The British Academy

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

Global (Dis)Order
international policy programme

The Global South and the transformations of world order

International policy forum summary

World order: current experiences and possible futures

Competition and conflict have been at the heart of discussions about norms and institutions in both the Global South and the Global North – historically and, certainly, now. In a changing and more plural world, it is helpful to consider the types of functioning world orders that may develop in the context of contested norms, divergent values and preferences, and shifting patterns of agency. Four possible models of order to consider are the 'charter', the 'club', the 'concert', and the 'coalition'.

The charter model takes a universalist approach, with sovereign equality; the UN fulfils this model currently. It has the virtue of legitimacy; however, it is currently under considerable pressure. Nevertheless, it is still active – as seen in 2025 with COP30, the WHO pandemic preparedness treaty, and the Financing for Development conference (FFD4) in Seville.

The club model supports ideological affinity, as could be seen in the Cold War. It has the virtue of solidarity; however, that solidarity can be at the whim of changing circumstances. Recent changes in the US Government's foreign policy (e.g. through its National Security Strategy) indicate this challenge, and the solidarity of a club can only go as far as club members wish. In other words, there will be a tension between ideological affinity and self-interest.

The concert model would support cooperation between the great powers. It has the virtue of being a more pluralist approach, along with the virtue of capability, as it would enable government by those that can govern. It may also have some traction in today's world. However, it raises questions about who is in the concert and whether it would reproduce the blockages currently seen (for example) at the UN Security Council. It also reinforces logics of order over justice.

The coalition model provides informal modular and minilateral settings for cooperation – some more ad hoc and others more institutional – in what could be described as a G-x model. It has the virtue of flexibility, with participants in each minilateral able to shift for each problem or issue. A recent example might be the Tropical Forest Forever Facility. This model would allow shared concerns to coalesce but could also drive global fragmentation.

A positive possibility in this transforming landscape may be the role of 'middle powers'. The category 'middle powers' has never been easy or straightforward, in either analytic or political terms. However, the roles of countries in this category (broadly conceived), or which see themselves in this way, have become politically far more salient. The question is whether, among these middle powers, countries in the Global South and Global North can collaborate, despite their divides. There is an appetite and openings for collaboration among middle powers; however, there are huge differences in these countries' preferences and priorities. There is also a significant gap in terms of what the 'strategic imaginary' would be of a world based around collaboration among middle powers. Currently, some of these countries are giving considerable drive to strategic outlooks based on race, civilisation, and empire. Similar themes were at the core of colonial projects, and they create their own patterns and hierarchies in the international system. A shift to a world order based on middle power collaboration would be significant and might lead to counter-mobilisation – but that would remain to be seen.

These themes bring us to the very term 'Global South', which can often appear to connote a homogenous group – yet it includes democracies and authoritarian regimes, and wide differences in economics, society, and culture. There is an underlying cultural imperialism that comes with terminology like 'Global South', which also feeds into how the Global North is seen from the Global South. Although the 'Global South' is, in some ways, an unhelpful category, it is also arguably necessary for policymaking, given limited time day-to-day to deal with these types of questions. In addition, the term is important for key powers such as China and India, who position themselves as its standard-bearers.

All this being said, there needs to be humility about predictions. For example, the shift in Chinese economic power was not discussed in the 1970s, despite many ideas then about the future of global order. In the 2000s, we would have spoken about global governance; yet now the technical institutionalisation of global challenges such as climate change and processes such as COP30 are increasingly struggling – because the issues being faced are not technical, and implementation is not a technical exercise but deeply political and ideological, involving significant power considerations. More than half the countries at COP30 are not democracies, so the influence of civil society in those countries is minimal to non-existent; and the impact of transnational civil society against action on climate change is growing. Thus, the implementation challenge is facing politicisation, and climate action is struggling.

It is therefore important to consider the different timelines in play at any given point, including the spectrum from the crisis of the moment to deeper structural change, or when moving from the global to the planetary perspective, as well as intergenerational issues and perspectives that may have their own histories.

Is multipolarity a helpful concept?

Assuming that US unipolarity will not reappear, there exists today a set of old and new logics, with relationships developing among them: on the one hand, political competition, geopolitical rivalry, and major war; on the other, issues such as technology and planetary sense-making. This is leading to dissensus on a range of issues, including self-determination, intervention, and war. Of course, there has been tension in the past around different understandings of principles, and their implementation – but the current context provides a new ground.

The present moment sees wide-ranging types of power diffusion, including in social and political agency; however, all orders bring forth contestation. This poses the question of whether multipolarity is useful as a form of analysis, as challenges of political legitimacy are happening across the world, in all systems. In that context, it is critical to consider systemic and structural dynamics, as a discussion about multipolarity has limited analytic value (other than to note there are poles).

Discussions about multipolarity can devolve too easily into discussions about different actors, usually state actors; however, questions of world order are not simply a power game between states. We need to discuss content (of interactions) as well, not only in terms of interactions between actors, but also how poles relate to, and are tied to, institutions – an example being the significant Global South engagement with international legal institutions. As an analytic lens, polarity also leaves out different layers, such as the planetary and the local-to-global ('glocal'). Our analysis of world order needs to bring in civil society, cities, and the private sector, especially in finance and technology.

It is important, therefore, to distinguish between the phenomenon of power diffusion and the analytic utility of multipolarity for today's world order. This is especially so because power diffusion can often be seen as fragmentation in the Global North, and thus a negative, and as multipolarity in the South, and thus a positive.

Stability and order through spheres of influence?

Spheres of influence have always had two defining features. The first is that they bring together the more powerful and the less powerful. Here it is crucial to look not just at the goals and policies of the would-be regional hegemon but also at regional actors' strategic agency and options – including selective engagement, full-fledged band-wagoning, hedging, and norm entrepreneurship. Stable hegemony has rarely depended solely on coercion. The second is that regional spheres need to be recognised outside the region, especially by other major states.

The literature has often ascribed to spheres of influence the benefit of providing order and stability and ensuring that adventurism is avoided. In addition, it is believed they allow for pluralism and regime security – but the current developments in US foreign policy and the situation in Latin America, between the US and China, would indicate this is not the case. The idea that a great power can easily build a sphere of influence is incorrect; instead, a sphere of influence is inherently unstable and violent – as can also be seen with Russia in Ukraine.

Moreover, the idea that spheres of influence are predominant does not accord with the reality on the ground in regions like Latin America. For example, Brazil's economy is deeply entwined with both the US and China. Chinese investment is focused in sensitive sectors such as electricity, oil, gas, and mining, and China and the US are the dominant countries for Brazil's exports. These investment flows also have domestic political impacts. Chinese investment in sensitive Brazilian sectors is increasingly controversial, and Chinese imports have displaced Brazilian workers in some sectors. Meanwhile, in countries like Chile and Peru, there is still considerable Chinese bidding for projects, despite US pressure. Thus, within Latin America, there is both significant contestation and competition, as well as considerable active strategic agency, suggesting that our understanding of spheres of influence needs alteration.

The latest US National Security Strategy (which was published during the meeting summarised here) speaks directly to the Monroe Doctrine. However, it reinterprets the original defensive doctrine to one that is prohibitive and hegemonic, that aims to impose a hierarchy on the region. It is, though, unclear what a revised Monroe Doctrine aims to deliver for the US. It is, after all, a territorial doctrine in a cross-border and digital world, although it could demonstrate a shift to an 'Americas First' foreign policy. It is unclear whether it is truly aiming at a hemispheric order, or more at helping to develop domestic political narratives, while limiting China and securing critical minerals and oil. At this stage it is unclear whether US foreign policy in this guise provides leadership or pressure without purpose, and whether it is a new grand strategy or 'muscle memory'. There are, however, clear tensions within the US Government's support base in relation to foreign interventions, although there are currents of support for a ripple of interventions – from Venezuela, potentially on to Colombia, and concluding with Cuba – with some seeing the latter as a historical moment for this US presidency.

A world of clubs: the BRICS

The establishment and growth of the BRICS can be seen as an expression of club diplomacy and of the fragmentation of forums related to global governance. Due to the diversity of countries it includes, and the need for consensus, little can be progressed, which means there is little impact in terms of the norms it produces. On the other hand, as an expression of today's power relations and the return of geopolitics, it is important not only in terms of the countries it brings together but also with regard to the difficulties it has in coalescing on different issues, with different underlying visions of the BRICS and of world order among its members.

For example, India and Brazil do not want the BRICS to become a vehicle for Chinese interests and are less keen on further expansion. However, they have seen value in the BRICS New Development Bank and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement. This, though, does not reflect a desire to implement de-dollarisation (due to their reliance on dollars in their foreign reserves) but does help to protect against wider macroeconomic policy challenges and US and EU sanctions related to Ukraine. The question is whether Brazil and India are capable of stopping BRICS becoming a Chinese project, which leads to a further question about how much energy the two countries put into their relationship with one another.

In addition, BRICS is not central to either country's foreign policy, though neither is it peripheral. BRICS has been instrumental as a platform for autonomy, development finance, and institutional diversification; it is not a symbolic or secondary forum. India does wish to see a multipolar world with India as a fourth pole, but its main goal is a multipolar Asia – which highlights that the China–India dynamic plays out across the board. The question of BRICS expansion, which was pushed forward by China, can be seen in this light, as well as whether or not it was a gain for China at the expense of India and Brazil. This partly comes down to a question of how big a global power China wishes to become. In the short term, the expansion does provide economic gains. However, for all its economic weight, China has not shown significantly that it can undertake political heavy lifts at this stage. It is an unusual great power that is not capable of, or does not exercise, political heavy-lift capacity. An example is China's inability to resolve issues on its border with Myanmar, relating to rare earths, drug trafficking, and scam centres. With an increase in economic power and the expansion of the BRICS, more asks will come to China.

Networked world order

Looking at world order in relation to transnational organised crime, order is becoming more networked and less hierarchical, with authority dispersed among states, businesses, and other actors. Thus, power diffusion is not about the shifting powers of states but about intersecting logics of power, and this is particularly taking place in the Global South. From this perspective, governance becomes about entangled networks and local economies, which is important as this is how order is experienced and how it is globally connected.

This demonstrates how hybrid governance is being established: sovereignty is becoming relational rather than territorial, as it is about networks. There is a negotiated legality along routes that often have trafficking hubs in border areas where flows intersect. With experience on one route, it is possible to switch business approach relatively straightforwardly. In other words, the importance of a route is not just physical but is about the people, organisations, and relationships on the route that create the networked governance.

This networked governance and illicit economy are undermining established legal and regulatory orders, illustrating the importance of regulatory gaps, financial infrastructures, and demand-side dynamics in the Global North, as well as how countries like Brazil have a central position in this networked order. Brazil is a major consumer and has a significant regulatory role, as well as being a transit country. This confluence of victims, facilitators, and regulators is shaping an evolving global (dis)order. The response of countries such as Brazil in the face of this networked governance is strategic ambiguity, given the entwined nature of illicit finance with the state and the formal economy, as well as the diffusion of power, governance, and responsibility. In this manner, sovereignty is plural, dispersed, and co-produced, with sovereignty contested from without and hollowed out from within.

Conclusion

It is important not simply to talk about actors but to focus on systems and structures. And this means not simply focusing on form (polarity) but on content (of interactions).

What is changing? There is a redistribution of power from the West towards China and Asia, as well as other poles. Currently the US is retrenching and delivering more coercive policies that have the potential to recreate hierarchy, while Chinese dominance is focused in the economic arena. Meanwhile, the COP30 negotiations and outcome demonstrate the challenge for the EU in this evolving world. The EU does not have internal consensus and is struggling to adjust to a world where its solutions are not accepted. It is being left behind as its long-standing strategy is not working, and it has not yet been able to reposition effectively.

There are various actors moving positions, and if we see a change in leadership then we will likely see a shift in values in the system. However, the vocabulary of the values in the system remains largely the same. Thus, this is not something new but a change of emphasis. There are, however, other dimensions that are not changing – the pattern of hub and spokes, or core and periphery – and the lack of cohesion in many policy domains is related to this continued relationship pattern.

The framing of change and continuity is critical: this illuminates whether matters are truly being reframed, or whether the games are the same with different actors in the seats. But even how to get a seat at the table really matters, due to the historical trajectories that this entails and brings with it. This also relates to there being both old and new logics and stories at play, with the 'old' including race, civilisation, and empire.

What does this imply for the system as a whole and for the Global South? We are likely to see more conflict and less multilateralism, and there will be concerns about US interventionism and coercion. There is also likely to be an increased transaction cost on cooperation, as it will be slower and less efficient. For the Global South, this provides opportunities to signal importance and to lead in certain areas through coalition building, but it does offer a challenge to state capacity and delivery (e.g. in response to illicit flows). Does this also mean, simply, that various countries are moving within the system but the system itself is staying the same for the Global South – one that is experienced hierarchically? A matter that remains underexplored is how hierarchies are co-produced through interaction and how understandings of hierarchy are themselves shifting quite dramatically – within the Global North (from Washington to Beijing, Berlin to Kyiv), within particular regions (e.g. Latin America), and across what was historically understood as the Global North and the Global South. The language of changing hierarchies is everywhere and needs further dedicated work.

The Global (Dis)Order international policy programme is a joint initiative of the British Academy and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace to generate fresh insights and creative thinking for the awareness of and uptake by policymakers and practitioners. Today's international system is in flux and fragmenting, with the need to navigate competing power aspirations and nodes of order. The programme focuses on understanding the history, current nature, and potential future trajectories of global orders, aiming to examine the diverse and often contested understandings of orders and disorders.

About the British Academy

The British Academy is the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences. We mobilise these disciplines to understand the world and shape a brighter future. From artificial intelligence to climate change, from building prosperity to improving wellbeing - today's complex challenges can only be resolved by deepening our insight into people, cultures and societies. We invest in researchers and projects across the UK and overseas, engaging the public with fresh thinking and debates, and bring together scholars, government, business and civil society to influence policy for the benefit of everyone.

About the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace generates strategic ideas and independent analysis, supports diplomacy, and trains the next generation of scholar-practitioners to help countries and institutions take on the most difficult global problems and advance peace. In addition to its offices in Washington, DC and California, Carnegie has established global centers in Asia, Beirut, Berlin, Brussels, and New Delhi. As a uniquely global think tank, Carnegie leverages its network of over 170 experts to better understand the threats and opportunities affecting global security and well-being, and to prepare the next generation of foreign policy leaders through training and mentorship.

The British Academy
10–11 Carlton House Terrace
London SW1Y 5AH

Registered charity no. 233176

thebritishacademy.ac.uk

Published April 2026

doi.org/10.5871/global-disorder/9780856727412

The British Academy | CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE