

From Unipolarity to Multipolarity: A Realist Explanation of 21st Century Great Power Rivalries

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The post-Cold War liberal international order, premised on cooperative multilateralism, democratic convergence, and institutional rule-making, has increasingly been challenged by the resurgence of great-power rivalry and the diffusion of power across the international system. This article examines the transition from unipolarity toward multipolarity through a pluralist realist framework, integrating insights from classical, structural, and neoclassical realism. It focuses on the strategic competition among the United States, China, and Russia, with particular attention to Sino-American rivalry, Russia's strategic posture in Europe, and the broader redistribution of global power. Employing a structured qualitative comparative case-study approach, the study examines military expenditure, technological capabilities, economic interdependence, and emerging instruments of power projection. It argues that international anarchy, state interests, and asymmetric distributions of power remain central determinants of great-power behaviour, while domestic political dynamics, strategic perceptions, and non-Western perspectives mediate their external strategies. The analysis further demonstrates that contemporary rivalry increasingly extends beyond conventional military competition to hybrid warfare, cyber deterrence, artificial intelligence, technological competition, economic coercion, and energy geopolitics, including emerging strategic competition in the Arctic. The article contends that Sino-American rivalry is becoming a defining axis of twenty-first-century geopolitics, while Russia's assertive posture reflects, among other factors, its perceptions of NATO enlargement and post-Cold War strategic marginalisation. The emerging multipolar order, therefore, is characterised not simply by a redistribution of material capabilities but by increasingly complex and contested forms of power projection. By incorporating Global South perspectives into realist analysis, the article seeks to broaden the explanatory scope of realism and demonstrates its continuing relevance for understanding contemporary great-power competition and the evolving international order.

Keywords: Realism, Power Politics, Sino-American Rivalry, Global Rivalries, Structural Realism, Offensive Realism, Multipolarity, Great Power Competition

Introduction

Great power competition has dramatically returned in the second decade of the twenty-first century, according to many academics and policymakers. The optimism of the 1990s—encapsulated in Francis Fukuyama's celebrated 'end of history' thesis—posited a linear trajectory towards liberal democratic governance and the progressive institutionalization of international relations (Fukuyama, 1992). Yet the early decades of the new millennium have revealed the tenacity of realpolitik logic. The rise of China as a systemic challenger to American primacy, Russia's assertive revisionism in the post-Soviet space, and the gradual erosion of the rules-based international order have profoundly challenged the liberal teleology and reasserted the centrality of power, interest, and security competition in global affairs. International institutions continue to shape state behaviour in important respects, yet their capacity to override structural imperatives when vital interests are engaged has proven more limited than liberal theory anticipated. Realism, in its various classical, structural, and offensive formulations, offers the most parsimonious and empirically grounded framework for understanding these developments. Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations* locates the power struggle in human nature and the absence of international authority (Morgenthau, 1948); Waltz's structural refinement shifts the explanatory weight to the anarchic ordering principle itself, rendering unit-level attributes secondary (Waltz, 1979); Mearsheimer's offensive variant radicalises this logic, arguing that security-seeking alone is insufficient and that power maximisation is the rational response to irreducible uncertainty about others' intentions (Mearsheimer, 2001). This article empirically investigates the different predictions that each framework makes regarding state behavior.

The study makes two key arguments. First, that the structural imperatives recognized by realist theory, anarchy, self-help, and the sharing of material competencies, remain the principal elements of great power behavior in the modern period, prevailing institutional and normative restrictions when dynamic security interests are engaged. Second, a realist-based explanation of this competition needs to incorporate neoclassical determinants—domestic political institutions, leadership perceptions, and strategic culture—to account for the different outcomes that fundamentally similar pressures produce across national contexts. From a methodological perspective, the study applies structured qualitative case analysis, on the basis of comparison, of the Sino-American, Russian-Western, and emerging multipolar rivalries. Where relevant, quantitative indicators of military spending (SIPRI data), distribution of

technological capability (CSET AI indices, share of semiconductor production), and economic interdependence data (trade and energy dependency data) are applied to anchor theoretical claims in the empirical record. The research establishes a dialogue between Western and non-Western intellectual traditions. It draws upon Chinese, Indian, and Global South IR perspectives to counter the analytical parochialism that infects much mainstream realist intellectual attainment. The study is divided into six fundamental sections. The first part interrogates the realist theoretical underpinnings of contemporary global rivalries, expanding the analytical lens to include non-Western IR perspectives. Next, the study examines Sino-American strategic competition as the defining rivalry of the 21st century, before shifting focus to Russian revisionism in Europe and the post-Soviet space. The subsequent sections examine multipolarity, hybrid warfare, and technological competition as structural pillars of contemporary power politics. The conclusion evaluates the ongoing relevance of realism in an age of complex interdependence and identifies a future research agenda.

Theoretical Foundations: Realism and International Anarchy

Classical Realism: Power and Human Nature

Classical realism, developed by E.H. Carr (1939) and Morgenthau (1948), posits that international politics is the competitive struggle for power, which stems from human nature and global anarchy. This marks a significant theoretical departure from structural realism, where Waltz's (*Theory of International Politics*, 1979) later argued that systemic outcomes are determined by the international architecture rather than human nature or state-level attributes. Morgenthau contended that the moral and psychological state of political actors directly shapes statecraft. For Morgenthau, *animus dominandi*, the desire for domination, is a core expression of political will, rendering conflict a permanent feature of interstate relations. Carr's devastating critique of liberal idealism in *The Twenty Years' Crisis* demonstrated that the international order is not constructed by norms and institutions alone but by the distribution of power that underlies them (Carr, 1939). For Carr (*The Twenty Years' Crisis*), the harmony of interests championed by liberal internationalists was an ideological reflection of the interests of dominant states and not a universal truth. Raymond Aron's contribution to classical realist thought in the nuclear age was to argue that the dual imperatives of survival and the maximisation of power shape interstate relations, which are conditioned by the prudential calculus of statesmen (Aron, 1966). Nicholas Spykman's geopolitical realism underscored the significance of

geographic location, resource endowment and strategic depth in determining the security calculations of states, providing the foundation for subsequent structural formulations of realism (Spykman, 1942). They converge on three core tenets: the primacy of national interest defined in terms of power, the limits of international law and morality in restraining state behavior, and the cyclical rather than progressive character of international history. Crucially, classical realism does not deny the relevance of morality to statecraft – Morgenthau emphasized the necessity of prudential judgment and moral responsibility – that is systematically bracketed by Waltzian structuralism. To homogenize these traditions into a single realist worldview is to overlook fundamental disagreements and create a significant risk of misapplying the analytical claims of each framework.

Structural (Neorealism): Waltz and the Logic of Anarchy

The most rigorous reformulation of realism theory is found in Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (1979), which moves the explanatory emphasis from human nature to the international system's structure. Waltz posits that international politics is anarchy—the absence of a legitimate central authority that can both make and enforce agreements and guarantee state security. Anarchy is a condition in which states are functionally undifferentiated units only differing in their relative capabilities, and the structure of the system is a direct reflection of the distribution of the capabilities among the units. Waltz argues that bipolar systems are more stable than multipolar systems because two superpowers are better able to handle deterrence and balancing against each other and to minimize the risks of miscalculation inherent in a system with multiple poles. Structural realism, as articulated by Waltz, posits a systemic imperative to balance against concentrations of power, rather than bandwagon with them, yet the empirical record presents a far more ambiguous picture. To account for these empirical anomalies, Walt (1987) demonstrated that states balance against threats, not power per se, by adding a threat-perception variable that reduces structural determinism. Schweller (1994) demonstrated that bandwagoning for profit, or aligning with rather than against a rising power, is a rational strategy contingent upon the prevailing distribution of systemic incentives. Furthermore, research on under-balancing (Schweller, 2006) and soft balancing through institutional friction and limited ententes (Paul, 2005) challenges the structural expectation of hard counter-coalitions. In Waltz's neorealism, the balance of power is not a conscious policy but a structural tendency. States that consistently

fail to respond to power shifts eventually face systemic elimination, but the form, timing, and intensity of actual balancing behavior vary from case to case. The contemporary contest between the United States and China is broadly consistent with structural balancing logic: as China's material capabilities have grown to rival those of the United States, alliance coordination, arms investment, and strategic competition have intensified across multiple domains (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2016). Yet this outcome is not uniformly confirming—several states in the Indo-Pacific continue to hedge rather than align, and some have deepened economic ties with Beijing simultaneously with security ties with Washington, patterns more consistent with soft balancing or strategic ambiguity than with the hard counter-coalitions Waltz's model anticipates.

Offensive Realism: Mearsheimer and Power Maximisation

John Mearsheimer's *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001) offers the most systematically pessimistic statement of realist logic. According to Mearsheimer, the structural compulsion for states to maximize power is a direct consequence of four compounding conditions: international anarchy, the inherent military capability of states, the radical uncertainty of intentions, and the overriding imperative of survival, all of which combine to produce a structural logic of power maximisation. From an offensive realist perspective, States do not simply want security; they want to maximise their relative share of power as the ultimate guarantee of security. The US is the only regional hegemon in modern history and will seek to prevent the emergence of any peer competitors in other regions. The principal target of a great power is hegemony in its region. Mearsheimer's framework provides an unambiguous prediction with respect to China's rise. Just as the United States refused to tolerate a peer competitor in the Western Hemisphere, a powerful China will seek regional hegemony in Asia, an ambition the United States is structurally bound to resist, generating intense security competition (Mearsheimer, 2014). This prediction has materialized against the backdrop of intensifying military competition in the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the broader Indo-Pacific region. Critics have noted that Mearsheimer's framework underestimates the role of institutions, norms, and economic interdependence in managing conflict (Ikenberry, 2011). More significantly within realism itself, defensive realists—following Jervis (1978) and Glaser (2010)—contest the power-maximisation premise directly. Where Mearsheimer treats offensive expansion as structurally rational, defensive realism argues that states typically seek security rather than dominance, and that

cooperation and restraint are viable under conditions where the offense-defence balance favours defenders. Applied to the Sino-American case, defensive realism would predict more scope for accommodation and signalling than offensive realism allows. The empirical record of the 2010s and 2020s suggests that structural competition has intensified, but whether this confirms offensive or defensive realist expectations depends on the causal weight attributed to Chinese capabilities versus intentions—a question the paradigm alone cannot settle.

Neoclassical Realism: Bridging Structure and Agency

Neoclassical realism, associated with Rose (1998), Schweller (2006), and Zakaria (1998), addresses a persistent explanatory gap in the structural variants: if systemic pressures are uniform, why do states in comparable positions produce divergent foreign policies? The answer lies in intervening domestic variables—institutional configurations, leadership perceptions, and state-society relations—which mediate the transmission of structural incentives into actual policy (Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro, 2009). Systemic conditions establish the broad parameters of possibilities; domestic factors define the choice within that range. This distinction carries immediate methodological implications for the case studies to come. Within the context of Sino-American competition, the translation of structural incentives into policy is shaped by Xi Jinping's personal power consolidation and the Chinese Communist Party's nationalist legitimization in ways that pure structural realism fails to accommodate. In the Russian case, regime survival imperatives and the securitization of national identity by Putin's inner circle explain the specific timing and form of revisionist action that exceed the predictive scope of raw material capability distributions. In the case of the United States, domestic political polarization and institutional constraints on executive power undermined the consistency and credibility of strategic commitments in the US.

Consequently, these domestic variables are not merely peripheral anomalies but analytically indispensable components of a full realist explanation of contemporary great power behavior (Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro, 2009). However, the theoretical frameworks surveyed above are overwhelmingly Western in their intellectual genealogy. Consequently, a comprehensive understanding of contemporary power politics necessitates a deep engagement with non-Western and Global South scholarship that provides alternative analytic frames and questions the universal applicability of Eurocentric realist paradigms. Conversely, Chinese IR scholars, in the “moral realist” tradition of pre-Qin

Chinese political thought that Yan Xuetong (2011) describes, argue that leadership quality and political legitimacy, not material capability alone, decisively dictate the rise and fall of great powers. Ultimately, Yan's framework posits that China's international influence will be as much a function of the moral authority of its model of governance as it is of its latent military and economic power. While this dimension is systematically neglected by Western structural realism. Indian strategic thought, informed by Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, articulates a tradition of pragmatic power politics that predates Machiavelli and Hobbes by centuries, and stresses strategic autonomy, multi-alignment and the management of powerful neighbours through a sophisticated calculus of alliances, neutralisation and coercive diplomacy (Baru, 2014). Postcolonial and Global South scholarship, including those working within institutional dynamics within the BRICS and the Global South, directly challenge the presumed universality that the liberal order built by the West is a truly universal model as opposed to a historically specific outcome of particular power arrangements and cultural premises (Acharya, 2014; Acharya and Buzan, 2019). Ultimately, these perspectives are not incompatible with realist analysis, but they deepen it by revealing the limitations of structural theory's abstraction from historical memory, strategic culture, and normative context. Including these voices is not simply an exercise in scholarly inclusivity; it is an analytical necessity for a theory that purports to explain the behaviour of states across distinct civilizational contexts.

The Sino-American Rivalry: Structure and Strategy

The Rise of China and the Power Transition Problem

No contemporary rivalry more clearly illustrates the logic of realist power politics than the strategic competition between the United States and China. The rapid accumulation of material capabilities by China over the past four decades—unprecedented in the history of the modern state system—has generated structural conditions for great power rivalry that transcend the preferences or intentions of individual leaders. China's GDP surpasses that of the US in terms of buying power parity. Over the past two decades, its military expenditure has grown at an average annual rate of almost 10% over the last 20 years, although it is still lower than that of the United States in absolute terms (SIPRI, 2023). The security dilemma dynamics identified by realist theory have been dramatically narrowed due to the structural gap and structural asymmetry separating the two powers. Power transition theory—pioneered by A.F.K. Organski in 1958 and

further refined by Kugler and Lemke in 1996- posits that systemic conflict becomes most probable when a rising challenger nears structural parity with the dominant state and is dissatisfied with the existing international order. The theory defines a “danger zone” in which the challenger reaches approximately 80% of the hegemon's material capabilities, where the threat of preventive war or revisionist conflict is greatest. This structural insight has been popularised by Graham Allison's widely cited concept of the ‘Thucydides Trap’ (the dynamics of the rise of Athens and the fear of Sparta in the Peloponnesian War), arguing that 12 of 16 historical cases of hegemonic transition have ended in military conflict (Allison, 2017). While the mutual nuclear deterrence renders direct military conflict between the United States and China catastrophically costly, the structural pressures recognized by power transition theory are instead manifesting as fierce competition in economic primacy, technological supremacy, and sub-conventional military domains. Drawing on this analysis, Brands and Beckley (2022) argue that China's power trajectory has already peaked relative to the United States in key domains, creating a “danger zone” in which Beijing may be tempted toward strategic risk-taking before its relative position deteriorates further—a scenario with direct implications for Taiwan and the South China Sea.

Strategic Competition in the Indo-Pacific

The main theater of Sino-American strategic rivalry is now the Indo-Pacific. China's assertive stance in the Taiwan Strait, its construction and militarisation of artificial islands in the South China Sea, its Belt and Road Initiative and its military modernisation programme are consistent with revisionist pressure on the regional order established under American dominance (Friedberg, 2011). But the nature of the Chinese revisionism has to be carefully specified. Current IR scholarship distinguishes between systemic revisionism, which is aimed at the overthrow of the fundamental ordering principles of the international system, and positional or selective revisionism, which is aimed at revision of particular rules, hierarchies, or territorial arrangements within a broader systemic framework (Schweller, 1994; Johnston, 2013). Evidence for the latter is contested: China is heavily involved in multilateral institutions, has been a net beneficiary of the global order, and has framed its ambitions in terms of reform rather than replacement. The more credible claim is that Beijing intends a form of selective revision, enlarging its regional sphere of influence and adjusting some institutional rules to better serve its interests, rather than a

wholesale overthrow of the liberal international order. The People's Liberation Army has developed anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities to counter U.S. military projection in the Western Pacific, including a heavy investment in ballistic missiles, sophisticated submarines, and hypersonic weapons (Scobell et al., 2020). Chinese scholarly perspectives on this rivalry differ significantly from dominant Western interpretations and merit direct engagement. Drawing on Chinese realist thought, Yan Xuetong (2019) argues that the Sino-American competition is a competition of quality of political leadership, not just a competition of material capacities, grounded in a Chinese realist tradition. Consequently, he asserts that China's long-term strategic success hinges on creating a model of governance that other states find attractive, not simply amassing hard power. Consequently, leading Chinese IR scholar Wang Jisi (2012) has argued that systemic misperception on both sides drives threat inflation, and that the most dangerous dynamics of the rivalry are produced by domestic political pressures rather than objective security dilemmas. Grounded in Chinese strategic thinkers who developed the concept of a "community of shared destiny," provide a normative framework for international order, with non-interference, development-oriented multilateralism and civilisational pluralism as Western liberal script (Qin, 2016). Whether these frameworks have genuine explanatory power vs. rhetorical instruments for Chinese power ambitions is itself a contested question, but engaging with them is essential to dismantle the analytical parochialism of treating Western realist categories as the self-evident vocabulary of international politics.

Correspondingly, the American strategic response has been equally comprehensive. The Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" entailed a rebalancing of strategic priorities toward the Indo-Pacific, a policy that was sustained but expanded by the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Biden administration's subsequent consolidation of regional alliances and minilateral partnerships in the region (US Department of Defense, 2022). Foremost among the structural counterweights in the region are the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue QUAD grouping of the United States, Japan, Australia, and India, and the formation of AUKUS (Rajagopalan, 2020). However, these minilateral arrangements have critical institutional limitations that a purely structural reading risks underplaying. QUAD does not have a treaty commitment or an integrated military command structure, and its members have asymmetrical economic dependencies with China, making it difficult to evolve a common strategic posture. India's alignment posture is especially instructive: New Delhi

has refused to formalise an alliance, continued defence cooperation with Russia, and refused to participate in Western sanctions regimes, embodying a doctrine of strategic autonomy that resists easy assimilation into a binary structural balancing framework. India's hedging behaviour within the QUAD clearly illustrates the explanatory deficiencies of a parsimonious approach and suggests that domestic political preferences and deeply entrenched traditions of non-alignment continue to shape the nature of balancing despite strong structural incentives.

Economic Warfare and Technological Decoupling

The Sino-American rivalry has extended well beyond traditional military competition into the domains of economic statecraft, technology competition, and supply chain politics. The Trump administration's 2018 tariff war inaugurated an era of a period of systematic economic confrontation between Washington and Beijing. Analytically, however, economic interdependence and strategic vulnerability are critical distinction must be maintained with one another. Mutual dependence, relatively balanced mutual reliance, implies reciprocal constraint. Conversely, asymmetric interdependence provides exploitable leverage for the less dependent state (Hirschman, 1945; Farrell and Newman, 2019). The latter dynamic finds its contemporary expression in the concept of 'weaponised interdependence', which denotes the use of central structural positions within global networks as a coercive instrument. The strategic implication is that interdependence does not preclude conflict, but that the distribution of dependence within an interdependent relationship determines which party bears the greater coercive risk. Correspondingly, Washington and Beijing have both recalibrated their economic policies in this direction. The idea is to fundamentally pivot in areas where the other side has a structural advantage and to maintain or increase links where they have a structural advantage. The race for dominance in advanced technologies: specifically, artificial intelligence, semiconductors, quantum computing, 5G telecommunications, and biotech. Perhaps the most consequential front in the Sino-American rivalry. Technological primacy translates directly into military advantage, economic productivity, and structural diplomatic influence (Doshi, 2021). The empirical indicators are instructive. The United States' share of global AI research output maintained a commanding share of 48 percent between 2015 and 2021, while China's share rapidly scaled from 10 to 29 percent in the same period (CSET, 2022). For example, in semiconductors, TSMC's near-monopoly over advanced fabrication (more than 90 percent of sub-7nm chips globally) demonstrates how

structural asymmetric dependencies in technology supply chains translate into geopolitical leverage (SIA, 2023). Codified under the CHIPS and Science Act of 2022, the Biden administration's export controls on advanced semiconductors and manufacturing equipment mark a watershed attempt to deny Beijing access to foundational enabling technologies. Explicitly validated that technological competition is an exercise in structural power, and that economic and technological competition is a type of structural power competition. Yet, the long-term effectiveness of technology denial as a strategic tool remains heavily debated in the strategic studies literature (Khan, 2021).

Russian Revisionism and the Crisis of European Security

NATO Expansion and the Security Dilemma

Russia's revisionist strategic behavior over the past two decades is a case study of security dilemma dynamics and great power competition. Realist scholars, most prominently Mearsheimer (2014), consider the eastward expansion of NATO - which incorporated 14 states of the former Warsaw Pact and Soviet space between 1999 and 2020 - as the structural reason for the deterioration of relations between Russia and the West. There is analytical power in this realist framing, but it requires critical qualifications. For the Central and East European countries seeking NATO membership, the security calculation was an abstract structural exercise: their accession was driven by direct historical experience of lived historical experience of Soviet occupation. Their insistence on membership was a rational assessment of security needs, rather than an unprovoked incitement to Moscow. A full analysis, then, must take account of both the fact that NATO expansion created structural incentives for Russian counter-reaction, as realists expect, and that for the states requesting membership, accession was a legitimate exercise of the sovereign self-determination, a right to which the liberal international order itself is committed. This realist framework often reduces the NATO expansion debate to a binary of Western aggression and Russian response, not including the security perceptions and historical experiences of states that are both objects and subjects of this competition. This structural outcome is exactly what, in 1997, George Kennan, the architect of the containment strategy, warned that NATO enlargement was a "tragic mistake" that would awaken animosity from Russia (Kennan, 1997). Similarly, former US Ambassador to the Soviet Union Jack Matlock also maintained that the eastward expansion of NATO to the borders of Russia was a breach of implicit promises made to Soviet officials in the negotiations on reunification (Matlock, 2004).

Regardless of whether these assurances were formal commitments or not, the realist point is structural: from Moscow's perspective, NATO expansion represented a progressive erosion of its strategic buffer zone and a violation of the sphere of influence it considered essential to its security (Sakwa, 2016). The post-Soviet space was full of security dilemmas, a situation where the defensive measures of one state are seen as offensive threats by Moscow.

Ukraine and the Logic of Preventive War

The most serious breach of the European territorial order since 1945 occurred when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, supported separatist troops in eastern Ukraine, and launched a full-scale invasion in February 2022. From a realist perspective, these actions are consistent with the logic of preventive war and the preservation of a strategic buffer. Ukraine's expressed intent to join NATO, combined with its increasing military cooperation with Western powers following 2014, created what Russian strategic planners perceived as an intolerable security threat on its most sensitive western flank (Mearsheimer, 2014). The war in Ukraine has had profound implications for the European security order and for realist theory. It has demonstrated that nuclear powers can engage in large-scale conventional warfare against neighbours they perceive as existential threats, that economic interdependence does not reliably constrain military aggression, and that the institutional framework of European security is ultimately dependent on the willingness of great powers to enforce it. Yet a structural realist account is insufficient to explain the war's full dimensions. The conflict's persistence and intensity cannot be divorced from factors that lie beyond the distribution of capabilities: Ukrainian national identity and the widespread popular resistance to Russian occupation that has sustained the war effort well beyond what structural power ratios alone would predict; the role of leadership psychology in Putin's decision-making, including the radicalisation of his historical revisionism regarding Ukrainian statehood; and the question of regime legitimacy—the extent to which the war's prosecution has become internally necessary for the Russian state's political survival. These identity, psychological, and domestic-political dimensions do not contradict realist analysis but rather complement it; a full explanation of the Ukraine war requires theoretical pluralism that structural realism alone cannot provide. The war has reinvigorated NATO, with Finland and Sweden abandoning decades of neutrality to seek membership, and has shown the limits of Russian conventional military

power, though Russia's nuclear arsenal continues to restrain Western intervention (Kagan, 2023). The tensions are a classic realist drama, a great power using military force to push back against what it sees as an unfavorable shift in the regional balance of power. Yet, the realist framing of Russia's actions as a structurally explicable response to NATO expansion risks obscuring dimensions of the conflict that structural analysis cannot adequately address. Russia's military campaign has been accompanied by documented violations of international humanitarian law, including strikes on civilian infrastructure, cities and hospitals, and credible allegations of war crimes being investigated by the International Criminal Court (ICC, 2023). The targeting of Ukrainian cultural institutions and the brutal deportation of Ukrainian children are acts aimed not merely at achieving military ends but at eradicating the Ukrainian national identity that Putin has set out to challenge. These normative and legal dimensions are not tangential to understanding the conflict; they shape the character and legitimacy of the belligerents' actions in ways that pure capability analysis cannot. A theoretically complete account must therefore combine the realist structural explanation of the origins of the war with the liberal and constructivist analysis of the conduct of the war, its humanitarian consequences, and the normative stakes that have mobilized unprecedented international responses. With the adoption of UNGA Resolution ES-11/1 (2022), the international community condemned, over 40 states imposed comprehensive sanctions, and the ICC issued an arrest warrant for Vladimir Putin. This demonstrates that normative frameworks still have real consequences for state behavior even in intense great power competition.

Russia's Strategic Alignment with China

One of the most important structural changes in the contemporary international system is the increasing strategic alignment between Russia and China, which constitutes a classical balancing coalition against American unipolarity in the realist sense. The two powers have conducted joint military exercises, deepened energy partnerships, coordinated their positions in the UN Security Council, and declared a 'partnership without limits' in February 2022, weeks before Russia invaded Ukraine (Putin and Xi, 2022). While the relationship falls short of a formal alliance and is characterised by significant asymmetries—with Russia increasingly the junior partner—it represents a structural challenge to American primacy that exemplifies the balance of power logic identified by Waltz (Lo, 2022). The Sino-Russian partnership is rooted in

shared grievances against the American-led order and shared interests in establishing a multipolar world in which both states have recognised spheres of influence. However, the relationship is characterised by a structural asymmetry that its rhetorical framing of equal partnership obscures. Russia's post-2022 isolation has sharply increased its economic dependence on China: the Power of Siberia pipeline and expanding trade flows increasingly run on Chinese terms, with Beijing extracting significant price concessions from Moscow in energy transactions (Trenin, 2022). Russia's technological dependence on Chinese components has similarly grown following Western export controls. China, by contrast, retains strategic flexibility—it has not formally backed Russia's war in Ukraine, has maintained economic relationships with Western states, and has positioned itself as a potential peace mediator. The relationship is thus less a partnership of equals than an asymmetric alignment in which China holds structural leverage over a weakened Russia. This growing dependency dynamic may itself generate future tensions, as Russian elites reckon with the costs of junior-partner status within a relationship they initially conceived as a relationship between coequal revisionist powers.

Multipolarity, Regional Powers, and Systemic Instability

The Transition to Multipolarity

The contemporary international system is undergoing a structural transition from the unipolar moment of the 1990s, yet the precise character of the emerging order requires conceptual specification. Three analytically distinct possibilities present themselves. True multipolarity, in the Waltzian sense, would require several states of roughly comparable capability capable of independent systemic influence—a condition not yet met given the continued gap between American and Chinese capabilities and those of other powers. A quasi-bipolar structure—in which Sino-American competition dominates while other states operate at the regional level—better describes current structural dynamics but is distinct from Cold War bipolarity in that economic and institutional interdependencies between the two principals remain dense. Asymmetric multipolarity—in which multiple centres of regional power coexist with a contested but still dominant US-China dyad—may be the most accurate characterisation, capturing both the diffusion of capabilities and the continued centrality of the Sino-American competition. The analytical stakes of this distinction matter: each configuration carries different predictions about stability, alliance formation, and the management of revisionist pressures. The

manuscript's use of 'multipolarity' as an unqualified descriptor risks obscuring these differences and should be applied with greater precision throughout. This transition is driven by the simultaneous rise of multiple regional powers—China, India, Brazil, Turkey, and, to a declining but still significant degree, Russia—each with the capability to project power and challenge American preferences within their respective regions (Layne, 2012; Shiffrinson, 2023). Structural realism predicts that the transition from unipolarity to multipolarity will be inherently destabilising, as the restraints imposed by bipolar or unipolar structures give way to more complex and uncertain patterns of competition and alignment. Waltz's theoretical prediction that bipolarity is the most stable configuration of the international system finds support in the historical record: the Cold War, despite its intense ideological conflict and multiple proxy wars, avoided direct superpower confrontation, in part because the clear demarcation of spheres of influence reduced the risk of miscalculation. In a multipolar system, by contrast, the complexity of interactions, the ambiguity of alliance commitments, and the multiplicity of potential conflict dyads significantly increase the risk of systemic instability (Mearsheimer, 2001). The current transition generates precisely these conditions: multiple great powers with overlapping interests, contested regional hierarchies, and weakened multilateral institutions.

India's Strategic Autonomy and the Multipolar Order

One of the most significant structural changes in modern international relations is India's rise to prominence. With the largest military in South Asia and the fifth-largest economy by nominal GDP, India has adopted "strategic autonomy" as its organising foreign policy concept—maintaining relationships with multiple great powers rather than adhering to a single alliance structure (Pant and Joshi, 2017). This posture reflects both the Nehruvian legacy of non-alignment and a realistic assessment of material interests. Yet reducing India's role to that of a structural balancer risks underestimating its significance as a normative and civilizational actor. India has articulated an alternative vision of regional order—emphasising multipolarity, sovereignty, and the reform rather than replacement of multilateral institutions—that resonates across the Global South in ways that neither American liberal nor Chinese authoritarian models fully capture. Its presidency of the G20 in 2023 illustrated this normative ambition: New Delhi sought to position itself as a bridge between developed and developing worlds, advancing an alternative institutional vision grounded in

development priorities and a multipolar conception of global governance. Any analysis of India's role in the contemporary order must therefore account for this dual identity as both a structural power managing material interests and a normative entrepreneur projecting an alternative model of international legitimacy. India's approach to the QUAD illustrates the complexities of multipolar power politics. While New Delhi has deepened security cooperation with Washington, Tokyo, and Canberra through the QUAD framework, it has simultaneously maintained military cooperation with Russia, resisted joining Western sanctions against Moscow following the Ukraine invasion, and managed ongoing border tensions with China (Miller, 2021). From a realist perspective, India's behaviour represents rational power maximisation: leveraging its strategic position between competing great powers to extract maximum concessions while minimising external constraints on its autonomy. As India's power grows, it will increasingly shape the contours of the emerging multipolar order, particularly in the Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions.

Middle Powers, Hedging, and the New Non-Alignment

The structural transition to multipolarity has generated a distinctive response among a range of middle powers—Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Indonesia, Brazil, South Africa, and others—who have adopted hedging strategies that resist alignment with either the American-led or Chinese-Russian blocs. This phenomenon, sometimes described as the 'new non-alignment' or 'strategic hedging,' reflects a rational calculation that multipolarity creates opportunities for states to extract concessions from competing great powers while avoiding the costs of exclusive alignment (Tessman, 2012). However, grouping Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, and Brazil under a common hedging framework risks analytical overgeneralisation, as their strategic calculations differ significantly. Turkey's hedging is driven by its frustration with the EU accession process, its NATO membership and exposure to Russian pressure on its northern borders, and Erdoğan's personalist foreign policy—a distinct combination not replicated elsewhere. Saudi Arabia's balancing between Washington and Beijing is structured primarily by its energy export dependence on Asian markets and its security dependence on American guarantees, a configuration specific to Gulf petrostate dynamics. Indonesia's neutrality reflects an ASEAN tradition of non-alignment and the domestic political constraints of a diverse Muslim-majority democracy navigating relations with both China and the West. Brazil's position is shaped by its own regional hegemon status in South America and the

ideological oscillations of its domestic politics. Each of these cases rewards individual analysis before being subsumed into a general hedging category, even if structural multipolarity helps explain why all four have found hedging strategies available. From a structural realist perspective, this behaviour is entirely predictable: as the distribution of capabilities becomes more diffuse and the dominant power less overwhelming, secondary states gain bargaining leverage and reduced incentives for tight alignment. The weakening of the American-led liberal order—manifest in Washington's relative retrenchment following the debacles in Iraq and Afghanistan, the populist challenges to multilateral institutions, and the credibility damage inflicted by the Capitol Hill insurrection—has emboldened middle powers to diversify their strategic relationships (Ikenberry, 2018). The result is a more fluid, transactional, and competitive international environment that closely resembles the multipolar systems of earlier historical periods.

Hybrid Warfare, Grey Zone Competition, and New Instruments of Power

The Hybridisation of Conflict

Contemporary great power competition has generated new forms of strategic competition that blur the traditional boundary between war and peace, combining conventional military pressure, irregular warfare, cyber operations, information operations, economic coercion, and political subversion into integrated strategies designed to achieve political objectives below the threshold of open military conflict. This phenomenon, variously described as 'hybrid warfare,' 'grey zone competition,' or 'political warfare,' has been most extensively theorized in the context of Russian strategy, where it has been linked to the doctrinal writings of General Valery Gerasimov (Gerasimov, 2013), though analysts have debated whether this constitutes a coherent doctrine or an ex-post rationalization of improvised operations. Russia's operations in Ukraine from 2014 to 2022 exemplified hybrid warfare in practice: the use of unmarked special forces ('little green men') to seize Crimea, the support of proxy separatist forces in the Donbas, systematic information operations to undermine Ukrainian national identity, cyber-attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure, and energy leverage (Renz, 2016). China has developed comparable but analytically distinct grey zone capabilities that deserve equal attention. In the South China Sea, China employs coast guard vessels, maritime militia, and civilian infrastructure development to advance territorial claims below the threshold of conventional

conflict (Erickson and Kennedy, 2016). Beyond the maritime domain, China conducts extensive cyber-enabled economic espionage, cognitive influence operations targeting overseas Chinese communities and foreign political systems, and legal warfare (“lawfare”)—the use of domestic and international legal frameworks to legitimate territorial claims and delegitimise adversaries. China's disinformation campaigns in Taiwan, its use of social media platforms to manipulate public discourse in democratic states, and its use of punitive economic statecraft against geopolitical challengers—Australia, Lithuania, South Korea—represent a sophisticated grey zone toolkit that is not secondary to, but in some cases more advanced than, Russia's hybrid strategies. Seeing hybrid warfare as mainly a Russian monopoly ignores the depth and complexity of China's own grey zone tactics. Through a realist lens, hybrid war is a modern iteration of realpolitik, adopted for a nuclear age where direct great power conflict is prohibitively dangerous, but the structural competition for influence and position goes on unabated.

Power and Digital Competition

Cyberspace is a new dominion of major power rivalry, defined by offensive dominance, difficulties in attribution, and the normative vacuum. State-sponsored cyber operations have increasingly focused on critical infrastructure, electoral systems, intellectual property, military secrets, and financial systems with growing complexity (Nye, 2010). Russia's coordinated social media manipulation and hacking operations to interfere in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, China's systematic appropriation of American intellectual property estimated to be worth hundreds of billions of dollars annually, and Iran's destructive cyber-attacks against Gulf energy infrastructure all illustrate the geopolitical value of cyber capabilities as instruments of power politics (Sanger, 2018). Cyber presents a significant theoretical challenge to the deterrence framework of realism. Effective nuclear deterrence rests on three essential pillars: a credible capability, unambiguous attribution, and clear communication about thresholds. Cyber operations degrade all three. Attribution is complex, allowing for sustained plausible deniability. The absence of clearly defined escalation thresholds makes cross-domain retaliation unpredictable. Moreover, the dual-use character of cyber infrastructure (civilian and military systems are inseparable) makes it hard to craft proportionate responses (Libicki, 2009). In response to these challenges, scholars of cyber deterrence. Gartzke (2013) contends that cyber power is more effective for espionage and coercion short of conflict than it

is as a deterrent instrument. Jacquelyn Schneider Borghard and Shawn Lonergan (2017) contend that cyber operations operate as an ongoing strategic pressure, rather than discrete, deterrable acts, and thus advocate a paradigm of “persistent engagement” rather than one of threatened retaliation. Similarly, Jason Healey (2019) identifies structural instability as the result of the attribution problem. If states cannot credibly threaten punishment against the appropriate actor, the logic of deterrence collapses altogether. Realism must therefore incorporate these adaptations and not simply import the complete framework of nuclear deterrence theory into the cyber domain. The non-territorial and difficult-to-monopolize nature of cyber power challenges the state-centric, capability-distribution framework that structural realism assumes as its analytical foundation. The result is a low-intensity cyber conflict that is continuous and unfolding alongside diplomatic engagement and economic exchange, a paradox that speaks to the complexity of modern strategic competition.

Energy Geopolitics as Power Politics

The control of energy resources and the infrastructure of energy distribution has long been a dimension of power politics, but the 21st century has made energy geopolitics a central strategic concern. Russia’s use of natural gas as a means of geopolitical coercion is an example of the weaponisation of energy interdependence (Stulberg, 2007) through the Nord Stream pipeline network, periodic supply interruptions to Ukraine and transit states, and preferential pricing for key geopolitical partners. The Belt and Road Initiative, while encompassing a wide range of infrastructure projects, has a substantial energy dimension, with investments in oil and gas pipelines, refineries, and port facilities that extend China’s strategic reach into Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and other areas (Downs, 2019). The European Union’s dependence on natural gas from Russia, which constituted around 40 percent of European gas use before 2022, established an asymmetric vulnerability that Russia used to exercise geopolitical influence (IEA, 2022). The 2022 supply disruption accelerated European diversification towards LNG imports from the United States and Qatar, expansion of renewable energy and alternative supplier agreements—a systemic realignment reflecting Hirschman’s (1945) insight that trade creates exploitable power asymmetries. The literature on energy geopolitics, however, extends beyond / reaches beyond the European context. Control of the Indo-Pacific’s maritime chokepoints- the Strait of Malacca through which about 80 percent of Chinese oil imports pass and the Strait of Hormuz through which about 20

percent of the world's oil flows, is a Strategic bottleneck that shapes China's strategic planning and accounts for Beijing's investment in Diversified energy corridors through Pakistan and Myanmar. There is another facet of Arctic energy politics: as the Northern Sea Route opens and melting ice reveals hydrocarbon reserves, Russia, China and the Nordic states are maneuvering for geopolitical leverage in a domain where territorial jurisdiction, resource rights and freedom of navigation converge (Kaplan, 2023). If an analysis of energy's role as an instrument of structural power competition is to cover the entire range of the strategic reality, then an exhaustive study of energy geopolitics needs to chart these Indo-Pacific and Arctic dimensions in parallel with the European case.

Technology, Military Innovation, and the New Arms Race

The integration of artificial intelligence into military systems represents what many analysts describe as a revolution in military affairs comparable to the introduction of nuclear weapons or the development of precision-guided munitions. AI capabilities in surveillance, logistics, autonomous weapons systems, decision support, and cyber operations could fundamentally tilt the balance of military power, offering first-mover advantages that encourage rapid development and deployment (Horowitz, 2018). The US and China are engaged in a fierce rivalry for AI supremacy, pouring money into military AI applications, establishing dedicated research institutes, and competing to attract the best AI talent. Less capable of developing AI, Russia has adopted a niche strategy, concentrating on autonomous weapons systems and AI-driven information operations. The strategic implications of military AI are analytically important. How destabilizing they are is an empirical question that is contested and requires one to engage with the specialist literature. Scharre (2018) considers how autonomous weapons reduce timelines for engagement and pose problems for existing frameworks for escalation control. Horowitz (2018) identifies a first-mover dynamic in military AI adoption that could create incentives to deploy quickly before fully validating safety. Acton (2020) and Geist and Lohn (2018) evaluate the particular risk that AI-enabled ISR could undermine nuclear second-strike survivability through dramatic improvements in counterforce targeting accuracy—a mechanism with direct implications for deterrence stability. The US-China Economic and Security Review Commission (2022) annual report notes the risk that the time scale for decision-making may become unreasonably short for meaningful human oversight of nuclear command, which it sees as a consequence of both powers' investment in AI-enabled early warning. Still, one

should be cautious about extrapolating from present capabilities to instability at the system level. Many anticipated military applications of AI remain in development, and historical analogies to past revolutions in military affairs suggest that defensive adaptation often constrains the benefits of offensive innovation. The prudent analytical position is that military AI creates structural incentives for competition whose destabilizing effects are plausible and theoretically grounded but whose magnitude and timeline are uncertain and thus should be referenced by scholars to the deterrence and arms control literature rather than to deterministic assertion.

The three great nuclear powers, the US, Russia, and China, all have ongoing projects of nuclear modernization, creating new delivery vehicles, warheads, and command-and-control systems. Russia has developed hypersonic glide vehicles capable of evading existing missile defence systems, low-yield tactical nuclear warheads designed to lower the threshold of nuclear use, and novel delivery systems including nuclear-powered cruise missiles (Kristensen and Korda, 2022). China is expanding its nuclear arsenal at a pace that surprised many Western analysts, with estimates suggesting a potential doubling or tripling of its warhead inventory over the coming decade, and is developing multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRVs) and submarine-based ballistic missiles that will give it a more robust second-strike capability. From a realist standpoint, these developments' structural ramifications are quite troubling. A three-way nuclear competition without established ceilings, verification procedures, or crisis communication protocols is made possible by the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty's collapse in 2019, the expiration of New START's extension window in 2026, and the lack of any arms control dialogue with China (Acton, 2020). As Russian and Chinese nuclear capabilities advance, extended deterrence commitments—the United States' pledges to protect partners in Europe and Asia under the nuclear umbrella—face fresh credibility issues. The structural conditions for nuclear instability identified by realist theorists of deterrence—uncertainty about relative capabilities, doubts about extended deterrence commitments, and the absence of crisis management frameworks—are thus more pronounced today than at any point since the height of the Cold War.

Realism and the Liberal International Order

The liberal international order—constructed by the United States and its allies in the aftermath of World War II and further institutionalised following the

Cold War's end—rested on three pillars: a network of multilateral institutions (the UN, WTO, IMF, World Bank), a set of normative commitments to democratic governance, human rights, and the rule of law, and an economic framework of trade liberalisation and financial integration. The order's apparent success in managing great power relations and fostering economic development generated a scholarly consensus, associated with scholars such as Ikenberry (2011) and Nye (2004), that the liberal order had fundamentally transformed international politics by creating institutional incentives for cooperation and imposing costs on the exercise of raw power. Realists never accepted this optimistic assessment. Mearsheimer (2019) argued consistently that the liberal order was always a product of American power rather than universal values, and that its expansion through NATO enlargement and democracy promotion was generating the very instability it claimed to prevent. Structural realists noted that the 'democratic peace'—the empirical regularity that democracies rarely fight each other—was a product of shared security interests under American patronage rather than a self-sustaining normative achievement. The post-2014 international environment has substantially vindicated elements of this critique. Yet Ikenberry's (2018) counter-argument for institutional resilience deserves serious engagement rather than summary dismissal. NATO has not disintegrated despite sustained internal stress—Finnish and Swedish accession following Russia's 2022 invasion demonstrated the alliance's continued attraction as a security institution. The global financial architecture centred on the dollar and managed through the IMF and World Bank frameworks has survived repeated challenges and continues to structure international monetary relations. Technology governance regimes, though contested, remain operative and continue to shape state behaviour through standard-setting, export control coordination, and multilateral agreements on AI safety. These signs of institutional durability suggest that the fate of the liberal order is not a simple choice between survival and collapse, but rather a contested process of renegotiation in which structural power and institutional path-dependence operate simultaneously. Realism captures this competitive dimension well, but is less well equipped to explain the durability of institutions, which have lasted longer than structural realists anticipated.

The events of the past decade have revitalized the theoretical discourse between realism and liberalism in international relations theory. Ikenberry (2018) contends that the liberal order displays remarkable durability, noting that the fundamental economic and institutional infrastructure established since 1945 has absorbed geopolitical shocks and continues to shape state behaviour. Even the

order's defenders concede that the order is under unprecedented internal and external pressures. The domestic political coalitions that sustained American leadership and allied solidarity have been weakened by rising inequality, populist backlash against globalization, and the Eroding legitimacy of democratic systems as a model for development. From a realist perspective, the current era is not the crisis of a unique global system but a reversion to the historical norm of great power competition, temporarily suspended by the aberrant conditions of American unipolarity. The institutions, norms, and economic interdependencies that were constructed during the liberal moment have not been dissolved, but are being systematically co-opted by the imperatives of power competition. States, which have traditionally worked together in multilateral institutions, are increasingly using those institutions as theaters for geopolitical maneuvering, defection, and the advancement of rival normative frameworks. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation(SCO), the BRICS grouping and China's promotion of an alternative model of international governance through the 'community of shared destiny' concept all expose systemic vulnerabilities to the American-led order that realism predicted and liberalism underestimated (Acharya, 2018).

These realist claims invite critique from constructivist and critical perspectives that identify dimensions of the international order that are not captured by capability distribution analysis. According to constructivist scholarship (Wendt, 1999; Finnemore, 1996), state interests and identities are not predetermined by systemic anarchy, but are constituted through social interaction, shared norms, and institutional engagement. Applied to the current period, constructivism would predict that even states engaged in competitive balancing are constrained by the normative frameworks they have internalised through decades of multilateral engagement—a prediction consistent with China's continued participation in WTO dispute resolution, Russia's invocation of international legal frameworks to legitimate its actions, and the United States' maintenance of alliance commitments that structural logic alone would render costly. Critical IR theory, following Cox (1981) and Gramsci-derived approaches, further argues that the liberal order serves the interests of dominant social forces within and across states, and that challenges to it reflect not merely capability shifts but transformations in the global political economy and the coalitions that sustain particular hegemonic orders. Economic interdependence, moreover, retains more constraining power than pure realist analysis acknowledges: the fact that Sino-American trade exceeded \$600 billion annually even at the height of the tariff war, and that financial decoupling between the two

economies remains structurally constrained by dollar reserve dominance and supply chain integration, suggests that interdependence creates durable structural constraints on the form and pace of competitive escalation even where it does not prevent competition altogether (Keohane and Nye, 2011).

Conclusion: The Enduring Logic of Power

The 21st century has not delivered the liberal peace that its prophets promised. Instead, it has confirmed the enduring logic of power politics in international relations. The Sino-American rivalry, Russian revisionism, the multipolar transition, the hybridisation of warfare, and the new arms races in cyber, artificial intelligence, and nuclear capabilities all reflect structural forces that realist theory has consistently identified as the bedrock of international politics: anarchy, the security dilemma, the balance of power, and the primacy of national interest defined in terms of material capability and territorial integrity. This article demonstrates that combining classical realism, structural realism, and offensive realism forms the most analytically powerful framework for understanding these developments. The great power competition of the contemporary world is empirically validated by Morgenthau's insight that politics is a power struggle, Waltz's demonstration that systemic anarchy compels states to balance and Mearsheimer's offensive logic of power maximisation. While integrating domestic political variables to neoclassical realism indeed adds important analytical nuance, the geopolitical realities of the last twenty years confirm the broad structural predictions of realism.

This is not to say that liberal and constructivist theories are without analytical value. Economic interdependence, institutional frameworks, and normative commitments do condition state action around the edges and shape the form of power competition. The Sino-American rivalry has been waged mostly in the economic and technological sphere, rather than on the battlefield, partly because of the mutual deterrence of nuclear weapons, but also because the dense network of economic integration makes direct military conflict economically catastrophic. While Russian revisionism has triggered a powerful balancing reaction from Western democracies, which is a testament to the normative solidarity of a democratic community and the structural imperatives of balancing. These qualifications do not invalidate the core realist premise that the distribution of material capabilities dictates the structure of international politics, and that structural imperatives invariably supersede institutional and normative constraints when vital security interests are engaged. Russia's invasion of

Ukraine demonstrates that a nuclear power will tolerate diplomatic ostracization and economic devastation in defence of what it sees as an existential security threat. China's geopolitical revisionism in the South China Sea shows that economic interdependence fails to adequately suppress strategic competition when national interests and historical grievances are at stake. The systematic efforts by the United States to contain China's technological rise—through export controls, alliance consolidation, and industrial policy—show that even the architect of the liberal international order subordinates liberal norms to the imperatives of power competition when its primacy is threatened.

The resurgence of 21st-century realist dynamics—marked by great power rivalry, balance of power conflict, and the primacy of material capabilities—put an end to liberal optimism. However, to say that it is just or only a 'realist century' would be to overstate the explanatory monopoly of a single framework, in terms of explanation. Its defining characteristics are great power competition, the balance of power, the security dilemma, and the struggle for primacy. These are things that realism has consistently validated as foundational features of international politics. But the most analytically rigorous application of realism's insights identifies where structural imperatives are truly decisive, where domestic politics and leadership choices modify structural predictions, where institutions display surprising durability and where normative commitments shape behavior in ways that strict material power metrics cannot capture. Ultimately, realism plays a vital role in understanding global politics, but not one of almost complete explanatory dominance. The primary imperative of statecraft is to understand these processes, to manage them strategically, and to create the institutional frameworks that can guide competitive forces to less destructive avenues. Realism is not the legacy of a pre-liberal age, but an Essential yet inherently flawed compass to the political terrain of the present. This analysis suggests several directions for future research.

First, integrating non-Western and Global South frameworks into realist analysis remains nascent; comparative studies of how Chinese, Indian, and African states operationalize realist principles in their foreign policies would add significantly to theoretical debate. Second, the interaction between structural competition and domestic political change, especially in deeply fractured democracies with highly politicized foreign policies, requires more systematic theoretical treatment than neoclassical realism has so far given. Third, emerging domains like cyber competition, military AI, and Arctic geopolitics demand theoretical innovation that pushes realist logic into non-territorial realms where

classical conceptualizations of capability, deterrence, and balance need to be heavily reconfigured. The policy implications of this analysis are most acute for smaller states and developing countries, which are the primary objects rather than the principals of great power competition. For these states, the multipolar transition simultaneously creates opportunity and danger. The proliferation of competing great powers expands the menu of potential partners and reduces dependency on any single patron, enabling the hedging strategies documented in the Global South. Yet the same transition creates intensified pressures to take sides, to host military infrastructure, and to accept conditionality from competing powers—conditions that constrain sovereignty and development choices. The lesson of the Cold War is instructive: smaller states that successfully navigated superpower competition did so by maximising strategic ambiguity, diversifying partnerships, investing in multilateral institutions as buffers, and cultivating sufficient internal capacity to resist coercive pressure from any direction. In the current multipolar environment, this prescription remains analytically valid, but its execution is complicated by the reduced effectiveness of multilateral institutions, the coercive reach of digital and economic instruments, and the speed at which geopolitical alignments shift. Building institutional capacity, reducing single-source dependencies, and maintaining strategic ambiguity represent the most defensible posture for states whose primary interest is development rather than great power competition.

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