REPORT SECTION

# The End of Consensus?

## Multipolarity, Unilateralism, and the Fracturing Global Order

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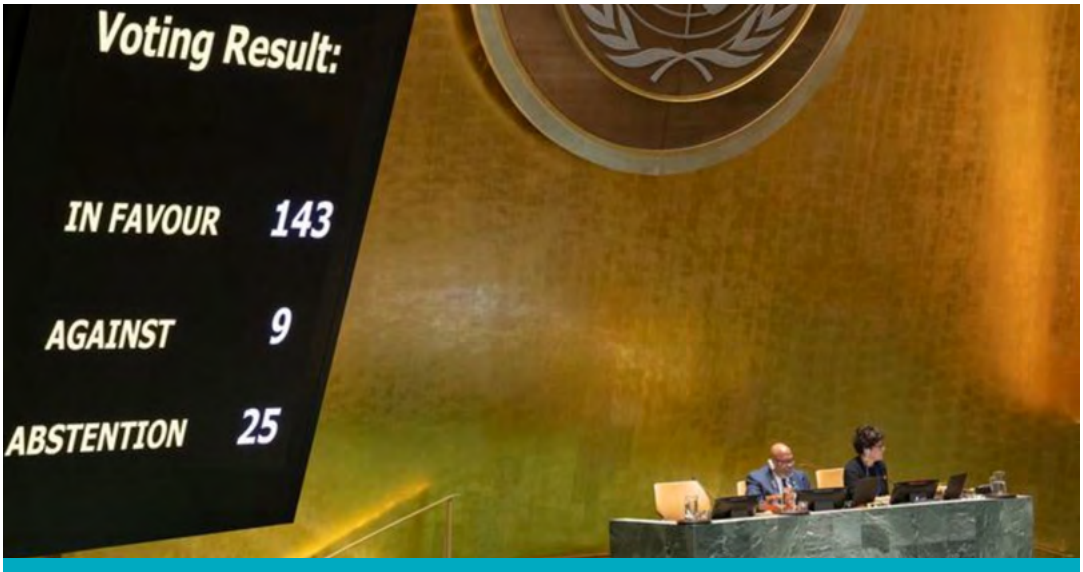
# Introduction

The post-Cold War international order—once described by Francis Fukuyama as marking the "end of history"—has undergone a profound transformation. In contrast to the relative unipolarity and normative consensus of the 1990s and early 2000s, the current global system is increasingly characterised by fragmentation. This fragmentation is driven by the growing influence of both great powers and emerging middle powers, each asserting distinct strategic positions and expanding their spheres of influence. Such a shift holds significant implications for scholars, policymakers, media analysts, and strategic communities alike. Notably, the rise of multipolarity is not occurring in isolation; it is accompanied—and in some cases, complicated—by a concurrent resurgence of unilateralism. The return of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency has amplified concerns regarding a drift away from multilateral cooperation toward unilateral foreign policy practices.

The intersection of multipolarity and unilateralism has the potential to erode mechanisms for diplomacy and collective action, thereby increasing the risk of geopolitical tensions and conflict. As global power diffusion accelerates, this dual dynamic is exerting pressure on the international system across multiple regions. Within this evolving landscape, Türkiye positions itself as a constructive middle power, pursuing a strategy of balanced diplomacy and cooperative engagement. This discussion paper argues three key points: First, that the international order is transitioning from a unipolar to a multipolar configuration, marked by increased fragmentation; second, that unilateralism is re-emerging as a destabilising force within this environment, particularly among great powers; and third, that middle powers—through strategic autonomy, norm entrepreneurship, and regional engagement—can help stabilise this emerging order. The analysis unfolds across three sections: the conceptual and historical context of polarity and unilateralism, the agency and typologies of middle powers, and Türkiye's evolving role as a responsible middle power in this turbulent landscape.




*(BM Pool - Anadolu Agency)*


*(Murat Gök - Anadolu Agency)*

# Three Codes of the International System: Multipolarity, Unilateralism, and Middle Powers

In the study of international relations, polarity refers to the distribution of power among states in the international system. A unipolar system is one in which a single state—typically a superpower—dominates in terms of military, economic, and diplomatic influence, as was the case with U.S. hegemony after the Cold War. A multipolar system, by contrast, is characterised by the presence of multiple states—great powers and influential regional actors—that exert comparable levels of influence, creating a more diffuse and contested global order. This distinction has profound implications for global governance: Unipolarity tends to support more cohesive institutional leadership (though often centred around one dominant actor), whereas multipolarity invites competing visions, alliances, and institutional experimentation.

Unilateralism refers to a state's preference to act independently on the international stage, often without regard for the positions or participation of others. It stands in contrast to multilateralism, which emphasises collective decision-making and institutionalised cooperation. Importantly, unilateralism can manifest even in a multipolar context, particularly when major powers choose to circumvent established norms or institutions.

*Over the last three decades, we have seen a rapid transformation in the distribution of power around the world. We went from a bipolar configuration between 1945 and 1989 to a unipolar configuration between 1989 and 2008 before entering what we today could call "complex multipolarity".*

*Joseph Borrell Fontelles, Former High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the European Commission*

The academic literature examining the global system through the lens of polarity and shifting power balances is both extensive and well-established (Jackson, 1978; Græger et al., 2022; Keersmaeker, 2015; Wardhani, 2021). These studies typically rely on a composite framework that integrates military, political, economic, and soft power indicators to classify the international order. Additionally, they often contextualise polarity through key historical epochs, including the Concert of Europe, the Interwar Period (1919–1939), the Cold War (1945–1990), and the post–Cold War era (1990–present). Regarding the evident shift from an American-led unipolarity toward a multi-centric power distribution, Peter (2023) underlines the role played by global market capitalism, which has started to concentrate more on the Asian economies, primarily China.

This body of scholarship demonstrates that the global order has historically transitioned through multiple phases of polarity. In the contemporary setting, the system can no longer be adequately described by a unipolar configuration centred solely around U.S. primacy. Instead, the international landscape is increasingly defined by the assertive roles of other major and middle powers—most notably China, Russia, India, the EU, Türkiye, and Brazil—contributing to a more diffuse and dynamic distribution of global influence. Therefore, the first prominent characteristic of the international system is *multipolarity*, at least for the majority of scholars and policymakers.

An increasingly salient characteristic of the evolving multipolar international system—albeit contrary to conventional expectations—is the resurgence of *unilateralism*, particularly visible during Donald Trump's first (2017–2021) and second (2025–) presidential administrations. Rather than reinforcing cooperative mechanisms within institutional frameworks such as the United Nations and its affiliated bodies, this trend has manifested in a preference for autonomous decision-making, signalling a departure from liberal institutionalist norms in favour of more individualistic and sovereignty-centred state behaviour.

The implications of this shift are significant. In a system where growing multipolarity would ideally incentivise greater multilateral engagement, unilateralism often proves counterproductive (Bertele & Mey, 1998). One prominent example is the Trump administration's initiation of tariff wars—especially targeting China—which intensified geopolitical friction and undermined opportunities for collaborative economic governance. The concurrent rise of unilateral behaviour and multipolarity poses a challenge to the US-led international order, facilitating the rise of counter-hegemonic narratives and actors (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2005). As unilateralism gains traction as a normalised state practice, it not only emboldens critical diplomatic discourse—particularly from China—but also legitimises similar assertive behaviour by other global actors.

Furthermore, as Falode et al. (2018) contend, unilateral foreign policy choices can exacerbate instability, as illustrated by the U.S. approach to Syria. In such cases, unilateral actions have undermined prospects for stabilisation that might have been achievable through coordinated multilateral engagement. Taken together, these developments underscore the tension between multipolarity and unilateralism and the risks this tension poses to global governance and order.

Following a concise review of the theoretical underpinnings of multipolarity and unilateralism, it is equally important to explore how these concepts have resonated across academic discourse and media narratives. Historically, the notion of multipolarity failed to attract sustained attention within Western scholarly and policy circles. However, the 2008 global financial crisis marked a turning point. The structural vulnerabilities it revealed within the Western-led financial architecture and the broader disillusionment with global capitalism contributed to a growing receptivity toward alternative models of global order, thus catalysing a wider embrace of multipolarity (Degterev, 2019). Keersmaeker (2015) notes that interest in multipolarity has been especially prominent among the BRICS countries and within European policy debates, whereas the American discourse remains largely anchored in discussions of unipolarity. This divergence is evident in the U.S. foreign policy establishment's leading publications. For example, in a Foreign Affairs article, the authors employed the term "partial unipolarity" to describe the evolving international order, suggesting a qualified persistence of U.S. primacy despite growing multipolar dynamics (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2023). In the same publication, Bekkevold (2023) advances a narrative that actively questions or downplays the relevance of multipolarity, reflecting a broader scepticism within segments of the U.S. strategic community.

*(Selçuk Acar - Anadolu Agency)*

Conversely, China has institutionalised the language of multipolarity within its foreign policy, using it not only as a strategic vision but also as a tool to galvanise anti-hegemonic sentiment—particularly in opposition to U.S. global leadership. Beyond rhetorical posturing, both China and Russia have embraced the strategic opportunities afforded by a more multipolar international environment. Their support for a diversified global order stems less from normative commitment and more from a pragmatic calculation of national interest, especially in contrast to the United States' efforts to preserve a system characterised by unipolar dominance (Al-Anbari, 2024).

One of the structural dimensions of multipolarity is the increased strategic latitude it affords to so-called "middle

powers." Far from being merely countries that fall beneath superpowers yet retain notable spheres of influence, the middle power concept has been the subject of extensive theoretical debate. Jordaan (2003), for instance, distinguishes between "traditional" and "emerging" middle powers based on constitutive attributes and behavioural roles. In contrast, Holbraad (1971) offers a more basic typology, situating middle powers as states occupying an intermediate position within the global power hierarchy.

Jordan's (2003) classification is particularly useful in capturing the profile of "emerging" middle powers—states that exhibit openness to regional integration and cooperation, aspire to regional leadership, and seek not merely to legitimise the status quo but to play a constructive and at times, transformative role within global governance structures. In this regard, Türkiye's foreign policy orientation over the past two decades strongly aligns with the behavioural patterns typically attributed to emerging middle powers.

Within the broader context of global power redistribution and the evolving multipolar system discussed in this paper, middle powers stand out not only for their material capabilities but also for their diplomatic style—marked by pragmatism, compromise, and multilateral engagement (Stephen, 2013). This blend of capacity and conduct is essential, as middle power status is not defined solely by quantifiable resources but also by the qualitative impact a state generates within its regional and international environment (Efstathopoulos, 2017). Moreover, Patience (2014) underscores the context-specific nature of middle power roles, introducing the concept of "niche diplomacy" to highlight the importance of sectoral specialisation in defining middle power identity in the post–Cold War multipolar order. According to this perspective, a state's middle power status may vary depending on the issue area or policy domain in which it exercises influence.

Within the literature, scholars distinguish between various types of middle powers. Traditional middle powers—such as Canada, Australia, and the Netherlands—are typically liberal democracies with stable institutions and a history of supporting multilateralism. These states often act as 'norm carriers' within the international system. Emerging middle powers, on the other hand, are states like Türkiye, Indonesia, Brazil, or South Africa that combine growing material capabilities with aspirations for regional leadership and reform of global governance structures. Unlike traditional middle powers, they may operate outside established Western institutions and often pursue strategic initiatives tailored to their unique regional and normative interests. This typology helps to understand Türkiye's position more precisely: it does not merely seek to uphold the status quo but actively engages in norm-shaping behaviour, regional conflict mediation, and alternative connectivity frameworks that reflect a post-Western, pluralist vision of order. Also, the multipolar character of the international system allows simultaneous strategic alignments to exist, such as China-Russia (SCO) and the U.S.-India-Australia-Japan (QUAD).

In sum, the scholarly treatment of middle powers reflects more than definitional ambiguity—it reveals a multidimensional and evolving framework that enriches our understanding of contemporary multipolarity. The diverse typologies and approaches in the literature serve as valuable analytical tools for assessing the agency of non-superpower states within the global order. Concrete manifestations of the multipolarity and middle powers demonstrate different strategic alignments and diplomatic initiatives instead of a unipolar pattern through which, for instance, the U.S. unilaterally intervened in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

The interplay between multipolarity and unilateralism reveals a structural paradox: while the diffusion of power creates new opportunities for shared governance, the resurgence of unilateral practices by great powers often disrupts cooperative mechanisms. In this fractured setting, middle powers occupy a unique and increasingly consequential space. No longer peripheral actors, they are called upon to navigate and mitigate these systemic tensions—especially in regions where great power rivalry is most pronounced. The following section explores how middle powers, particularly Türkiye, are positioned to mediate between fragmentation and cooperation, offering pragmatic pathways to recalibrate international norms and maintain systemic cohesion.

(Murat Gök - Anadolu Agency)

# Three Premises for the International Order

The evolving international system, increasingly shaped by the interwoven dynamics of multipolarity, unilateralism, and the agency of middle powers, presents a complex landscape defined by both crises and strategic openings. This shifting order marks a departure from the liberal international framework that, before the current multipolar turn, derived its normative legitimacy from a constellation of liberal values. These included human rights, equality, justice, the promotion of global peace, and the responsibility to protect—underpinned by material and diplomatic norms such as free trade, cooperative engagement, diplomacy, dialogue, and negotiated compromise.

However, the liberal order has come under growing scrutiny, not least due to a perceived and, at times, flagrant dissonance between its normative claims and the behaviour of its principal architects. Nowhere is this erosion of credibility more apparent than in the international response—or lack thereof—to crises such as Israel's genocidal war in Gaza, which has severely undermined faith in the normative coherence and moral authority of the US-led system.

Against this backdrop, the emergence of a multipolar configuration of global power is not simply a matter of shifting geopolitical weight. Rather, it also raises fundamental questions about the values and institutional norms that should govern international conduct in a more decentralised global order. For multipolarity to serve as a stabilising rather than destabilising force, it must be embedded within a framework of shared principles. These would act as a normative ballast capable of counteracting the centrifugal tendencies of unilateral action and great power competition.

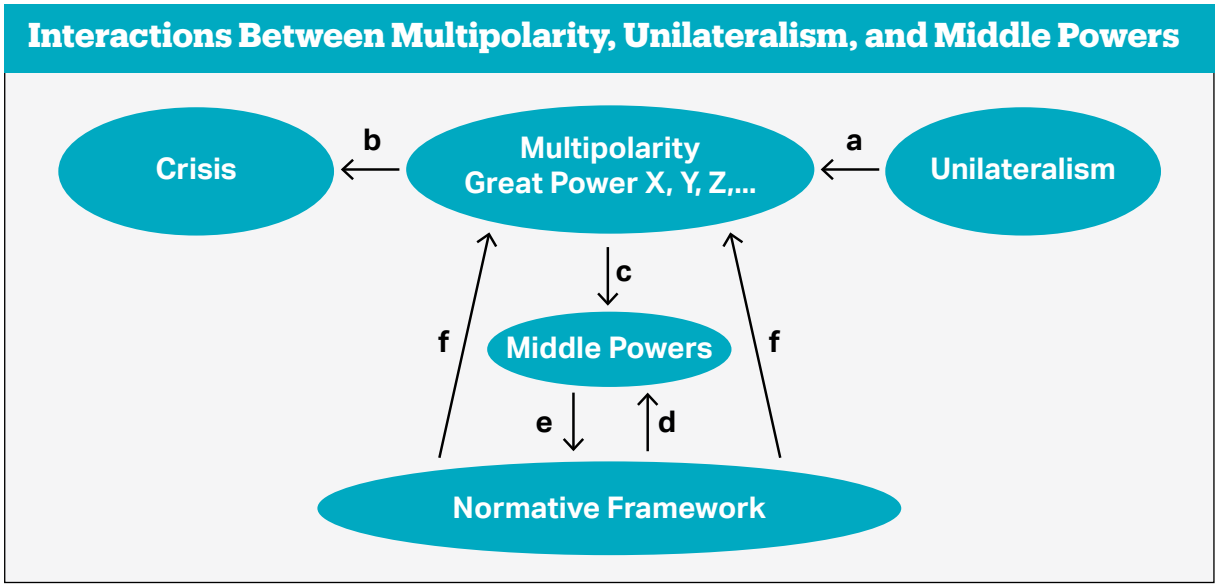
Accordingly, it is useful to articulate three foundational principles for a reimagined international order:

While multipolarity alone does not inherently generate instability, its convergence with an escalating trend of unilateralism—particularly among great powers expected to exercise responsibility commensurate with their capabilities—renders the international system increasingly susceptible to crisis. The absence of restraint and coordination among these actors undermines the potential for a balanced multipolar order and accelerates systemic fragmentation.

When viewed through the lens of responsible powerhood, middle powers must move beyond the role of passive actors oscillating between competing great power spheres. Instead, they should emerge as strategic interlocutors—facilitating dialogue, mediating tensions, and institutionalising cooperation across power hierarchies. In this capacity, they can function as integrative agents that uphold the cohesion of an otherwise diffuse multipolar system.

In the absence of a coherent normative framework that institutionalises cooperative engagement, the international order risks stagnating at the level of transactional economic interactions—many of which may themselves be plagued by fragmentation and competition. Without shared principles to guide political and diplomatic behaviour, the promise of deeper collaboration could paradoxically lead to heightened contestation and instability rather than a more durable multipolar consensus.

The interactive dynamics among multipolarity, unilateralism, and middle powers, as illustrated in the diagram




above, offer a conceptual framework for understanding the evolving architecture of the international system. Beginning with Arrow a, the diagram underscores how unilateralism manifests within the competitive interactions of great powers (e.g., States X, Y, Z) in a multipolar environment. Arrow b then illustrates the potential consequence of this trend: the increased risk of systemic crises. These include trade disputes such as the U.S.-China trade war or coercive acts like territorial annexation and military occupation, which often stem from unconstrained unilateral behaviour. A salient example of how multipolarity and unilateralism intersect is the ongoing U.S.–China trade war, which began in 2018 and has continued in various forms. Characterised by tariffs, export controls, and retaliatory economic measures, the dispute illustrates how great powers in a multipolar system can unilaterally disrupt global supply chains, stoke uncertainty in global markets, and erode trust in international trade institutions such as the WTO. It also triggered strategic hedging among other powers, including middle powers like Türkiye, which have sought to diversify trade routes and assert more economic autonomy in the face of major power friction. Arrow c, indicating the emergence of middle powers from within the multipolar system, suggests that these actors are both a by-product and a structural necessity of multipolarity. Through Arrows d and e, the diagram highlights the dual relationship between middle powers and international norms: They may contribute to the normative framework of the global order or be shaped by it. This concept aligns with "norm entrepreneurship," a term introduced by Mueller (1996) in the context of regime theory, referring to the capacity of states—particularly middle powers—to initiate, institutionalise, and diffuse norms within the international system.

Lastly, Arrow f reflects the foundational role of normative coherence in sustaining the viability of a multipolar international system. In contexts where unilateralism prevails, such a normative architecture is critical for ensuring effective oversight and accountability. In its absence, the system risks facing the same critiques currently directed at the perceived ineffectiveness of existing institutions, such as the United Nations. Thus, for multipolarity to mature into a stable and functional global order, its normative underpinnings must be robust, actionable, and collectively endorsed in the form of regional and global influence and pressure.

While mainstream international relations theory posits that no supranational hierarchy exists over sovereign states, the convergence of normative principles and the resultant collaborative pressure may still shape the decision-making calculus of relevant actors. A contemporary illustration of this dynamic is Israel's persistent engagement in genocidal warfare despite ICJ's interim measures ruling. Indeed, both South Africa's litigation and the Court's evidentiary and deliberative processes rest upon a normative framework that is, in principle, broadly acceptable. However, practical implementation reveals that the deficiency lies not in the normative architecture itself but in the inability of systemic actors to generate sufficient coercive influence to ensure compliance. Consequently, within a multipolar context, while initial manifestations may suggest escalating fragmentation and factionalism, the agency of middle powers—guided by the doctrine of responsible powerhood—could potentially catalyse transformative shifts in regional and global spheres of influence. One example of this character is Türkiye's co-sponsorship of the Astana Peace Process alongside Russia and Iran, which highlights its diplomatic agility. While criticised for aligning with Russia, Türkiye leveraged the forum to push for localised ceasefires and manage refugee flows—actions that reflect pragmatic middle power behaviour in a complex multipolar conflict arena.

# Conclusion: Navigating Disorder Without Consensus

The evolution of the international system has carried the world far from the confidence of the 1990s, when unipolarity and liberal norms promised stability and predictability. What has emerged instead is a fractured order defined by two simultaneous trends: the diffusion of power into multiple poles and the resurgence of unilateralism among great powers. Multipolarity, in theory, should create incentives for cooperation; in practice, it is colliding with the assertive individualism of states unwilling to be bound by collective frameworks.

This paradox is at the heart of today's instability. Great powers, rather than restraining themselves for the sake of systemic balance, increasingly weaponize economic, technological, and military tools for unilateral advantage. Institutions built to manage disputes are weakened, while transnational challenges—from climate change to pandemics—struggle to find coordinated solutions. The credibility of the liberal order has been further eroded by glaring double standards, most notably in the global response to the ongoing genocide in Gaza.

Within this fractured context, middle powers have assumed renewed significance. They cannot overturn the structural realities of multipolar competition, but they can mitigate its worst excesses. By mediating conflicts, experimenting with new regional formats, and acting as norm entrepreneurs, states like Türkiye, Brazil, and Indonesia have the potential to prevent the slide into unchecked rivalry. Their diplomacy is often pragmatic rather than ideological, geared toward preserving room for manoeuvre while avoiding rigid blocs.

Yet the risks remain stark. Without a shared normative ballast, multipolarity could devolve into transactionalism and perpetual crisis management. A sustainable order requires more than balancing poles of power; it demands principles that constrain unilateralism and encourage responsible behaviour. Here lies the central challenge of our time: to rediscover forms of cooperation that are credible, inclusive, and resilient enough to withstand both the ambitions of great powers and the turbulence of global crises.

The "end of consensus" does not mean the end of order altogether. It signals the beginning of a difficult but necessary transition—away from a fading unipolar model and toward a pluralist system whose stability will depend less on hegemony than on the ability of diverse actors to share responsibility. Whether this transition produces a fragmented battlefield, or a rebalanced architecture of cooperation will hinge on the actions not only of the major powers but also of the middle powers willing to act as bridges in a fractured world.

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