



Theoretical Analysis of Power Networks in the International System

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Abstract

The contemporary international system has undergone profound structural transformations that challenge the dominant narrative of affluent states portraying themselves as guardians of democracy and freedom, despite the persistence of historical and racial divisions (Aiginger, 2020). This system is no longer a mere extension of traditional actors but has evolved into an entity with a distinct identity, driven by the reconfiguration of power relations (Gill, 2022). Competing perspectives conceptualize it as “unimultipolar,” a form of “glocalization,” or a complex and asymmetric order (Olthoff, 2023; Quinn, 2022). However, both international relations theory and international political economy (IPE) research often oversimplify systemic dynamics by privileging state-centric or linear bottom-up approaches (Oatley, 2021; Pan, 2021). Existing narratives remain shaped by assumptions of power distribution and great-power dominance. Yet globalization has facilitated power diffusion beyond the West, generating new opportunities for non-Western actors. Accordingly, this study examines the structure, agency, and relational patterns underpinning the emerging geopolitical order.

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Methodology

This study employs a descriptive–analytical approach, with data and information collected primarily through library research and documentary sources. The analysis is qualitative in nature, relying on qualitative techniques to interpret and evaluate the findings. In the initial phase, relevant data were gathered from scientific centers, research institutes, and credible databases through systematic note-taking. Subsequently, by outlining the theoretical foundations and synthesizing the required findings, the study establishes a framework for examining and analyzing the transformation of the international system from power poles to power networks. This framework is grounded in the theoretical literature on power and guided by the conceptual model of networked power.

Result and discussion

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore that the contemporary international system is best understood as a transitional and hybrid order, neither a continuation of Cold War bipolarity nor a complete manifestation of novel dynamics. Instead, the system reflects an evolving configuration in which historical legacies coexist with profound structural shifts in global governance and institutional practices. This liminal condition illustrates the fluidity of power relations, as established and emerging actors simultaneously pursue strategies of convergence and divergence, shaping the contours of the emerging order.

Three interrelated transformations define this process: the declining utility of polarity as an organizing principle, the rise of new interests and threats that transcend traditional state-centric boundaries, and the increasing significance of asymmetric power. Collectively, these dynamics reveal a trajectory toward a post-polar, networked geopolitical architecture. Within this framework, power is no longer reducible to the aggregation of material capabilities or bloc alignments, but is instead constituted through decentralized and overlapping networks of influence.

Two mechanisms are central to this networked logic. First, the proliferation of interdependent relations generates complex patterns of connectivity that intensify systemic sensitivity and interdependence. Second, the emergence of competition–cooperation dynamics privileges balance of interests over balance of power, redefining strategies of survival and influence. International institutions and informal platforms alike—ranging from the G20 to the World Economic Forum—function as nodal sites within these networks, facilitating both cooperation and contestation.

This perspective advances a reconceptualization of agency: actors are repositioned not according to fixed hierarchies but based on their capacity to program, switch, and reconfigure networks across economic, technological, and cultural domains. Emerging powers, particularly those with advantages in fields such as artificial intelligence, become disproportionately influential as they leverage their embeddedness within multiple overlapping networks.

Ultimately, theorizing the international system through the lens of networked power provides a more precise account of its complexity. It captures the simultaneous intensification of interdependence, rivalry, and adaptive governance. Moreover, it offers explanatory leverage for understanding why states increasingly diversify partnerships, cultivate multi-nodal engagements, and prioritize resilience in an order where the ability to shape and navigate networks has become the primary determinant of global influence.

Keywords:

Theoretical Analysis, International System, Power Relations, Power Networks

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