



A World Adrift: Reordering and New Pathways of Cooperation

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By Mely Caballero-Anthony

SYNOPSIS

Global governance is under severe strain as geopolitical conflicts, climate risks, pandemics, technological disruptions, and widening inequalities unfold amid the United States' retrenchment from the international arena and China's assertiveness in global affairs. A more pluralistic global landscape is emerging where new and old institutions coexist. Regional and middle powers, including groupings like ASEAN, can shape a more stable and cooperative order through inclusive, rules-based frameworks that strengthen resilience and revitalise multilateralism.

COMMENTARY

Since the end of World War II, global governance has been anchored in a rules-based order championed by the United States. This order is now severely challenged by the “polycrisis” confronting the world today. From the wars in Ukraine, Gaza, Myanmar, and several African nations to multiple climate risks, pandemics, technological disruptions, and rising inequality, the global community teeters on the brink of a conflagration.

The United States has drifted away from globalism, marking its [decisive retreat from the global order](#) it had once built. The multilateral system that once provided stability is now increasingly polarised, with rising contestation over norms, authority, and legitimacy. The absence of coherent, global leadership and the discipline of collective purpose have made it more difficult for institutions to respond effectively to complex, cross-cutting challenges worldwide.

The Decline of Global Institutions

A foundational component of the post-1945 international order, global institutions have played a central role in establishing rules, shaping normative behaviour, and enabling multilateral cooperation. Their effectiveness, however, depends on the political will and multilateral commitment of powerful states.

In recent years, that commitment has declined. The rising illiberalism and state tendencies that emphasise national sovereignty and security increasingly undermine the liberal multilateral ethos. This has revived the [“might makes right” mentality](#), leaving powerful states less constrained by institutions.

Once a leading defender of multilateralism, the United States has, in recent years, taken positions that erode confidence in multilateral norms. Its withdrawal from international agreements like the Paris Agreement on Climate and the World Health Organisation has severely weakened climate commitments and damaged the legitimacy of global frameworks.

Other major powers have also been selective in their approach to international norms, reinforcing perceptions that rules apply unevenly. Russia’s war in Ukraine violated the core principles of non-aggression and non-interference. At the same time, China’s expansive nine-dash line in the South China Sea breaches the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, to which it is a signatory. Such actions by major states expose the fragility of a system meant to safeguard peace and global stability.

For many in the Global South, such developments exacerbate long-standing grievances with global institutions, which are viewed as exclusionary and Western-dominated. The Global South, distinct from China, remains without permanent representation at the UN Security Council, leaving it with limited voice and influence.

Calls for [reform of the Security Council, World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund \(IMF\)](#) have grown louder. The recently launched [UN80 Initiative](#) seeks to strengthen inclusivity and accountability, but doubts persist over its ability to achieve meaningful reforms amid severe budget cuts and political divisions. As dissatisfaction grows, more states and actors are articulating alternative visions of global governance – some through reformist engagements, others through the creation of parallel institutions, including forums of like-minded governments at the regional level – a process described as “minilateralism”.

A Global Reordering?

Once excluded from major Western-led platforms, China has become an active actor and provider of global public goods. Arguably benefitting from US global retrenchment, it has offered alternative frameworks while expanding its influence both within existing institutions and through new initiatives. Beijing has deepened engagement with the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and World Health Organisation (WHO), broadened its role in peacekeeping and climate governance, [and increased its influence at the World Bank, the IMF, and the WHO](#). Such moves enhanced China’s legitimacy and enabled it to challenge Western initiatives from within the respective world bodies.

With initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and the Global Security Initiative (GSI), China positions itself as a leader in tackling inequality and poverty while rejecting Western emphases on democracy and human rights. The GSI, in particular, elevates [China's central ideological emphasis on comprehensive and indivisible security](#) and challenges exclusive Western alliance blocs.

For many countries in the Global South, China's rise creates new opportunities for participation and influence over the wider system. With its pragmatic, ostensibly inclusive approach, China presents an appealing option for states across Asia, Africa and the Middle East seeking economic development without the restrictive conditions often imposed by Western donors.

The BRICS grouping, including new members Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates, embodies many of China's aspirations: [promoting sovereignty, noninterference, and an alternative economic development model](#) that avoids political conditionalities. Backed by Beijing's resources, BRICS has become a key platform for South-South cooperation.

This growing multipolarity provides diversification of options and empowers the Global South to exercise agency – to hedge, align selectively and shape the evolving balance of norms in the global system. However, despite these shifts, elements of continuity endure. The United Nations Charter continues to anchor the system, and sovereignty retains wide legitimacy across both the West and the Global South. Calls for reform from the Global South focus on greater inclusion rather than the dismantling of the international system, signalling a preference for adaptation rather than wholesale change.

Thus, what is emerging is not the replacement of one order by another, but the [coexistence of new and old frameworks](#) reflective of competing pluralism rather than outright change. The Global South, while critical of Western hypocrisy, remains wary of over-reliance on any single major power. This hedging behaviour paradoxically could foster greater balance and responsiveness in global governance.

Charting New Pathways

Regional actors have the choice and flexibility to shape a more stable and cooperative global order. In Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific, ASEAN-led frameworks such as the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, its Digital Economy Framework Agreement and Strategy for Carbon Neutrality contribute to a more inclusive, rules-based regional architecture that supports the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

These regional initiatives enhance economic security, social protection, and health resilience, while preparing education systems to address the challenges of digitalisation and artificial intelligence (AI). They also allow ASEAN to integrate sustainability and green transitions into regional economic strategies, including mobilising climate finance and technology transfer for low-carbon growth.

As strategic competition intensifies, the risk of “weaponised interdependence” remains high. Yet middle powers and regional actors can still play stabilising roles by fostering dialogue, reducing mistrust, and advancing cooperative norms. Regional arrangements can help reframe interdependence from vulnerability to a source of resilience and shared responsibility, particularly on issues such as climate disruptions, AI, cyber safety, biosecurity, and nuclear security.

By working with dialogue partners and development partners and forming flexible coalitions of the willing, regional groupings like ASEAN can more effectively exercise collective agency and help shape a more resilient regional order. Ultimately, the depth of cooperation among ASEAN and middle powers will determine whether multilateralism becomes a strategic vulnerability or collective strength. The task ahead is clear: Turn interdependence into a stabilising force and build a multipolar order anchored in cooperation, not coercion.

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