THE CHANGING WORLD ORDER: RECENT DYNAMICS IN WORLD POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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Abstract

Over the past five years the international system has undergone significant transformation. The post-Cold War era of U.S. hegemonic leadership and liberal integration is giving way to a more contested, multipolar, and fragmented order. This article reviews the main shifts in international politics and relations—great-power competition (especially U.S.–China), war and coercion (notably the Ukraine conflict), alliance re-configuration, economic fragmentation and technology competition, the geopolitics of climate and energy, as well as democratic backsliding and normative contestation. It draws on recent survey and policy-report data, primary documents and think-tank analyses to highlight both empirical changes and theoretical implications for IR scholarship and policy. The article concludes by identifying emergent research agendas and policy priorities.

Introduction

In the early decades of the twenty-first century the world's major power configuration appeared stable in certain respects: a dominant United States, a broadly integrated global economy, expanding liberal norms and institutions, and limited risk of large-scale interstate war.[1] However, beginning with the global financial crisis of 2008, accelerating in the 2010s and accelerating further since 2020, the international order has entered a phase of rising instability and transformation. As the World Economic Forum (WEF) puts it in its *Global Risks Report 2025*: "Deepening divisions and increasing fragmentation are reshaping international relations and calling into question whether existing structures are equipped to tackle the challenges collectively confronting us."[2] By the same token, more than half of survey respondents (52 %) expect an "unsettled" global outlook over the next two years, and 62 % foresee "stormy or turbulent" conditions over the next decade.[3] This article examines how that broader context translates into changes in world politics and IR: how power is being redistributed, how states and alliances are adapting, how economic and technological linkages are being rewired, how new domains of conflict emerge, and what this all means for theory and policy.

1. Multipolarity and institutional contestation

One of the clearest shifts is toward a more plural and contested international order. The WEF survey reports that 64 % of respondents believe that the coming decade will see a "multipolar or fragmented order, in which middle and great powers contest, set and enforce regional rules and norms."[4]

Simultaneously, existing Western-led institutions appear under strain. The WEF identifies a so-called "geopolitical recession" in which multilateral institutions' role in conflict prevention and resolution is weakened: "A loss of support for and faith in the role of international organizations … has opened the door to more unilateralist moves."[5] At the same time, new institutional formations and "non-Western" initiatives are gaining attention. For example, the enlargement of the BRICS grouping signals a drive among emerging economies to create alternative centres of finance, trade and diplomatic coordination. [6] The implication is a layered order in which U.S. power remains substantial but no longer unilateral, and where multiple regional and thematic architectures vie for influence. This scenario demands refinement of classical IR frameworks (e.g., unipolarity, bipolarity, multipolarity) to account for institutional competition and normative-ideational rivalry.

The rise of digital communication has transformed the mechanisms of political mobilization. Social media platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube have empowered populist leaders to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and communicate directly with mass audiences. Populists excel in this environment because their rhetoric—simple, emotive, and adversarial—fits the logic of social media. Algorithms prioritize sensational content, reinforcing ideological echo chambers and deepening polarization. The digital age has also produced an epistemic crisis. The proliferation of fake news, conspiracy theories, and algorithmic manipulation has eroded trust in traditional

information sources.[16] Populist leaders exploit this mistrust, dismissing unfavorable journalism as "fake news" and presenting themselves as the only reliable interpreters of reality.

This erosion of epistemic authority has profound implications for democracy. Deliberative politics depends on shared facts and reasoned debate; when these foundations collapse, populist narratives based on fear and resentment gain traction.

2. U.S.–China strategic competition and technology decoupling

The liberal international order—anchored by institutions, rules-based trade, and multilateral governance—is under strain. Many observers argue that systemic cooperation is more difficult in an era of geoeconomic rivalry and technological decoupling.[11] When the major powers compete, the incentives for global public-goods provision or broad multilateral problem-solving become weaker, thereby reinforcing the competitive logic.

The resurgence of great-power competition marks a critical turning point in international relations. The paradigms of the 1990s and early 2000s—characterised by U.S. primacy and liberal multilateralism—are giving way to a more contested, multipolar, and complex world. While this revival of power politics shares DNA with the Cold War era, it also differs significantly: competition today is more diffuse (multiple domains, geoeconomic tools, technological frontiers), and the stakes encompass not just territory or ideology but supply-chains, standards, and governance models. The contest between the United States and China in East Asia, Russia's re-assertion in Europe/Eurasia, and the strategic choices of middle powers such as India illustrate that we are navigating a world of rivalry layered with cooperation, autonomy and strategic ambiguity.

Among the axes of global competition, the rivalry between the United States and the People's Republic of China stands out. What was once primarily an economic and trade relationship is now conceptualised as long-term strategic competition. Analysts emphasise three intertwined dimensions: trade/technology, military/security, and diplomatic/global governance. In the technology domain, states increasingly treat advanced semiconductors, AI, quantum computing and certain biotechnologies as strategic assets. The WEF notes the risk of "adverse outcomes of AI technologies" making a "jump" in the ten-year risk horizon.[7]

Scholars provide empirical support. For example, a recent paper finds that export controls on semiconductor hardware and software are starting to hurt U.S. firms while accelerating Chinese innovation: "Export controls back-fired … the report shows how U.S. firms lost more than US$33 billion in sales to Huawei between 2021 and 2024."[8] Another study finds that Sino-U.S. science & technology friction is already reducing cross-border knowledge flows in certain technology areas.[9] In military and security terms, European allies recognise the changing calculus: the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has indicated that Russian aggression in Ukraine places renewed premium on deterrence and European burden sharing.[10] In diplomatic and governance terms, the tech-sphere is becoming a site of normative competition — standards for data governance, AI ethics, export-regimes and supply-chain resilience are now contested. For IR theory, this competition challenges distinctions between economic interdependence and security rivalry — the two are increasingly fused.

3. War, coercion and the revival of conventional conflict

The recurrence of large-scale armed conflict is another defining feature of the period. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in February 2022 remains a systemic watershed. The WEF report states: "State-based armed conflict (proxy wars, civil wars, coups, terrorism, etc.) … climbs from #8 to #1 in the ranking of risks for 2025."[11]

The war has triggered a cascade of changes: NATO revitalisation, dramatic defence spending increases in Europe, renewed emphasis on territorial defence and deterrence.[12] For example, in Europe defence spending reached 1.9 % of GDP in 2024, up from 1.6 % in 2022.[13] The persistence of the war also highlights several structural features: (1) major-power war remains possible (at least regionally), (2) conventional war still matters despite technological advances, (3) the interplay of war, economic sanctions, energy supply disruptions and food insecurity underscores global spill-over effects. Thus, the period challenges the liberal expectation of declining interstate war and emphasises the continuing relevance of realist concerns. For IR theory, it suggests the need to integrate war-procurement-economy linkages, resource vulnerabilities and institutional adaptation into our models of conflict.

Traditional military alliances (NATO, etc.) increasingly incorporate "cyber-domains" into their doctrine; cyber-defence and information warfare become formal alliance tasks. Cybersecurity shapes access, interoperability, norms among allies and partners. Moreover, domains of contestation now include cyberspace, space, supply-chains and data infrastructures in addition to land, sea, air.

As states compete for digital architecture and control, global governance faces stress. Who writes the rules for cyber conduct? How are norms enforced? What is deterrence in cyberspace? The risk logics literature argues that cybersecurity politics encompasses more than classic threat paradigms; it includes risk-uncertainty logics, systems vulnerability, and governance dilemmas.[13]

Fragmentation of digital regimes—data sovereignty, divergent standards, national firewalls—may lead to a more fractured global order. Cooperation is still possible (for example on cybersecurity frameworks), but competition is stronger. The speed and complexity of cyber-operations raise the risk of mis-calculation, accidental escalation, and unintended consequences. The "blurring" of war/peace makes conflict less predictable. The asymmetric, deniable nature of cyber-operations complicates deterrence: if you cannot attribute reliably who attacked you, how do you respond?

Cybertechnology empowers non-state actors in new ways: hacker-groups, criminal syndicates, corporate actors with vast data capabilities can shape state-level outcomes. The intertwining of public and private in digital infrastructure means political outcomes reflect hybrid governance. Traditional IR models focusing solely on states may not suffice.

The era in which international relations were predominantly defined by armies, navies, diplomacy and economic blocs has been supplemented—and in some respects transformed—by the era of technology and cybersecurity. The digital age brings new domains of contestation (cyber-domain, data-domain), new actors (non-state, tech firms), new tempos (speed, automation), and new forms of power (data-control, standards-setting). These transformations have deep implications for how states behave, how alliances are structured, how conflict and cooperation occur, and how global governance must adapt.

4. Alliance plasticity and multi-vector partnerships

While traditional alliances endure, they are being reconfigured in response to new threat environments and shifting power balances. NATO remains central, but the alliance is adapting: increasing defence spending, authorising new capability commitments, and rethinking its geographic and thematic remit.[14] Simultaneously, new formats of cooperation are emerging: the AUKUS trilateral security pact (Australia–UK–US), the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the "Quad" – US, Japan, India, Australia) in the Indo-Pacific, and ad hoc defence-industrial partnerships among democracies.[15] Middle powers are balancing in complex ways: hedging between China and the U.S., preserving economic ties while enhancing security linkages with the West. The result is a more flexible, issue-based, networked system of partnerships rather than rigid blocs. For IR scholarship, this invites greater attention to "mini-alliances," functional coalitions, and the grey zone between alliance and neutrality.

The control of data and digital infrastructure becomes a form of strategic competition. States increasingly compete over standards (for 5G, AI), over digital supply-chains, over control of platforms and information flows. Cybersecurity is intertwined with digital governance: who sets the rules for data flows, algorithmic transparency, digital sovereignty?[8] The traditional knowledge that states held becomes eroded by open, networked technologies.

Cyber-operations blur the boundary between war and peace, and between domestic and international politics. Influence campaigns via social media, disinformation, are politically potent and cross borders. The line between internal politics and external interference is increasingly porous. This evolution forces a reconceptualisation of conflict and security.

One of the most salient developments is the use of cyber-operations by major powers. For example, states conduct espionage on rivals' economic, military, technological secrets; moreover, attacks on critical infrastructure (power grids, financial systems, government networks) have become strategic. The article "Geopolitical Ramifications of Cybersecurity Threats" argues that supply-chain attacks, ransomware and advanced persistent threats (APTs) have significant political implications.

5. Economic fragmentation, supply-chain resilience and geoeconomic coercion

The previously dominant narrative of ever-closer global economic integration is yielding to new forms of economic fragmentation and geoeconomic competition. The WEF identifies "geoeconomic confrontation (sanctions, tariffs, investment screening)" as #3 for current risk, and to receive heightened attention in the near term.[16] Major powers increasingly treat trade and technology flows as instruments of statecraft. Examples include: export controls on advanced chips, investment-screening regimes for foreign direct investment, efforts at "friend-shoring" or "near-shoring" supply chains. Empirical research suggests that while diversification efforts are underway, China remains deeply embedded in global value chains (GVCs) and the U.S. + 1 strategy has limitations.[17] Many scholars argue that the concept of economic interdependence needs refinement: states now manage trade

dependencies strategically, not simply economically. For IR theory, this means a revival of economic statecraft literatures, a deeper focus on digital and supply-chain interdependence, and the role of resilience as a strategic asset.

6. Climate, energy transitions and geo-ecological security

Environmental and climate issues now underpin geopolitical change in unprecedented ways. The WEF long-term risk landscape is dominated by extreme weather events, biodiversity loss and critical changes to Earth systems.[18] Simultaneously, the energy transition opens new lines of competition: access to critical minerals, control over battery supply chains, clean-energy infrastructure, and the risk of bottlenecks or dependencies.

States are increasingly framing climate policy as security policy. For example, energy-exporting states must adjust to declining demand for hydrocarbons; resource-rich minerals (lithium, cobalt, nickel) become strategic; climate-induced migration and disaster risk trigger security implications. These developments require IR scholarship to incorporate ecological systems as structural variables, not just peripheral concerns.

7. Domestic politics, normative competition and regime contestation

The quality of domestic governance and norms is now a major driver of foreign policy and global politics. Democratic backsliding and authoritarian resilience have become common features. Scholars now argue that "democracy vs authoritarianism" competition is not simply normative but integral to geopolitics. One recent article observes the instrumental use of constitutional and legal levers to weaken checks and balances in many countries, producing far-reaching external consequences.[19]

Over the past two decades, populism and nationalism have re-emerged as powerful forces in world politics, reshaping democratic systems, altering party alignments, and transforming the international order. Though both concepts have deep historical roots, their contemporary manifestations have taken on new dimensions in response to globalization, economic inequality, migration, and technological disruption. The simultaneous rise of populist and nationalist movements across diverse contexts—from Donald Trump's "America First" doctrine in the United States to Brexit in the United Kingdom, and from Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil to Viktor Orbán's Hungary—signals a structural shift in global political dynamics.

The resurgence of these ideologies has prompted widespread academic debate about their causes, consequences, and interconnections. Populism, often characterized by its anti-elite, anti-establishment rhetoric, challenges liberal democratic norms and institutions. Nationalism, with its emphasis on sovereignty and cultural identity, questions the legitimacy of supranational governance and cosmopolitan values. When combined, populism and nationalism form a potent ideological synthesis that opposes globalization and liberal internationalism, framing politics as a struggle between an authentic national community and a corrupt or alien global elite.

Populism also reflects a crisis of political representation. Traditional parties—particularly those aligned with the post-war centrist consensus—have struggled to respond to the discontent generated by neoliberal globalization.[9] Many citizens perceive mainstream politicians as detached technocrats serving corporate or supranational interests. The populist appeal lies in its promise of direct representation: leaders who claim to speak for "ordinary people" without mediation. In Latin America, this dynamic has a long history. Leaders such as Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales mobilized populist rhetoric to challenge entrenched elites and U.S. influence, emphasizing economic redistribution and national sovereignty. While ideologically distinct from right-wing populism, these movements share a rejection of global economic orthodoxy and elite rule

Moreover, states and non-state actors compete over narratives: governance models, data policies, human rights standards, AI ethics, climate justice frameworks. The result is a more ideationally contended world — not only who has power but whose model of governance becomes influential. For IR theory, this demands an integration of constructivist insights alongside realist/libral concerns.

8. Possible Theoretical implications

In our view, these empirical changes present several implications for International Relations theory:

- **Refinement of polarity conceptions**: The rise of institutional contestation alongside power diffusion suggests that unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar models need revision; we may now operate in a *contested multipolarity*.
- **Integration of economic-technology-security nexus**: Traditional dichotomies between security and economics are collapsing; IR theory must more directly integrate techno-economic dimensions (e.g., export controls, value chains, data flows).

- **Revival of war and coercive tools**: Despite decades of decline, interstate war and coercive competition remain central. The expectation of peace must now be reconsidered; realism retains explanatory force but must incorporate new domains (cyber, AI, supply-chain disruption).
- **Ecological and transnational systemic factors**: Climate and geo-ecological processes are shifting from background variables to systemic drivers. IR theory must incorporate ecological constraints, resource transition, and system-level risk.
- **Normative competition and domestic-foreign interplay**: Domestic authoritarianism or democratic erosion no longer affect only internal politics but have external ramifications (alliances, legitimacy, governance export). Constructivist lenses regain relevance.

9. Possible Policy implications

From a policy perspective, four priorities emerge:

- **Manage strategic competition intelligently**: Recognise that U.S.–China rivalry is structural and long-term; institutionalise risk-reduction (military-to-military channels, crisis hotlines), multi-domain arms control (cyber, AI), and resilient supply-chain strategies.
- **Strengthen alliances and partnerships**: Adapt alliances (NATO, Indo-Pacific) for flexibility and technology pooling, while enabling partner autonomy to prevent over-dependence.
- **Build resilience and diversify dependencies**: Invest in critical-technology production, supply-chain resilience, defence-industrial base, and domestic buffers to external shocks.
- **Revitalize multilateral cooperation on global risks**: Re-energise governance for climate finance, pandemic readiness, cyber norms, biodiversity — even amid competition, cooperative platforms are indispensable.

Conclusion

The international system today is not simply reverting to a Cold War-style bipolarity nor continuing the liberal-globalisation trajectory of the early 21st century. Instead, we are witnessing a more complex, contested multipolar order — where power is more diffuse, institutions are contested, economics and technology are securitised, and global risks span domains. For scholars and policymakers alike, this means rethinking dominant assumptions and models. Key research priorities include: (1) mapping the governance architectures of emerging powers and multi-polar institutional networks; (2) quantifying how technological decoupling and supply-chain re-structuring affect security and economic outcomes; (3) exploring the intersection of climate transitions, minerals policy and geopolitics; and (4) assessing how domestic regime type, digital governance and external legitimacy interact to shape global alignment. In sum, the world politics of the 2020s is defined by **uncertainty**, **strategic competition**, **technological transformation**, and **systemic risk**. Understanding this evolving environment demands not only new data and frameworks but also sustained engagement across disciplinary boundaries.

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