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Global Order in Transition: Major International Crises and the Strains of Multipolarity

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Abstract

The contemporary international system is experiencing a period of profound transition marked by the gradual decline of unipolar dominance and the uncertain emergence of a multipolar order. Rather than producing stability, this evolving configuration has unfolded alongside a series of major international crises that have exposed deep structural tensions within global politics. Conflicts such as the Russia–Ukraine war, renewed instability in West Asia, intensifying United States–China rivalry, and the growing political assertiveness of the Global South have collectively challenged existing norms, institutions, and mechanisms of global governance. This paper examines how these interconnected crises have placed significant strain on the functioning of multipolarity and accelerated the transformation of the global order. Drawing primarily on realist and institutionalist perspectives, the study argues that while multipolarity expands strategic space for states and weakens hierarchical dominance, it also heightens geopolitical competition, normative fragmentation, and institutional paralysis. The analysis demonstrates that contemporary crises are not isolated disruptions but systemic stress tests that reveal the limitations of existing multilateral frameworks and the selective application of international norms. By situating major global crises within a broader structural context, the paper contributes to debates on international order by highlighting crisis politics as a central driver of systemic change. It concludes that the present phase represents a transitional and unsettled global order, characterized less by consolidated multipolar stability and more by fluid power alignments, contested legitimacy, and competing visions of global governance.

Keywords: Multipolarity; Global Order; International Crises; Great Power Rivalry; Global Governance

Introduction

The structure of the international system has entered a phase of significant transformation, marked by the gradual erosion of post–Cold War unipolarity and the uncertain emergence of a multipolar configuration. While multipolarity was once expected to promote balance and stability through the diffusion of power, recent developments suggest a far more complex and contested transition. The contemporary global order is increasingly shaped by major international crises that have exposed underlying structural weaknesses within existing political, economic, and security arrangements. Rather than functioning as isolated disruptions, these crises have interacted with shifting power distributions to intensify systemic stress and geopolitical fragmentation (Acharya, 2018; Mearsheimer, 2014).

The Russia–Ukraine war, renewed instability in West Asia, intensifying strategic rivalry between the United States and China, and the growing assertiveness of emerging powers through platforms such as BRICS have collectively altered the dynamics of global politics. These developments have accelerated the return of power politics, weakened confidence in multilateral institutions, and challenged the universality

of international norms (Ikenberry, 2011; Walt, 2018). As a result, the international system appears increasingly characterized by selective multilateralism, competing visions of order, and declining institutional effectiveness.

This paper argues that the current phase of multipolarity is unfolding under conditions of sustained crisis, which fundamentally differentiates it from earlier historical experiences of power transition. Instead of producing equilibrium, crisis-driven multipolarity has heightened uncertainty and strategic mistrust among major and middle powers alike. Existing scholarship often examines individual crises in isolation, thereby overlooking their cumulative impact on the structure and functioning of the global order. This study seeks to address this gap by analyzing how major contemporary international crises collectively strain multipolarity and contribute to the ongoing transformation of global order.

By adopting a combined realist and institutionalist analytical framework, the paper examines crisis politics as a central mechanism shaping systemic change in international relations. It aims to contribute to broader debates on world order by demonstrating that the present moment represents not a consolidated multipolar system, but a transitional and unsettled phase marked by fluid alignments, contested legitimacy, and competing models of global governance.

Literature Review

Scholarly debates on the structure of the international system have long revolved around questions of polarity, power distribution, and systemic stability. Early post–Cold War literature largely emphasized the durability of unipolarity, highlighting the institutional, economic, and normative advantages enjoyed by the United States in sustaining global leadership (Ikenberry, 2011). However, subsequent analyses increasingly questioned the long-term viability of unipolar dominance, pointing to the diffusion of economic and military capabilities and the rise of new centres of power in Asia and the Global South (Walt, 2018).

A significant body of literature has examined the concept of multipolarity, often associating it with both opportunities and risks. Realist scholars argue that multipolar systems tend to be more unstable due to shifting alliances, miscalculation, and intensified security dilemmas among major powers (Mearsheimer, 2014). From this perspective, the redistribution of power does not necessarily lead to balance, but rather increases the likelihood of competition and conflict. In contrast, liberal institutionalist approaches emphasize the potential stabilizing role of international institutions, norms, and regimes in managing power transitions and mitigating conflict under conditions of multipolarity (Keohane, 1984).

More recent scholarship has moved beyond structural debates to focus on the role of crises as catalysts of systemic change. Studies on the Russia–Ukraine war, for instance, highlight how large-scale conflict has accelerated geopolitical polarization, revived alliance politics, and weakened confidence in existing security arrangements (Allison, 2022). Similarly, analyses of renewed instability in West Asia emphasize the selective application of international norms and the declining legitimacy of global governance mechanisms in managing protracted conflicts (Fawcett, 2019). These works suggest that contemporary crises expose not only regional fault lines but also deeper weaknesses within the global order.

Another strand of literature focuses on the growing assertiveness of emerging powers and the Global South. Scholars argue that platforms such as BRICS reflect dissatisfaction with Western-dominated institutions and represent efforts to reshape global governance from within rather than overturn it entirely (Acharya, 2018). This perspective introduces the concept of a more fragmented and pluralistic order, where multiple visions of legitimacy and authority coexist. However, critics caution that such institutional

diversification may further complicate coordination and reduce the effectiveness of global responses to crises.

Despite these contributions, much of the existing literature remains fragmented, often addressing polarity, institutions, or specific conflicts in isolation. There is limited integrated analysis that examines how multiple, overlapping international crises collectively strain multipolarity as a systemic condition. This paper builds on and extends existing scholarship by bringing these strands together, offering a crisis-centred interpretation of how the contemporary global order is being reshaped under conditions of sustained instability.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding the transformation of the contemporary global order requires an analytical framework capable of capturing both structural power shifts and the evolving role of institutions under conditions of sustained crisis. This paper adopts a combined realist and institutionalist framework to examine how major international crises have strained the functioning of multipolarity and reshaped global order dynamics. The integration of these perspectives allows for a balanced analysis that accounts for material power competition as well as the limitations of global governance mechanisms.

From a realist perspective, international politics is fundamentally shaped by the distribution of power and the pursuit of security by states operating in an anarchic system. Realist scholars argue that periods of power transition are inherently unstable, particularly in multipolar systems where shifting alliances and uncertainty increase the risk of miscalculation and conflict (Mearsheimer, 2014). In the contemporary context, the relative decline of unipolar dominance and the rise of multiple power centres have intensified strategic rivalry among major states. International crises such as the Russia–Ukraine war and escalating United States–China competition illustrate how power politics has reasserted itself, reinforcing security dilemmas and undermining expectations of systemic stability. From this viewpoint, multipolarity under crisis conditions is less a source of balance and more a catalyst for competition and geopolitical fragmentation.

While realism offers valuable insights into power behaviour, it provides limited explanation for the persistence and erosion of international institutions during periods of crisis. Liberal institutionalism complements this analysis by focusing on the role of norms, rules, and organizations in facilitating cooperation and managing conflict. Institutionalists argue that institutions can reduce uncertainty, lower transaction costs, and provide mechanisms for coordination even in competitive environments (Keohane, 1984). However, recent crises have revealed significant constraints on institutional effectiveness. The selective enforcement of international norms, weakening compliance mechanisms, and declining legitimacy of multilateral institutions suggest that institutional frameworks are increasingly shaped by power asymmetries rather than shared commitments.

By combining these perspectives, this study conceptualizes contemporary multipolarity as a condition marked by both intensified power competition and institutional strain. Major international crises function as stress tests that expose the gap between normative aspirations and political realities. This theoretical framework enables a systematic analysis of how crisis politics accelerates structural change, reshapes state behaviour, and contributes to an unsettled global order characterized by contested legitimacy, fragmented governance, and fluid alignments.

Major International Crises and the Transformation of Global Order

Crisis Politics and Systemic Stress

Major international crises have historically played a decisive role in reshaping global order by exposing structural weaknesses and accelerating shifts in power relations. In the contemporary period, crises no longer remain confined to regional theatres but generate global political, economic, and normative repercussions. The cumulative effect of overlapping crises has placed unprecedented strain on an already fragile multipolar transition. Rather than facilitating equilibrium, the diffusion of power across multiple centres has coincided with heightened uncertainty, strategic mistrust, and declining institutional coherence.

The Russia–Ukraine War and the Return of Geopolitics

The Russia–Ukraine war represents a critical rupture in post–Cold War assumptions about European security and international norms. The conflict has reinforced the centrality of military power, territorial control, and alliance politics, challenging expectations that economic interdependence and institutional integration would constrain major power conflict. The war has revitalized NATO, deepened strategic polarization between Russia and the West, and intensified energy and food security concerns globally (Allison, 2022). More broadly, the conflict has demonstrated how multipolarity under crisis conditions can amplify geopolitical confrontation rather than mitigate it, as major powers pursue divergent strategic objectives with limited institutional restraint.

West Asia and Normative Fragmentation

Renewed instability in West Asia has further revealed the selective application of international norms and the erosion of normative consensus within the global order. Prolonged conflicts and humanitarian crises have underscored inconsistencies in global responses, particularly regarding sovereignty, intervention, and human rights. The inability of international institutions to produce sustained conflict resolution has weakened their legitimacy and reinforced perceptions of double standards (Fawcett, 2019). These dynamics contribute to normative fragmentation, where competing interpretations of legality and legitimacy coexist, complicating collective action in a multipolar environment.

United States–China Rivalry and Strategic Polarization

Intensifying rivalry between the United States and China constitutes a central axis of contemporary global politics. Unlike earlier power transitions, this competition spans military, economic, technological, and ideological domains. Strategic competition has increasingly shaped regional security architectures, trade regimes, and technological governance, generating pressures on middle and smaller powers to navigate complex alignment choices (Walt, 2018). In a multipolar context, this rivalry has contributed to strategic polarization without producing stable blocs, reinforcing uncertainty and limiting prospects for coordinated global governance.

Global South Assertion and Institutional Contestation

Parallel to great power competition, emerging powers and the Global South have sought greater voice within the international system. Platforms such as BRICS reflect dissatisfaction with Western-dominated institutions and efforts to reform global governance structures from within (Acharya, 2018). While this assertiveness signals a shift toward pluralism, it has also increased institutional fragmentation. Competing

forums, overlapping memberships, and divergent priorities have complicated collective responses to global crises, highlighting the limits of institutional adaptation during periods of systemic stress.

Implications for Global Governance

The crisis-driven transformation of the international system has profound implications for the nature and effectiveness of global governance. As multipolarity unfolds under conditions of sustained instability, existing institutions and norms face increasing pressure to adapt to shifting power realities while maintaining legitimacy and functionality. Contemporary crises reveal a growing mismatch between institutional design, which largely reflects post–Second World War power structures, and the emerging distribution of power in the international system.

One of the most significant implications is the declining effectiveness of multilateral institutions in managing large-scale crises. Organizations such as the United Nations and its subsidiary bodies have struggled to produce consensus-driven outcomes in the face of deep strategic divisions among major powers. Veto politics, selective norm enforcement, and institutional paralysis have weakened the credibility of collective security mechanisms, particularly during conflicts involving great power interests. This erosion of institutional authority has reinforced a pattern of selective multilateralism, where states engage with global institutions instrumentally rather than as binding frameworks for collective action (Ikenberry, 2011).

At the normative level, contemporary crises have intensified fragmentation within the global governance architecture. Competing interpretations of sovereignty, intervention, and human rights have undermined the universality of international norms. The uneven application of these principles across different conflicts has contributed to perceptions of double standards, particularly among states in the Global South. As a result, global governance is increasingly characterized by contested legitimacy rather than shared normative consensus, complicating efforts to coordinate responses to humanitarian, security, and economic challenges (Acharya, 2018).

Multipolarity under crisis conditions has also altered the behaviour of middle and emerging powers. Rather than aligning rigidly with major power blocs, many states have adopted flexible strategies aimed at preserving strategic autonomy and maximizing diplomatic space. While such behaviour reflects pragmatic adaptation to systemic uncertainty, it further reduces the coherence of global governance by weakening collective commitments and reinforcing fragmented institutional engagement (Walt, 2018). This trend suggests that governance outcomes are increasingly shaped by power calculations rather than rule-based cooperation.

Taken together, these developments indicate that global governance is entering a transitional phase marked by reduced institutional effectiveness, normative contestation, and fragmented authority. Without meaningful institutional reform that reflects contemporary power realities and restores normative credibility, global governance mechanisms are likely to remain reactive rather than preventive, responding to crises after they escalate rather than managing underlying structural tensions.

Conclusion

The contemporary international system is undergoing a complex and unsettled transformation in which the transition toward multipolarity has been shaped less by orderly power redistribution and more by the cumulative impact of major international crises. This paper has argued that conflicts such as the Russia–Ukraine war, renewed instability in West Asia, intensifying United States–China rivalry, and the growing

assertiveness of the Global South have collectively functioned as systemic stress tests, exposing the limitations of existing global order arrangements. Rather than stabilizing the international system, crisis-driven multipolarity has intensified geopolitical competition, weakened institutional effectiveness, and fragmented normative consensus.

The analysis demonstrates that contemporary multipolarity differs significantly from earlier historical experiences. Power diffusion has not resulted in equilibrium but has instead produced fluid alignments, strategic uncertainty, and selective engagement with multilateral institutions. The erosion of confidence in global governance mechanisms reflects both structural power shifts and the inability of institutions to adapt meaningfully to changing political realities. As a result, governance outcomes are increasingly shaped by power calculations rather than shared rules and norms.

The study contributes to debates on international order by emphasizing the interconnected nature of contemporary crises and their cumulative impact on systemic transformation. It highlights crisis politics as a central mechanism through which global order is being reshaped, challenging assumptions that multipolarity inherently produces stability. The present phase should therefore be understood as a transitional and contested order rather than a consolidated multipolar system.

Looking ahead, the trajectory of the global order will depend on whether emerging and established powers can reconcile power competition with institutional reform and normative renewal. Without such adaptation, multipolarity is likely to remain marked by fragmentation and reactive governance, leaving the international system vulnerable to recurring crises and prolonged instability.

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