism, which refers to the increase in the number of users and domains of use of a language or the community that speaks it beyond its natural development process (Cooper & Seckbach, 1977, p.214). Historically, it is observed that various languages have expanded through expansionist policies. Language expansionism is generally directly related to the political and economic power held by the nation that speaks the language. Between 1500 and 1750, due to colonial activities being predominantly under Spanish and

Portuguese influence, Spanish and Portuguese are known to have acquired an expansionist character during this period. Between 1750 and 1945, English and French assumed this role; and in the post-1945 period, particularly English can be said to have come to the forefront in the context of language expansionism (Barrantes-Montero, 2018, pp.9–10).

In Phillipson's work (1997, p.239), linguistic imperialism is proposed as a theoretical framework that allows for the discussion of how language preference processes are directed by certain centers of power and authorities, and how linguistic hierarchies are constructed. In general terms, linguistic imperialism is defined as the process by which only one language among those coexisting on equal terms in society is supported and brought to the forefront. This phenomenon can be considered a subform of "cultural imperialism" (Gürcan, 2022), as it is based on the belief that development is only possible through European languages. The primary aim of European colonialism was to expand the economic and political influence of European states. Although this objective was initially achieved through the use of military force, over time, this means proved insufficient to maintain the exploitation system established in the occupied territories. Therefore, European powers constructed a social structure that legitimized and solidified their own social, cultural, and scientific superiority (Pennycook, 1998, p.34). Within this structure, colonial Europeans and local collaborators occupied the highest social strata, which led to the languages they spoke being perceived as superior, prestigious, and reputable. In contrast, the languages of the exploited local populations were positioned in the lower tiers of the social hierarchy and were regarded as inadequate or even insignificant.

English as the Lingua Franca: From Cultural Capital to Linguistic Imperialism

The concept of linguistic imperialism provides a critical foundation for understanding the global spread of English and its geopolitical implications for cultural and educational hierarchies, specially in higher education settings. However, to grasp the full complexity of this phenomenon, it is also necessary to consider the historical context in which English emerged as a global lingua franca—an ostensibly neutral medium of communication that is anything but apolitical on the surface. As English continues to expand its reach across diverse sociolinguistic contexts, debates surrounding its standardization, localization, and pedagogical framing reveal the tensions between linguistic globalization and cultural sovereignty.

One of the key concepts that stands out in research and discussions concerning English as a global language is the term Lingua Franca. Historically, this term originated from the name Lisanul Farang, used by Arab merchants who traded in overseas regions to refer to the common language widely used in the places they visited. In this context, the term does not represent a direct designation but rather a conceptualization shaped by a necessity arising in communication. Today, English holds the position of the most dominant language fulfilling the function of a Lingua Franca. Another important concept evaluated within this framework is the term World Englishes, which refers to the ways in which various nations living in different geographical regions reconstruct English in original forms by incorporating elements from their own local languages, cultural structures, and modes of expression (Seidlhofer, 2001, p.140).

It is argued that the demand for Standard English and the reactions against this language have developed in a mutually reinforcing linear relationship. According to this approach, as the global spread of English increases, interest in the language also grows with the push of several socio-political and economic factors; this situation paves the way for core countries to emerge as rule-setting authorities in their approach to language education. As the core's stance—often described as norm-setting and at times imposing—gains strength, critical reactions from peripheral countries intensify in parallel. Modiano (2001, p.341) describes the insistence on teaching students a form of English close to the "standard" as "a persistence in imposing an action," and argues that this approach serves not to provide students with access to the global community, but rather to carry out cultural indoctrination. The author critiques that some theorists who embrace the idea of global culture and argue that the so-called "global culture" spreading around the world is not monopolized by the US and the United Kingdom. Furthermore, they consider English Language Education as an important tool for fostering a sense of global citizenship (Modiano, 2001, p.343). Within this framework, it is stated that not all groups who argue that English plays an important role in the construction of global citizenship necessarily adopt Western values in the same way. Moreover, the necessity of using English in a form stripped of cultural identity —as a neutral language of communication—is frequently emphasized. Joshua Fishman argues that a language's potential to function as a "Primary Language of Global Communication (PLGC)" is directly related to the neutral character of that language (Kovacevic, 2004, pp. 323–326).

This evolving role of English as a global lingua franca and the contested terrain of "standard" versus localized forms of English must be understood not only as a linguistic phenomenon but also as a reflection of deeper social hierarchies and global power dynamics. Through the lens of Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, mastery of English—particularly in its standardized, norm-enforcing form—operates as a powerful form of symbolic capital that grants access to academic prestige, economic opportunity, and international legitimacy. At the same time, Phillipson's theory of linguistic imperialism highlights how the global diffusion of English often reproduces unequal power relations between the core and periphery, privileging Anglo-American norms while marginalizing local languages and epistemologies. In the Turkish context, this dynamic positions English not merely as a communicative tool but as a vehicle for cultural hegemony and epistemic dependency—reinforcing the idea that language is both a medium of exchange and a mechanism of domination.

To conclude this section, English is often portrayed as a neutral or universally accessible tool for global communication in the context of the internationalization of higher education. However, linguistic imperialism theory emphasizes that English operates not simply as a lingua franca but as a hegemonic medium through which cultural, ideological, and epistemic dominance is exerted. As universities increasingly adopt English-medium instruction to attract international students and enhance global prestige, they risk reinforcing Anglo-American linguistic norms and marginalizing local languages, knowledge systems, and cultural frameworks. In Türkiye, this dynamic has been particularly pronounced: English language adoption has coincided with geopolitical realignments and economic dependencies, embedding Western-centric values and discourses into the fabric of higher education. Thus, the internationalization of Turkish universities through English not only fosters global integration but also deepens asymmetries in linguistic and cultural power—making linguistic imperialism an essential lens for critically examining the politics of language in global higher education.

Use of English in Turkish Higher Education: A Critical Geopolitical Re-Assessment

The global ascendance of English as a *lingua franca*, framed by the twin dynamics of cultural capital and linguistic imperialism, does not unfold uniformly across contexts—it takes on distinct historical and sociopolitical contours within each national setting. Türkiye offers a particularly illustrative case. As the country has navigated its modern nation-building process and international alignment—especially during the Cold War period—language education policies have increasingly favored English, not only for pragmatic reasons but also as a symbol of modernity, elite distinction, and integration into the Western imperialist system. To fully understand the domestic trajectory of English in Türkiye, it is essential to examine how foreign language education evolved from the early republican period onward, and how this evolution reflects broader ideological, geopolitical, and class-based imperatives.

In the early years of the Republic, foreign languages such as German, French, Italian, English, Arabic, and Persian were taught in Turkish schools. However, Persian was soon removed from the curriculum, and Arabic instruction was limited to institutions providing religious education. During this period, the most widely taught foreign languages in Turkish schools were German and French (Demircan, 1988, p. 92). Indeed, the Turkish-German rapprochement that took shape before the Second World War, along with the French government's policies promoting the teaching of French, had a significant impact on this development. However, starting from the 1950s, this situation began to change; English began to compete with French and German—which had previously held dominant positions—in various fields ranging from education to diplomacy. As English-speaking countries started gaining influence on a global scale in economic, political, and military domains, the English language became increasingly widespread within international institutions and structures (Tollefson, 1991, p. 82).

The Turkish state, acting in line with the goal of modernizing Türkiye, supported the view that English was an important tool for strengthening commercial relations, ensuring communication at the international level, and sustaining scientific development (Doğançay-Aktuna, 1998). Türkiye’s inclusion in NATO and its efforts to strengthen communication with the United States led to an increase in American influence within Türkiye. As a result, the adoption of English within the country accelerated, and English began to gain importance over other languages. Ankara College, operating under the Turkish Education Association, began offering education in English in 1952. From that point on, there was a noticeable increase in the number of schools providing education in English. In 1955, six Maarif Colleges (secondary schools offering instruction in a foreign language) were opened across Türkiye. These schools implemented an education program with a strong emphasis on English; science and mathematics courses were taught in English. In 1975, the name of the Maarif Colleges was changed to Anatolian High School, and with this change, the number of schools offering education in English reached twenty (Demirel, 2008, pp. 13–14).

With the increase in the number of Anatolian High Schools, public high schools focusing on foreign language instruction, the number of schools offering education in English also grew rapidly over time. In 2005, when the duration of high school education was extended to four years, the English preparatory classes in Anatolian High Schools and Super High Schools were abolished; only eight Anatolian High Schools were permitted to continue this preparatory education. Since the 1950s, English has risen to the position of the primary foreign language in Turkish schools. Today, foreign language instruction in Turkish public schools begins at the second-grade level, and the vast majority of students receive English education as their first foreign language (Çakır, 2017, p. 16). In parallel with all these developments, English-medium instruction has also grown steadily in higher education, and this increase appears to be closely linked to the rapid rise in the number of international students coming to Türkiye. While the number of international students studying in Türkiye was recorded as 16.656 in the year 2000, this figure rose to 154.505 by 2019 (Yükseköğretim Bilgi Yönetim Sistemi, 2022, p.1).

Table 1. Number of International Students in Türkiye
(Yükseköğretim Kurulu, 2025, p.9)

Year	Number of International Students
2001	16656
2002	16328
2003	15719
2004	15288
2005	15028
2006	16059
2007	16455
2008	17388
2009	18720
2010	21948
2011	26228
2012	31933
2013	44025
2014	48184
2015	72178
2016	87903
2017	108076
2018	125138
2019	154505
2020	185047
2021	224048
2022	260289
2023	301694
2024	336366

The consideration of internationalization in higher education as a public policy area, and its regulation within this framework, began to emerge toward the end of the 20th century. In Türkiye, the massification of higher education became particularly evident starting in the 2000s, with a notable increase in both the number of students and higher education institutions. During this period, the growth process accelerated through policies aimed at meeting the needs of individuals seeking access to higher education, and this development has been referred to as the “massification of higher education”.

Indeed, one of the key enablers of this transformation has been the expansion of English language education at the university level. As English increasingly becomes the medium of instruction in many Turkish higher education institutions, it enhances the accessibility of academic programs to a wider international audience, thereby strengthening the country’s attractiveness in the global education market. In this sense, there is a strong, mutually reinforcing relationship between the rise in international student numbers, the internationalization of higher education, and the institutionalization of English as the primary foreign language of instruction.

In this context, the trajectory of English language adoption in Türkiye’s education system—particularly from the 1950s onward—can be deeply understood through the combined lenses of Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital and Phillipson’s concept of linguistic imperialism. As the Turkish Republic shifted from a multilingual imperial legacy toward a nationalist modernization project, the choice of foreign language instruction became tightly entangled with the broader geopolitical goal of aligning Türkiye with Western hegemonic centers. In this context, English gradually supplanted French and German as the dominant foreign language, not merely due to geopolitical alliances or pragmatic utility, but also through processes of symbolic valuation, social distinction, and epistemic alignment—all central concerns of Bourdieu’s cultural capital framework.

According to Bourdieu, language is not merely a neutral communicative tool, but a bearer of symbolic power and cultural legitimacy. The privileging of English in Turkish educational institutions, especially elite ones such as Ankara College or the Anatolian High Schools, functioned as a mechanism for accumulating institutionalized cultural capital—a form of capital that signals academic prestige, access to global networks, and social mobility. Mastery of English increasingly came to serve as a gatekeeping criterion for accessing high-status educational and professional trajectories, particularly in the sciences, diplomacy, and international business. This was not only a reflection of global trends but also a domestically cultivated hierarchy of linguistic legitimacy, where English was constructed as the language of progress, science, and modernity, while other foreign languages—once dominant—receded in both symbolic and practical importance.

However, as Phillipson's theory of linguistic imperialism suggests, the global spread of English cannot be understood solely in terms of voluntary adoption or functional necessity. Rather, it must be analyzed within broader structures of power, domination, and epistemic control. The expansion of English in Türkiye occurred within the context of Cold War geopolitics, NATO integration, and increasing economic dependence on Western institutions—conditions that reflect what Phillipson identifies as the asymmetrical global order underpinning linguistic hierarchies. In this framework, the dominance of English represents not a benign tool of internationalization but a mechanism of linguistic and cultural subordination, wherein knowledge production and educational practices become increasingly aligned with Anglo-American norms, values, and epistemologies. Thus, what appears as a rational policy choice aimed at internationalization can also be interpreted as a process of knowledge colonization, in which local languages and alternative modes of thought are gradually marginalized or rendered invisible.

This tension is especially salient in the Turkish context, where the discourse of internationalization in higher education is frequently framed as a neutral or even emancipatory project. Yet, when viewed through the critical perspectives of Gramsci, Bourdieu and Phillipson, internationalization—particularly through English—

reveals its ideological underpinnings and social consequences. It reinforces existing social inequalities by rewarding those with early and sustained access to English-medium education (often urban, middle- or upper-class students), while excluding others from high-status academic and economic opportunities. Simultaneously, it channels research agendas, pedagogical approaches, and academic identities toward alignment with dominant Western paradigms, undermining both academic autonomy and knowledge pluralism.

In sum, Bourdieu's theory explains how English functions as a form of cultural capital within Türkiye's stratified education system, while Gramsci and Phillipson's frameworks highlight the imperial logic embedded in its global hegemonic dominance. Together, these theories illuminate how internationalization—far from being a purely technical or inclusive endeavor—is entangled with historically rooted forms of symbolic violence, epistemic dependency, and cultural hegemony. Recognizing these dynamics is essential not only for critiquing current policy trajectories but also for envisioning more equitable, multilingual, and context-sensitive models of international engagement in Turkish higher education.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that the internationalization of higher education in Türkiye—particularly through the proliferation of English-medium instruction—is not a neutral or universally progressive development, but one deeply embedded in global structures of inequality and domination. By drawing on Gramsci's notion of hegemony, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and Phillipson's theory of linguistic imperialism, the study has shown how English functions both as a marker of academic prestige and as a vehicle of epistemic subordination. Within this framework, the rise of English in Turkish universities reinforces existing social hierarchies, privileges elite groups with access to English-language capital, and constrains the scope of autonomous knowledge production by aligning academic norms with Western hegemonic standards. When higher education policies prioritize global competitiveness and international visibility through English, they risk reproducing colonial patterns of linguistic and epistemic dependency. In this light, internationalization becomes a process not of reciprocal exchange, but of asymmetrical integration into a global order that privileges Anglo-American modes of thought, research, and pedagogy.

Within this context, fostering linguistic pluralism and academic autonomy emerges as both a strategic necessity and a form of resistance to epistemic dependency. One crucial step toward this goal is to reimagine internationalization not as a process synonymous with Anglicization, but as a multidimensional framework that values linguistic diversity and regional engagement. Multilingual internationalization models—incorporating Turkish alongside other regional and global languages—can help decenter English while still maintaining international competitiveness. This requires strategic partnerships beyond the Anglophone world, particularly with non-Western and postcolonial academic institutions such as the BRICS Universities League and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization University.

Moreover, academic output in Turkish must be re-legitimized and institutionally supported. The dominance of English in publication criteria and academic evaluation risks marginalizing local knowledge systems and excluding scholars without privileged access to English-medium education. National funding agencies, academic journals, and university promotion committees must actively recognize and reward scholarly work produced in Turkish and other non-dominant languages. Doing so will both democratize academic participation and strengthen Türkiye's intellectual sovereignty. At the curricular level, universities should localize educational content by integrating national histories, languages, and epistemologies into course design. This does not imply isolationism but rather the development of context-sensitive knowledge production that reflects Türkiye's own sociocultural realities. Similarly, language policy reforms are needed to regulate the proportion of English-medium instruction and ensure the continued centrality of Turkish as a language of science and scholarship.

Importantly, any pluralist language agenda must be accompanied by efforts to democratize access to English, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. While English proficiency remains a valuable skill in global academia, it must not become a tool of stratification. Addressing this imbalance requires the expansion of public English-language education and support services while simultaneously working to decenter English as the only gateway to international academic legitimacy.

Institutionally, universities must reclaim autonomy from external dependencies, including over-reliance on foreign donor agendas, standardized global rankings, and externally imposed research priorities. Building independent research ecosystems, regionally grounded collaborations, and diversified funding sources away from the neoliberal paradigm will empower Turkish academia to set its own priorities and pursue its own models of excellence. Finally, these transformations must be supported by a pedagogical shift toward critical language awareness. Students and educators alike should be encouraged to interrogate the ideological dimensions of language, understand how linguistic hierarchies are constructed, and reflect on how language shapes access to knowledge and power. Language education, in this sense, should be not only technical but emancipatory.

In the final analysis, achieving linguistic pluralism and academic autonomy in Turkish higher education requires moving beyond surface-level notions of internationalization. It demands a structural rethinking of how language, power, and knowledge intersect. By embracing a multilingual, contextually rooted, and critically engaged vision of higher education, Türkiye as a major Global South country can contribute to a more equitable and diverse global academic order—one in which it is not merely a participant, but a co-architect.

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