

Issues in International Relations

COURSE CODE: M23PS11DC

Postgraduate Programme in Political Science

Discipline Core Course

Self Learning Material



SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

The State University for Education, Training and Research in Blended Format, Kerala

SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

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Issues in International Relations

Course Code: M23PS11DC

Semester - IV

Discipline Core Course
Postgraduate Programme in Political Science
Self Learning Material
(With Model Question Paper Sets)



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The State University for Education, Training and Research in Blended Format, Kerala



ISSUES IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Course Code: M23PS11DC

Semester- IV

Discipline Core Course

Postgraduate Programme in Political Science

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Edition
March 2026

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ISBN 978-81-998406-0-7



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Dear learner,

I extend my heartfelt greetings and profound enthusiasm as I warmly welcome you to Sreenarayanaguru Open University. Established in September 2020 as a state-led endeavour to promote higher education through open and distance learning modes, our institution was shaped by the guiding principle that access and quality are the cornerstones of equity. We have firmly resolved to uphold the highest standards of education, setting the benchmark and charting the course.

The courses offered by the Sreenarayanaguru Open University aim to strike a quality balance, ensuring students are equipped for both personal growth and professional excellence. The University embraces the widely acclaimed "blended format," a practical framework that harmoniously integrates Self-Learning Materials, Classroom Counseling, and Virtual modes, fostering a dynamic and enriching experience for both learners and instructors.

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Regards,
Dr. Jagathy Raj V.P.

01-03-2026

Contents

BLOCK	1	Post Cold War Era, UN and Changing Global Order	1
UNIT	1	Bipolar to Multipolar World	2
UNIT	2	American Hegemony	32
UNIT	3	Role of UN in Multipolar World	54
BLOCK	2	Global Security Issues	78
UNIT	1	Terrorism, Cyber Security	79
UNIT	2	Climate Change, Refugee Crisis and Global Governance	117
UNIT	3	Maritime Security and Ocean Governance	140
BLOCK	3	Contemporary Practices	166
UNIT	1	Neo Colonialism and Neo Imperialism	167
UNIT	2	International Non-Governmental Organizations	181
UNIT	3	Conflict and Peace Resolutions	195
BLOCK	4	Global Governance	214
UNIT	1	International Institutions	215
UNIT	2	Climate Governance	236
UNIT	3	Regional Organization and Governance	255
Model Question Paper Sets			275

BLOCK 1
Post Cold war Era, UN and
Changing Global order

Bipolar to Multipolar World

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, learners will be able to:

- analyse the transformation of global power structures from the bipolar Cold War system to contemporary multipolar configurations and understand the implications of this shift for international stability and cooperation
- evaluate the concept of American hegemony and the liberal international order, distinguishing between historical claims and current realities in global governance structures
- assess regional approaches to global order and understand how regionalism complements or challenges universal multilateral institutions

Background

Imagine a world where a single superpower dominated global affairs, where international institutions reflected primarily Western interests, and where major decisions about war, peace, and prosperity emanated largely from Washington, London, and Brussels. For much of the post-World War II period, this was the reality of international relations. The United States emerged from the ashes of the Second World War as an unprecedented hegemon, establishing a network of alliances, playing an important role in the creation of international institutions, and promoting a liberal vision of global order based on free markets, democratic governance, and multilateral cooperation. This American-led system, often called the "liberal hegemonic order," shaped the destinies of nations across continents for over seven decades.

However, the twenty-first century has witnessed dramatic changes in this established order. The economic rise of China, India, Brazil, and other nations has shifted the global balance of power. The 2008 financial crisis exposed vulnerabilities in Western economic models. American military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan revealed the limits of even the world's most powerful military. Today, new voices demand seats at the table of global governance. Regional powers assert their interests more confidently.



Alternative models of development and governance challenge Western prescriptions. This transformation raises fundamental questions: What comes after American dominance? Will the world fracture into competing regional blocs, or will new forms of cooperation emerge? Can rising powers be integrated into existing institutions, or will they create parallel structures? Understanding this transition from a bipolar Cold War world through a brief unipolar moment to an increasingly multipolar and complex global system is essential for anyone seeking to comprehend contemporary international relations.

Keywords

Unipolarity, Hegemony, Liberal International Order, Emerging Powers, BRICS, Regionalism, Global Governance, Power Transition, Multilateralism, Multiplex World

Discussion

The study of international relations requires an understanding of how power is distributed among nations and how this distribution shapes global politics. The structure of the international system has undergone profound transformations over the past century. The Cold War created a bipolar world dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 briefly created a unipolar moment marked by unchallenged American dominance. Today, we witness the emergence of a more complex multipolar world where power is distributed among several major states and regions. This unit examines these transformations, analysing the rise and fall of different global orders, evaluating competing theories about international stability, and exploring the roles of emerging powers and regional institutions in shaping contemporary world politics. Understanding this evolution is crucial for comprehending current global challenges and future possibilities.

1.1.1 Definitions and Scope

1.1.1.1 Understanding Global Power Structures Polarity in International Relations

❑ Concept of
polarity in IR

Polarity refers to the distribution of power among major states in the international system. This concept is fundamental to understanding global order because it shapes how nations



- ❑ Bipolarity: two superpowers, one rivalry

- Unipolarity:
unprecedented
single power
dominance

- ❑ Multipolarity:
several competing
power centres

1.1.1.2 Hegemony and Liberal Order

Hegemony refers to the dominance of one state over others in the international system. However, hegemony involves more than mere military or economic superiority. A hegemon shapes international rules and institutions, provides certain public goods

- ❑ Hegemony combines power with consent

like security and economic stability, and exercises leadership that other states accept or acquiesce to, at least partially. The concept draws from the work of Antonio Gramsci, who theorised that hegemony is maintained more through consent than coercion, though both elements are present.

- ❑ US led order: multilateral but contested

The American World Order, or liberal hegemonic order, describes the international system created and led by the United States after World War II. This order rested on several pillars: military alliances like NATO, economic institutions like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, liberal norms emphasising democracy and human rights, and a commitment to open trade and multilateral cooperation. Proponents argue this order brought unprecedented peace and prosperity, at least among major powers and Western nations. Critics contend its benefits were unevenly distributed, its reach was more limited than claimed, and it often involved coercion rather than genuine consent.

- ❑ Hegemonic orders claim benevolent membership

The term "American World Order" parallels the historical concept of the "Chinese World Order," which structured East Asian international relations before Western intervention. Just as China positioned itself as the central civilising force providing order and prosperity to surrounding states through the tributary system, the United States claimed to provide global public goods like security, economic stability, and progressive norms. Both orders combined material power with ideological claims about superior civilisation and benevolent leadership.

1.1.1.3 The Multiplex World Concept

- ❑ Multiplex world: coexisting power centres

The multiplex world metaphor offers an alternative way of visualising global order beyond traditional polarity concepts. Just as a multiplex cinema shows different films simultaneously in various theatres, the multiplex world features multiple centres of power, diverse approaches to governance, and competing visions of international order coexisting and interacting. This concept captures several important features of contemporary global politics.

First, the multiplex world is decentered rather than hierarchical. No single power or model dominates completely. Different actors produce their own "shows," reflecting distinct interests, values, and approaches. Second, it emphasises diversity and choice. Just as moviegoers select from various



- offerings, states and societies can draw upon different models and partnerships rather than facing a single hegemonic option. Third, the multiplex concept highlights interdependence and interaction. The theatres exist within one complex, sharing common infrastructure and security arrangements, much as contemporary states operate within interconnected global systems despite their differences.

1.1.2.1 The Cold War Bipolar System

- The bipolar structure of the Cold War emerged from the ashes of World War II. The United States and the Soviet Union emerged as superpowers with vastly superior military and economic capabilities compared to exhausted European nations and recovering Asian states. This bipolar division structured global politics for over four decades, from roughly 1947 to 1991.

- Advocates of bipolarity argued that it provided stability. Kenneth Waltz, a prominent structural theorist, contended that bipolar systems reduced uncertainty because only two major powers needed to calculate each other's intentions and capabilities. With fewer major actors, the possibilities for miscalculation decreased. The bipolar structure also expanded the geographic scope of both superpowers' concerns, encouraging them to manage crises carefully to avoid escalation to nuclear war. John Lewis Gaddis described this as "self-regulation," comparable to an automatic pilot, where crisis management mechanisms helped prevent catastrophic conflict despite intense ideological rivalry.

- However, this view of bipolar stability carries important limitations. The "stability" of the Cold War primarily meant the absence of direct war between the superpowers and relative peace in Europe. It did not extend to the developing world, where the superpowers engaged in numerous proxy conflicts, supported opposing sides in civil wars, and intervened militarily to advance their interests. Regional conflicts in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Central America, Africa, and elsewhere caused immense suffering. The bipolar peace was therefore a partial and geographically limited phenomenon, more accurately described as the "West's long peace" rather than truly global stability.

The ideological bipolarity of the Cold War era profoundly influenced international relations. The United States advanced capitalism, concomitant Western liberal values, military alliances such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), and interventions often critiqued as neo-colonialist (Gaddis, 2005). In contrast, the Soviet Union championed socialism—rather than communism per se—through alliances with developing nations in the Global South and the dissemination of socialist literary and cultural works (Westad, 2005). This ideological schism permeated alliance formations, developmental paradigms, and domestic political trajectories across the globe. The Non-Aligned Movement arose as a stratagem by postcolonial states to eschew bloc alignment, notwithstanding the eventual gravitation of many towards one superpower or the other (Willetts, 2011).

1.1.2.2 The Unipolar Moment

The term "unipolar moment" was coined by Charles Krauthammer in 1990, shortly after Iraq invaded Kuwait. America's overwhelming military victory in the Gulf War, combined with the Soviet Union's impending collapse, created an unprecedented situation where one power dominated all others across multiple dimensions. The United States possessed unmatched military capabilities, the world's largest economy, technological leadership, and a network of alliances spanning the globe.

❑ Gulfwar confirmed US global dominance

Scholars have debated how long unipolarity might last and what its implications would be. William Wohlforth argued that American preponderance was so vast that it might endure as long as the Cold War's bipolarity, potentially four or five decades. He pointed to the significant gap between American capabilities and any potential challenger, the difficulty of balancing against a distant offshore power, and the benefits other states gained from the American-led order. Others, like Christopher Layne, predicted that unipolarity would be brief because power balancing is a fundamental law of international politics. Rising powers would inevitably emerge to challenge the hegemon, either individually or through coalitions.

❑ Scholars disagreed on unipolarity's duration

The reality proved more complex than either view anticipated. The unipolar moment did prove relatively brief, but not primarily because of the rise of challengers. Instead, American policy choices, particularly during the George W. Bush administration, hastened its end. The invasion of

❑ US policy choices ended unipolarity



Iraq in 2003, the broader War on Terror, and the embrace of unilateral action rather than multilateral cooperation generated widespread opposition and damaged American legitimacy. The 2008 financial crisis further exposed American vulnerabilities and accelerated the relative rise of other powers, particularly China.

❑ Unilateralism undermined multilateral vision

President George H.W. Bush had proclaimed a "New World Order" based on multilateral cooperation and collective security following the Gulf War. This vision emphasised working through international institutions and building broad coalitions. However, the subsequent turn toward more aggressive assertions of American power, exemplified by the Bush Doctrine of preventive war, undermined this multilateral approach. The combination of unipolarity with unilateralism proved particularly toxic, speeding the end of the unipolar moment that might otherwise have lasted longer.

1.1.2.3 The Rise of Emerging Powers

❑ BRICS grouping signalled power shift

The concept of "emerging powers" gained prominence in the early twenty-first century, particularly after Goldman Sachs analyst Jim O'Neill coined the term "BRIC" in 2001 to describe Brazil, Russia, India, and China as major emerging market economies. South Africa joined in 2010, creating BRICS. These countries represent large populations, growing economies, and increasing political influence. Between 2000 and 2010, the BRICS contributed over one-third of world GDP growth, expanding from about one-sixth of the global economy to nearly one-quarter.

However, the emerging powers category faces definitional challenges. Various acronyms proliferate, including CIVETS (Colombia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Egypt, Turkey, South Africa), MIST (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey), and others. Some focus on economic growth potential, others on geopolitical influence, and still others on regional leadership. The G20, established in 1999 and elevated to leaders' level in 2008, provides a broader framework encompassing both established and emerging economies. It represents 80 per cent of global GDP, 75 per cent of world trade, and two-thirds of the world's population.

The economic performance of emerging powers has been impressive but uneven. China's economy grew from 678 billion dollars in 1987 to over 12 trillion dollars by 2012, making it

❑ Growth
impressive but
internally uneven

the world's second-largest economy. India's growth accelerated after economic reforms in the early 1990s, while Brazil emerged as a major economic power in Latin America. However, these countries also face significant challenges, including domestic inequality, infrastructure deficits, environmental pressures, and, in some cases, the risk of falling into the middle-income trap, where growth slows after reaching a certain level of development.

Politically, the emerging powers exhibit considerable diversity. Some, like India, Brazil, and South Africa, are democracies, while China and Russia have authoritarian systems. This diversity creates tensions, as democratic emerging powers sometimes face criticism for aligning with non-democratic states in forums like BRICS. The emerging powers also have divergent interests on key issues such as UN Security Council reform, climate change responsibilities, and approaches to human rights and sovereignty.

1.1.2.4 Projections for Global Power Distribution

❑ Projections
confirm
multipolar
trajectory

Various forecasts attempt to predict future power distributions. The European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) 2030 Report projects that the five largest economies in 2030 will be China (23.8 percent of global GDP), the United States (17.3 percent), the European Union (14.3 percent), India (10.4 percent), and Japan (3.5 percent). The United States will likely remain the preeminent military power but will increasingly need to operate through broader coalitions, except where vital national interests are directly threatened. China may have the world's strongest aerospace capabilities and a predominant regional military role in the Asia-Pacific, though it will not achieve global power projection comparable to that of the United States.

The US National Intelligence Council's Global Trends 2030 report envisions Asia surpassing North America and Europe combined in terms of GDP, population, military spending, and technological investment by 2030. Even in the most optimistic scenario for the United States, its share of G20 GDP would decline from about one-third in 2010 to about one-quarter in 2030. China's economy may surpass America's in purchasing power parity terms a few years before 2030, though the US would remain the largest at market exchange rates. The report notably projects India outperforming China, whose economy is expected to slow by 2030.



1.1.3 American Decline Debate: Assessing Power-Transition

- Both absolute and relative decline visible

- ❑ Relative shift favours emerging economics

Relative decline is evident in multiple dimensions. America's share of global GDP fell from 31 percent in 2000 to 23.1 percent in 2008, according to some calculations; though this remains contested given different methodologies. More significantly, China's GDP grew from being one-eighth of America's in 2000 to over one-third by 2010. The developing world's share of the global economy increased dramatically, from 34 percent to 44

percent on a purchasing power parity basis between 2000 and 2009. These shifts reflect both the rapid growth of emerging economies and slower growth in the developed world, particularly after the 2008 financial crisis.

1.1.3.2 Competing Perspectives

❑ Anti-declinists cite enduring strengths

Anti-declinists make several arguments. They contend that concerns about American decline are cyclical and often exaggerated, pointing to previous periods of pessimism in the 1970s and after World War I that proved unfounded. Robert Kagan argues that America's share of global GDP has remained around 25 percent since the early 1970s, showing remarkable stability. The United States leads in university rankings, research and development spending, Nobel Prizes, and entrepreneurship indices. It ranks seventh in the World Economic Forum's competitiveness index, while China ranks 29th. These fundamental strengths provide a foundation for continued leadership.

❑ Declinists see structural, lasting trends

Joseph Nye emphasises that American military predominance persists and will likely continue. No other country spends remotely comparable amounts on defence or possesses similar global reach. US defence spending in 2010 was more than twice that of all non-US NATO members combined and nine times higher than Chinese military spending. Beyond military power, the United States benefits from favourable demographics, with the population projected to grow by over 100 million by 2050 and the workforce expanding by 40 percent, in contrast to aging populations and shrinking workforces in China, Russia, and Europe.

Declinists counter that raw statistics mask important trends. Robert Pape calculates that the US share of world GDP fell by 7.7 per cent from 2000 to 2008, one of the most significant declines experienced by any major power since the mid-nineteenth century. More importantly, the periods of high growth in the late 1990s and from 2002 to 2008 were driven by unsustainable bubbles that ultimately caused severe damage. If judged properly, American economic performance over the past two decades has not been significantly better than Japan's, despite claims of Japanese stagnation.

The notion that superior economic performance compared to Europe and Japan offers consolation also proves questionable. The American-led liberal order has been fundamentally



collective, depending heavily on European and Japanese partnership. Their weaknesses, therefore, undermine rather than support American hegemony. Moreover, even if the US economy recovers, relative decline continues as emerging economies grow faster. China's economy is projected to reach 68 trillion dollars by 2050 compared to America's 38 trillion, while India's may reach 53 trillion.

1.1.3.3 Implications for Global Order

❑ Decline perceived as global stability risk

Most American analysts, whether they accept or dispute the decline thesis, agree on one point: American decline would be dangerous for international stability. Liberals argue that reduced American leadership would weaken international cooperation and collective action on global challenges. Realists warn that declining powers become targets for opportunistic rivals or themselves become aggressive as they attempt to shore up their position. Even critics of unipolarity's durability fear that its end will bring heightened rivalry, regional fragmentation, or unstable multipolar competition.

This consensus reflects a deep-seated belief in the necessity of American predominance for global order. It assumes that the liberal institutions and norms established under American leadership require continued American power to function effectively. It warns that alternatives to American hegemony, whether a multipolar balance of power, regional blocs, or bipolar rivalry between the US and China, would be less stable and more conflict-prone. This view sees American power as uniquely benign and essential.

❑ Decline could enable more equitable order

However, this assumption deserves critical examination. The claimed universality and benevolence of American hegemony may be overstated. The liberal order's geographic scope during the Cold War excluded major regions and populations. Its operation often involved coercion alongside consent, and its benefits were distributed very unequally. Rising powers and developing countries experienced American dominance differently than Western allies did. From their perspective, American decline might create space for alternative approaches, more equitable institutions, and genuine multilateralism rather than hegemony disguised as cooperation.

1.1.4 The Liberal Hegemonic Order: Claims and - Critiques

1.1.4.1 Conceptual Foundations

- ❑ Liberal order fuses liberalism with hegemony

The concept of the liberal hegemonic order posits that American power after World War II created a distinctive international system characterised by multilateral institutions, open economic exchange, collective security arrangements, and shared liberal values. This order is described as "liberal" because it promoted democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and market economics. It is "hegemonic" because it relied on American preponderance and leadership. Theoretically, it draws upon hegemonic stability theory, which argues that a dominant power is necessary to create and maintain international order by providing public goods and enforcing rules.

- ❑ Ikenberry: power mediated through institutions

John Ikenberry, a leading theorist of liberal hegemony, describes it as a hierarchical order with liberal characteristics. America played the leading role in providing rules and stability, but its power was muted and mediated through institutions, reciprocal political processes, and shared strategic interests. Weaker states gained institutionalised access to American power. The United States provided public goods such as security and economic openness while operating within a loose system of multilateral rules. American hegemonic power and the liberal international order were fused and mutually dependent.

This liberal hegemonic order is distinguished from earlier British hegemony and from pure balance-of-power systems. Unlike the nineteenth-century European balance of power, which relied on shifting alliances and war to maintain equilibrium, the American order emphasised institutional cooperation and collective security. Unlike British imperialism, which directly controlled vast colonial territories, American hegemony ostensibly operated through consent and mutual benefit rather than formal empire. The order is also contrasted with Soviet-style hegemony, which was coercive, ideologically rigid, and economically closed.

1.1.4.2 Myths and Limitations

Critical examination reveals several myths about the liberal hegemonic order. The first myth concerns its geographic scope. During the Cold War, the liberal order did not encompass the Soviet bloc, China, India, Indonesia, and much of the developing



❑ Order was never truly global

world. The Soviet Union represented 12.5 percent of world economic output in 1960, just under half that of the United States and comparable to the European Economic Community. It occupied one-sixth of the world's land area and controlled vast resources. China and India, though economically weaker during the Cold War, together contained enormous populations. These countries explicitly rejected key elements of the American-led order, including alliance systems like SEATO.

The liberal hegemonic order was, therefore, an international order but not a truly global world order during much of its history. It existed alongside and in competition with the Soviet-led socialist order and the Non-Aligned Movement. Only after the Cold War's end, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and economic reforms in China, India, and Vietnam, did the liberal order potentially expand to encompass most of the world. However, even then, many societies and states continued to challenge its ideological underpinnings and question its benefits.

❑ Consent was never truly voluntary

The second myth involves claims about consent versus coercion. The liberal order is presented as fundamentally consensual, with other states willingly accepting American leadership because they benefited from public goods like security, open trade, and stable institutions. However, the historical record shows substantial coercion alongside consent. British colonialism, which created important foundations for the liberal order, was hardly consensual. Post-colonial interventions, support for authoritarian allies, and economic pressure frequently characterised American policy towards the developing world.

Latin American countries challenged the Monroe Doctrine and developed robust legal principles defending non-intervention against American hegemony. Asian nations like India and Indonesia rejected American alliance systems and opposed interventions in their regions. African and Middle Eastern states experienced Western power through military intervention, support for dictators, and manipulation of their resources. These forms of resistance demonstrate that the liberal order was contested and imposed rather than universally accepted. The costs of challenging it were often high, but many societies paid those costs rather than simply acquiesce.

❑ Benevolence narrative ignores coercive costs

The third myth concerns the benevolence of liberal hegemony. Advocates emphasise public goods provided by American power: security guarantees, economic openness, rule-based institutions, and support for development. Hillary Clinton declared that the post-World War II architecture built by American leaders prevented a third world war and lifted millions from poverty. These claims have merit, particularly for Western Europe and East Asian allies, which did benefit substantially from the American security umbrella and access to American markets.

However, this narrative is selective about costs and failures. American-led institutions like the IMF imposed structural adjustment programmes in Africa during the 1980s that increased poverty and suffering. The liberal order's commitment to decolonisation was often weak, with the United States sometimes supporting colonial powers against independence movements. American support for authoritarian regimes in Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia, South Korea, the Philippines, and elsewhere contradicted democratic values. Military interventions in Iran, Vietnam, Cuba, and Nicaragua served narrow strategic interests rather than universal principles. The liberal order's record in preventing and managing conflict in the developing world was poor, with superpower interventions often escalating and prolonging civil wars.

1.1.4.3 Alternative Contributions to Global Order

❑ Other regions produced their own norms

The fourth myth holds that global order and progressive norms derive primarily from American leadership. This obscures the contributions of other actors. European countries independently developed supranational institutions after World War II, establishing the first examples of pooled sovereignty before the United States embraced similar approaches. European social democracy offered alternative models of market regulation and welfare provision. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe developed concepts of cooperative security and confidence-building that influenced other regions.

Latin American countries contributed significantly to international law and human rights norms. They developed robust interpretations of non-intervention and sovereign equality during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to resist American dominance. At the 1945 San Francisco



□ Global order has multiple architects

Regional contributions to peace and order deserve recognition. African regional organisations developed humanitarian intervention norms and practices independently. Asian regionalism created frameworks for integrating former adversaries and managing great power competition. Latin American democracy promotion through the OAS preceded similar American efforts. Southeast Asian countries developed the "ASEAN Way" of consensus-based regionalism that socialised major powers into regional norms. These diverse approaches demonstrate that global order emerges from multiple sources, not just American power.

1.1.5.1 The BRICS and G20

❑ BRICS diversity
limits collective
action

- ❑ G20 coordinates but reforms poorly

However, the G20 faces significant limitations. It has made modest progress on reforming global institutions despite initial promises. IMF quota reforms adopted in 2010 to increase emerging market representation have stalled because the US Congress delayed ratification beyond the agreed deadline. UN Security Council reform remains blocked by competing claims and opposition from states that would lose influence. The G20 struggles with expanding its agenda beyond finance to include development, climate change, and security issues, risking dilution of focus and effectiveness.

❑ Regional suspicion constrains global ambitions

China faces suspicion throughout East Asia regarding its intentions. Despite economic interdependence, countries like Japan, Vietnam, and the Philippines worry about Chinese

assertiveness over territorial disputes and military expansion. China's "charm offensive" of the 2000s gave way to more aggressive postures after 2009, particularly in the South China Sea, increasing regional anxieties. India's neighbours in South Asia have long viewed New Delhi with suspicion due to India's overwhelming size and past interventions, although relationships have improved recently. Russia's actions in Georgia and Ukraine demonstrate a continued willingness to use force in its "near abroad," undermining claims about a peaceful rise.

Brazil, South Africa, and Nigeria face different challenges. Their neighbours sometimes resist their bids for regional leadership positions. Argentina and Mexico question Brazil's qualifications for a permanent UN Security Council seat. Egypt and other African states wonder about Nigeria's special claim to represent Africa. Pakistan opposes India's Security Council ambitions. These regional rivalries complicate emerging powers' global aspirations because regional support enhances legitimacy, while regional opposition undermines it.

❑ Sustainable influence requires regional legitimacy

The tension between global ambition and regional engagement appears in several ways. Indonesia's pursuit of G20 prominence raises questions about maintaining ASEAN centrality. Brazil faces dilemmas between strengthening MERCOSUR and using G20 membership to project global influence. Some emerging powers may be tempted to "leapfrog" their less glamorous neighbourhoods to pursue global prestige, but sustainable global influence likely requires regional legitimacy. Historical examples like the US Monroe Doctrine, which sought global leadership while dominating the Western Hemisphere, will not work in the twenty-first century's more interconnected and institutionalised environment.

1.1.5.3 Norm-Making and Norm-Taking

Traditionally, developing countries were viewed as norm-takers, passively receiving international norms created by Western powers. However, historical evidence shows that Third World countries actively reinterpreted and expanded norms like non-intervention and sovereign equality. They created new norms for the developing world, such as the non-aligned movement's principle of avoiding Cold War military alliances. They contributed to climate change principles like "common but differentiated responsibilities," which recognise shared

❑ Emerging powers can reshape norms

environmental stakes while assigning primary responsibility to developed countries.

Emerging powers today display divergent attitudes toward global norms. Most remain strongly committed to traditional principles of sovereignty and non-intervention. China, India, Brazil, Russia, and South Africa all face significant internal conflicts and, therefore, resist external interference. China confronts separatist challenges in Tibet and Xinjiang, as well as broader political dissent. India deals with Maoist insurgencies, conflicts in the Northeast, and issues in Kashmir. Russia faces Chechen separatism and regional tensions. South Africa grapples with extreme inequality that generates social tensions. Brazil has a complex internal diversity. These domestic challenges reinforce their attachment to sovereignty.

❑ Africa and china offer normative alternatives

However, subtle shifts are occurring. African countries, including South Africa and Nigeria, have led the development of humanitarian intervention norms through the African Union. The Constitutive Act of the African Union recognises the right to intervene in member states in cases of war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity. This represents a significant evolution from the Organisation of African Unity's strict non-intervention stance. The concept of Responsibility to Protect (R2P), while controversial, drew significant African input. Francis Deng, a Sudanese diplomat, helped develop the idea of "sovereignty as responsibility," arguing that governments failing to protect their people forfeit their sovereignty claims.

China offers distinctive normative contributions drawing from its philosophical traditions. Chinese scholars propose concepts like Tianxia (all under heaven), emphasising harmony among different systems rather than uniformity. Yan Xuetong advocates principles such as "righteousness" and "benevolence," which complement but also challenge Western liberal norms. Righteousness requires that state actions be upright and necessary, not merely democratically legitimised. Benevolence towards weaker states means that strong powers should provide assistance rather than merely respecting formal sovereign equality. These principles reflect different cultural foundations and could shape China's approach to regional and global order.



1.1.5.4 Limitations and Prospects

- ❑ Multiple constraints limit transformative capacity

Emerging powers face multiple limitations constraining their ability to reshape global order. First, they lack sufficient cohesion for collective action. Internal divisions, competitive relationships, and divergent interests within BRICS prevent unified approaches to reform. Second, they still depend substantially on existing institutions and cannot easily create parallel structures. China and India benefit from the current trading system; attempting to overturn it would harm their own interests. Third, they have limited capacity to provide global public goods. None possesses the military reach, institutional infrastructure, or economic resources to replace American leadership functions.

Fourth, domestic challenges constrain international ambitions. All BRICS countries face risks of middle-income traps, political instability, environmental crises, or social conflicts. Excessive focus on global status could undermine necessary domestic reforms. Fifth, normative differences with Western powers on issues like democracy, human rights, and intervention create tension but also limit the appeal of emerging powers. Democratic emerging powers such as India and Brazil face pressure to distance themselves from authoritarian Russia and China, while all emerging powers encounter criticism for prioritising sovereignty over human rights.

- ❑ Emerging powers diversity international order

Despite these limitations, emerging powers do challenge existing inequities and introduce healthy diversity to the international order. They question Western dominance of institutions created when their own capabilities were minimal. They demand a voice and representation commensurate with their current economic weight. They offer alternative development models and governance approaches. They demonstrate that the Western path to modernity is not universal. Their rise forces established powers to share authority and accept more genuinely multilateral cooperation. Whether through gradual reform of existing institutions or the creation of parallel structures, emerging powers will significantly shape twenty-first-century global order.

1.1.6 Regionalism and Regional Orders

1.1.6.1 Changing Nature and Purpose

Regionalism refers to cooperation among states within a defined geographic area. Regional organisations pursue

❑ Regionalism expanded beyond original mandates

economic integration, political coordination, security cooperation, or some combination of these goals. The nature and purpose of regionalism have evolved significantly since World War II. Early regional organisations focused narrowly on specific functions: economic integration for the European Economic Community, security for the Arab League and OAS, or anti-colonial solidarity for the Organisation of African Unity. Contemporary regionalism is broader, more multifunctional, and more open to external engagement.

The proliferation of regional arrangements illustrates this evolution. By January 2013, 546 regional trade agreements had been notified to the WTO, with 354 in force. Beyond trade, regional organisations now address security, human rights, environmental protection, health emergencies, humanitarian intervention, democratisation, and development. ASEAN, originally focused on political cooperation among anti-communist states, now encompasses economic integration, security dialogue, human rights mechanisms, and environmental coordination. The African Union pursues economic development, democracy promotion, conflict resolution, and peace operations. MERCOSUR in South America combines trade integration with political cooperation and democracy protection.

❑ Open regionalism prevents exclusive bloc formation

Regionalism has become more inclusive rather than exclusionary. The concept of "open regionalism," developed in Asia, means that regional economic liberalisation extends benefits to non-members rather than creating protective blocs. Inter-regionalism connects different regional organisations through dialogue and cooperation. Examples include the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), the Forum for East Asia-Latin America Cooperation (FEALAC), and regular AU-EU summits. These cross-regional linkages prevent fragmentation into competing blocs and create multiple channels for international cooperation.

Regional institutions increasingly address transnational challenges that neither purely national nor global mechanisms handle effectively. ASEAN developed an ASEAN Political-Security Community partly in response to terrorism, piracy, pandemics like SARS, and natural disasters. The ARF undertakes initiatives for counter-terrorism financing, maritime security, and disaster relief. Climate change, migration, infectious diseases, and financial volatility require regional

coordination because their scope exceeds individual states but varies across regions. Regionalism thus complements global governance by addressing problems at an intermediate level.

1.1.6.2 Regional Diversity and the European Model

❑ EU model
does not travel
universally

Europe's integration through the European Union represents the most advanced form of regionalism, featuring supranational institutions, pooled sovereignty, and deep economic integration. The EU evolved from the European Coal and Steel Community through the European Economic Community to its current form, which encompasses monetary union, common foreign policy aspirations, and extensive regulatory harmonisation. It serves as a reference point for discussions of regionalism worldwide, but assuming the EU model should be universally replicated proves problematic.

Significant differences distinguish European from non-European regionalism. The historical foundations differ fundamentally. Europe has built on centuries of diplomatic interaction through balance-of-power systems and the Concert of Europe, while Asia has lacked comparable multilateral traditions, experiencing discontinuity due to colonial interventions. Foundational objectives diverged sharply; European integration aimed to overcome nationalism and constrain state sovereignty after two devastating world wars.

Security relationships with external powers create further distinctions. Europe developed multilateral security through NATO while building autonomous EU structures in a complementary fashion. In contrast, Asia experienced American bilateral alliances (the hub-and-spoke system) rather than multilateral frameworks. Asian regional institutions led by ASEAN include China, the target of American alliances, creating fundamentally different dynamics than Europe's overlapping NATO-EU arrangements. These differences mean that demanding EU-style supranational institutions or legal integration from Asian, African, or Latin American regionalism overlooks their distinct contexts and objectives.

Regional organisations outside Europe should be evaluated based on their own foundational goals rather than conformity to European templates. ASEAN has succeeded in maintaining stable post-colonial boundaries, preventing major interstate war among members, and creating frameworks for socialising former adversaries, including Vietnam and China.

- ❑ Evaluate regionalism by its own standards

African regional organisations have helped stabilise colonial borders and increasingly pursue humanitarian intervention and democracy promotion. Latin American regionalism has contributed to democratic consolidation and conflict resolution. These achievements deserve recognition, even though they do not replicate European models.

The EU's attractiveness as a model has diminished recently. The Eurozone crisis exposed vulnerabilities in monetary union and revealed democratic deficits in EU governance. The OSCE, once seen as a blueprint for other regions, has lost effectiveness. Russia's 2008 attack on Georgia, despite OSCE mechanisms, highlighted these limitations. NATO expansion, which George Kennan called the most fateful American policy error of the post-Cold War era, created provocation that arguably became a self-fulfilling prophecy by reinforcing Russian paranoia. By contrast, Asian regional institutions, despite lacking elaborate European-style mechanisms, arguably did better at socialising China than European institutions did with Russia.

1.1.6.3 Regionalism and Global Order

- ❑ Contemporary regionalism strengthen global order

The relationship between regionalism and global order generates ongoing debate. Some liberals distrust regionalism, fearing it could fragment into competing blocs like nineteenth-century Europe's alliances. Franklin Roosevelt rejected Winston Churchill's proposal for regional councils after World War II, preferring a single universal organisation for collective security. Contemporary concern focuses on regional trade agreements potentially undermining the multilateral trading system or regional security arrangements excluding major powers and creating dangerous vacuums.

However, contemporary regionalism differs fundamentally from nineteenth-century bloc formation. Regional trade agreements increasingly operate within WTO frameworks and extend most-favoured-nation treatment, preventing discriminatory blocs. The proliferation of overlapping arrangements creates networks rather than exclusive groupings. Major multinational corporations prefer multilateral rules that regional agreements increasingly approximate, pushing against protectionism. Regional trade agreements often pioneer liberalisation in areas like services, intellectual property, and investment, which are later incorporated into global frameworks.

Regional security institutions today are more open and inclusive than past alliances. The ARF includes all major powers plus ASEAN members. The East Asia Summit similarly brings together diverse actors. Inter-regionalism prevents the isolation of regional arrangements. Rather than fragmenting global order, contemporary regionalism potentially strengthens it by providing intermediate-level governance, testing policy innovations, and engaging diverse stakeholders. Regional institutions can address problems that global institutions cannot reach while reinforcing rather than undermining universal norms and rules.

❑ Regional foundations underpin future order

The future of global order likely requires stronger regional foundations rather than purely global or national approaches. Climate change requires regional action plans adapted to local circumstances within global frameworks. Financial regulation needs regional surveillance and coordination to supplement global standards. Conflict prevention and humanitarian intervention may be more effective when regional organisations take the lead with global support. The NIC 2030 Report acknowledges that economic trends, especially growing intraregional trade, point toward "a world order built more around regional structures" complementing global institutions.

1.1.6.4 Avoiding Hegemonic Regionalism

A final question involves whether the end of American global dominance will lead to regional hegemonies. Some predict China seeking regional hegemony in East Asia, India in South Asia, Russia in its "near abroad," Brazil in South America, Nigeria in West Africa, and South Africa in southern Africa. John Mearsheimer argues that aspiring great powers naturally seek regional hegemony as a more achievable and necessary goal than global dominance.

❑ Resistance limits hegemonic regionalism

However, several factors work against hegemonic regionalism. First, regional powers face significant resistance from neighbours. China's assertiveness since 2009 has increased regional concern and strengthened other states' relationships with the United States. India's dominance historically stifled SAARC, though recent improvements in bilateral relationships have created better prospects. Brazilian, Nigerian, and South African regional leadership faces opposition from neighbours suspicious of their intentions. These constraints mean regional hegemony requires restraint and multilateral engagement rather than domination.

Second, global status aspirations require regional legitimacy. Emerging powers cannot simply leapfrog their regions to pursue global influence. Indonesia's global ambitions through G20 membership must be balanced with ASEAN leadership. Brazil's global projection depends partly on MERCOSUR and South American cooperation. Regional legitimacy provides the foundation for credible global roles. Historical American exceptionalism, which established hemispheric dominance through the Monroe Doctrine while seeking global leadership, will not work in today's more interconnected and institutionalised world.

Third, regional powers are adopting different styles of engagement. Some remain hegemonic or domineering, like Russia in Eastern Europe and China in parts of Southeast Asia. Others pursue accommodationist approaches, like contemporary Japan, Brazil, and South Africa, showing restraint towards neighbours who reciprocate by acknowledging their leadership. Still others achieve communitarian integration, like Germany in the EU and Indonesia in ASEAN, where past aggression has been overcome through deep institutional cooperation and mutual restraint. The trend generally favours accommodationist and communitarian approaches over domineering hegemony.

1.1.7 The Multiplex World and Future Order

Two main possibilities exist for a post-hegemonic global order, with hybrid forms being the most likely. The global concert model envisions cooperation among established and emerging powers to manage international affairs. Like the nineteenth-century European Concert, major powers would develop shared rules, coordinate responses to crises, and provide collective leadership. However, contemporary concerts must be more inclusive, transparent, and democratically accountable than their historical predecessors. The G20 represents a tentative step towards this model, bringing together established and emerging economies for macroeconomic coordination.

❑ Concert model faces coherence challenges

Concerts face significant challenges. Emerging powers lack cohesion and shared interests. The ideological convergence necessary for concert operation remains limited. Democratic emerging powers hesitate to align fully with authoritarian Russia and China, while all emerging powers resist Western positions on issues like intervention and human rights. Moreover, concerts have historically marginalised smaller states, creating

legitimacy problems. Successful contemporary concerts would need to avoid elitism through genuine engagement with regional organisations, civil society, and broader international institutions. The nineteenth-century European Concert ultimately failed, collapsing into the Crimean War and eventually World War I. Contemporary concerts must do better.

The regional world approach emphasises multiple regional orders as building blocks for global stability. Rather than expecting homogeneous global frameworks imposed from the top, this approach accepts diverse regional arrangements adapted to local contexts and challenges. Regional institutions address problems at intermediate levels between purely national and fully global scales. They provide venues for socialising major powers, integrating former adversaries, and managing regional conflicts. They develop norms and practices that may eventually scale to global levels or may remain regionally specific.

❑ Regional diversity need not mean fragmentation

Regional diversity does not mean fragmentation if supported by open regionalism, inter-regional dialogue, and overlapping memberships. Contemporary regionalism is more inclusive and interconnected than past bloc formation. Regional trade agreements increasingly complement multilateral rules. Regional security institutions engage external powers rather than excluding them. Inter-regionalism creates multiple channels linking different parts of the world. This networked structure prevents isolation while allowing context-specific approaches.

1.1.7.1 The Multiplex Hybrid

The most plausible future combines elements of both approaches. A multiplex order would feature cooperation among established and emerging powers (concert element) operating through and alongside diverse regional arrangements (regional element). This hybrid avoids pure concert elitism by engaging regional organisations as legitimate stakeholders. It prevents pure regional fragmentation by maintaining global coordination among major powers and universal institutions. It recognises that different mechanisms work for different problems and different contexts.

❑ Hybrid multiplex combines both models

Global concerts would focus on truly systemic challenges like nuclear proliferation, pandemic prevention, and climate change, requiring worldwide coordination. Regional organisations

would address conflicts, development, and transnational issues within their areas while engaging global institutions for support. Smaller states would participate through regional organisations rather than being fully excluded, as in traditional concerts. Cross-regional dialogue would prevent isolation and promote learning across regions. Established and emerging powers would exercise restraint, share authority, and support regional autonomy rather than seek dominance.

❑ All actors must adjust for multiplex order

Achieving this multiplex order requires adjustments from all actors. The United States must genuinely share power and accept more democratic multilateral institutions rather than monopolising leadership. Emerging powers must contribute to order-building through peacekeeping, development assistance, and regional restraint, not just demand recognition. Regional organisations need empowerment through resources and capacity-building while maintaining openness. The UN Security Council should delegate more authority to regional bodies. All actors must balance their particular interests with collective responsibilities.

Summarised Overview

The transformation from Cold War bipolarity through brief American unipolarity to an emerging multipolar world represents one of the great transitions in modern international history. This unit has examined the nature of this transformation, the debates surrounding American decline, the limitations of liberal hegemonic order narratives, the capabilities and constraints of emerging powers, and the importance of regionalism in shaping global order. Several key conclusions emerge.

First, structural theories focusing solely on power distribution provide insufficient understanding of international order. While power matters, so do institutions, norms, identities, domestic politics, and historical contexts. The multiplex world concept offers a richer framework that captures the complexity and diversity in contemporary global politics. Second, claims about American-led liberal hegemonic order require critical examination. Its scope was more limited, its operation more coercive, and its contributions less singular than proponents suggest. Other actors, including European states, Latin American countries, Asian nations, and transnational movements, contributed significantly to global and regional order.

Third, emerging powers face real limitations despite growing capabilities. They lack cohesion, confront domestic challenges, need regional legitimacy, and cannot easily provide global public goods. However, they do challenge inequitable institutions, introduce normative diversity, and demand genuine multilateralism. Fourth, regionalism



has evolved dramatically and now represents a crucial dimension of global order. Regional institutions are more open, multifunctional, and interconnected than past blocs. They complement rather than threaten global governance if properly designed and supported.

Fifth, the future likely involves hybrid arrangements combining great power cooperation with strong regional foundations. Pure American hegemony cannot be restored. Pure emerging power dominance is implausible. Traditional multipolar rivalry is not inevitable. Instead, a multiplex world featuring diverse centres of authority, multiple governance mechanisms, and cross-cutting partnerships can provide order. This requires all actors to adjust expectations, share authority, and work together across differences.

The end of American hegemonic dominance need not mean chaos or instability. It creates opportunities for more equitable, legitimate, and effective international cooperation. Whether humanity seizes these opportunities depends on the wisdom, restraint, and creativity of leaders and citizens worldwide. Understanding the complex dynamics explored in this unit provides an essential foundation for navigating this critical transition.

Self-Assessment Questions

1. What is the difference between bipolarity, unipolarity, and multipolarity in international relations?
2. Why did the "unipolar moment" after the Cold War prove to be relatively brief?
3. What are the main arguments made by those who believe the United States is in decline?
4. How did the liberal hegemonic order differ from previous international systems?
5. What are the BRICS countries, and why are they considered important emerging powers?
6. Why do emerging powers face challenges in achieving regional legitimacy?
7. How does contemporary regionalism differ from the regional blocs of the nineteenth century?
8. What is meant by the concept of a "multiplex world"?
9. Why is the European Union not a perfect model for regionalism in other parts of the world?
10. What are the two main pathways discussed for organising global order after American hegemony?

Assignment

1. Analyse the strengths and weaknesses of bipolar, unipolar, and multipolar international systems. Which structure do you believe is most conducive to global stability and why?
2. Critically evaluate the claim that the liberal hegemonic order created by the United States after World War II was both universal and benevolent. What evidence supports or challenges this claim?
3. Assess the role of emerging powers (BRICS) in contemporary global governance. What contributions can they make, and what limitations do they face?
4. Compare and contrast regionalism in Europe and Asia. Why have these two regions developed such different approaches to regional cooperation?
5. Explain the concept of the "multiplex world" and discuss whether it provides a useful framework for understanding contemporary international relations.
6. Examine the relationship between regional legitimacy and global influence for emerging powers. Use specific country examples to illustrate your argument.
7. Discuss the future of American power in the international system. Will the United States remain the dominant global power, and if not, what might replace American hegemony?
8. Analyse how the end of the Cold War transformed regional organisations around the world. What new roles did they adopt, and why?

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU



American Hegemony

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, learners will be able to:

- explain the concept of hegemony and distinguish it from simple dominance by understanding how the United States combined material power with intellectual and moral leadership in shaping the post-World War II international order
- analyse the unipolar moment that emerged after the Cold War ended in 1991 and evaluate how the United States exercised global leadership during this unique period in international relations
- identify and assess the major challenges to American hegemony from rising powers
- evaluate competing perspectives on whether US hegemony is declining or enduring

Background

Imagine a classroom where one student is not only the strongest and smartest but also sets the rules for group projects, decides which games everyone plays during breaks, and convinces others that following these rules benefits everyone. Now imagine what happens when this student faces personal problems at home, when other students grow stronger and smarter, or when classmates begin questioning whether the rules are really fair. This simple scenario mirrors a much larger question that scholars and policymakers worldwide are asking today: Is American global leadership fading, or does the United States still guide the international system?

Since the end of World War II in 1945, the United States has occupied a unique position in world politics. It did not merely possess military and economic strength; it also created institutions like the United Nations, shaped global trade rules, promoted democratic values, and convinced many nations that following American leadership served their interests. However, recent decades have witnessed significant changes.

China has become an economic powerhouse, and Russia has challenged Western norms through military interventions. The United States itself has experienced domestic political divisions and questioned its international commitments. European allies have grown uncertain about American reliability. These developments raise profound questions about the future of global order. Understanding American hegemony requires exploring not just power and dominance but also legitimacy, consent, and the complex interplay between material capabilities and ideas that shape how nations cooperate and compete in our interconnected world.

Keywords

Unipolarity, Bipolarity, Soft Power, Hard Power, Legitimacy, Liberal International Order, Collective Imperialism, Counter-hegemony, Atlanticism, Triad, Post-hegemonic Era

Discussion

American hegemony represents one of the most debated topics in contemporary International Relations. The term hegemony itself carries different meanings depending on how scholars use it. This unit examines how the United States rose to global leadership after World War II, how it exercised this leadership during the unique unipolar moment following the Cold War, and what challenges now threaten its dominant position. The analysis moves beyond simple measurements of military or economic power to explore deeper questions about legitimacy, consent, and the cultural and institutional foundations that sustain hegemonic orders. By understanding these dynamics, students can better grasp current debates about whether we are witnessing the decline of American hegemony or merely its transformation.

1.2.1 Definitions and Conceptual Foundations

1.2.1.1 Understanding Hegemony versus Dominance

Many people confuse hegemony with simple dominance or control through force. However, scholars draw important distinctions between these concepts. Dominance refers to the ability of a powerful state to impose its will on others through coercive means such as military force or economic sanctions. A dominant power relies primarily on threats and punishment to achieve its goals. In contrast, hegemony involves a more



- ❑ Hegemony is leadership, not mere force

sophisticated form of leadership that combines material power with intellectual and moral authority.

A hegemon does not merely force other states to comply with its preferences. Instead, it creates an international order where other states voluntarily accept or even support its leadership because they believe this arrangement serves their interests. The hegemon establishes principles, norms, rules, and institutions that structure international behaviour. These institutional arrangements become seen as natural or legitimate rather than imposed. Other states internalise these norms and follow them not because they fear punishment but because they accept the underlying values and see benefits in cooperation.

Antonio Gramsci, an Italian social theorist, originally developed the concept of hegemony to explain how ruling classes maintain power within societies. Robert Cox adapted Gramsci's insights to international relations. According to Cox, hegemony in world order refers to a structure of values and understandings about the nature of order that permeates the entire system of states and non-state entities. In a hegemonic order, the ways of thinking and doing promoted by the dominant state acquire the acquiescence of elites in other states. The structure appears as the natural order rather than something artificially imposed.

- ❑ Gramsci - cox framework explains consent

This conceptual distinction helps explain why the United States after World War II differed from earlier empires. The United States did not primarily rule through direct colonial control. Instead, it created international institutions like the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. It promoted ideas like free trade, democracy, and human rights. It built alliance systems like NATO that involved mutual commitments rather than simple subordination. While the United States certainly possessed overwhelming military and economic power, its hegemony rested on convincing other states that the American-led order benefited them as well.

1.2.1.2 Material and Ideational Dimensions of Hegemony

Hegemonic power operates through both material and ideational dimensions. The material dimension includes tangible resources such as military capabilities, economic productivity, technological innovation, and financial strength. The United States emerged from World War II with unmatched industrial

❑ Both material and ideational power matter

capacity, nuclear weapons, a powerful navy, and control over global financial institutions. This material preponderance gave Washington the ability to shape outcomes through rewards and punishments.

However, material power alone does not create hegemony. The ideational dimension involves the spread of ideas, values, norms, and beliefs that legitimise the existing order. The United States promoted liberal democratic governance, market capitalism, individual rights, and the rule of law as universal values. These ideas became embedded in international institutions and treaties, shaping how policymakers thought about proper state behaviour. Educational exchanges, cultural products, and media helped spread American ideas globally.

❑ Soft power makes hegemony more durable

Joseph Nye coined the term "soft power" to describe this ability to attract and persuade rather than coerce. Soft power arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies. When other countries admire American values and desire similar systems, the United States can achieve its goals without deploying military force or economic sanctions. This makes leadership less costly and more sustainable. However, soft power depends on maintaining legitimacy and credibility. When American actions contradict stated values or when domestic dysfunction becomes visible, soft power erodes.

The combination of hard power and soft power creates what Nye calls "smart power." A successful hegemon uses military and economic capabilities to establish the basic structure of order while simultaneously employing attraction and persuasion to win voluntary cooperation. This combination makes hegemony more efficient and durable than simple dominance.

1.2.2 Historical Evolution of American Hegemony

1.2.2.1 Foundations in the Post-World War II Era

❑ Interwar isolation gave way to engagement

The United States did not immediately assume global hegemonic responsibilities. After World War I, America retreated into isolationism despite President Woodrow Wilson's efforts to create the League of Nations. The US Senate refused to ratify the Treaty of Versailles, and America remained outside the League it had inspired. This withdrawal contributed to the instability that led to World War II.



World War II transformed American thinking about international engagement. The devastation in Europe and Asia, the threat posed by fascism, and the economic chaos of the 1930s convinced American leaders that the United States needed to take an active role in building a stable international order. Unlike after World War I, American policymakers now understood that their security and prosperity depended on global stability.

The United States emerged from World War II with enormous advantages. Its territory had not been bombed, its industrial capacity had actually grown during the war, and it possessed nuclear weapons. Its navy controlled the seas. Economically, America produced roughly half of global GDP in 1945. This overwhelming material preponderance provided the foundation for hegemonic leadership.

American leaders used this power to create new international institutions. The United Nations was established in 1945 to provide collective security and prevent future wars. The Bretton Woods Conference in 1944 created the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to manage the international monetary system and provide development financing. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, later replaced by the World Trade Organization, established rules for international trade. These institutions embedded American preferences for multilateralism, open markets, and international law.

❑ Postwar institutions embedded US preferences

The Marshall Plan demonstrated how the United States combined self-interest with a broader vision. Announced in 1947, this programme provided massive economic assistance to rebuild war-torn Europe. American policymakers recognised that European recovery would create markets for American goods, prevent communist expansion, and build stable democratic partners. European countries appreciated the aid and largely accepted American leadership. This established a pattern where US hegemony involved genuine benefits for partners rather than pure exploitation.

1.2.2.2 The Cold War: Bipolar Hegemony

The Cold War complicated American hegemonic ambitions. The Soviet Union emerged as a rival superpower with its own ideology, military capabilities, and sphere of influence. The international system became bipolar, divided between American-led and Soviet-led camps. Nuclear weapons and the

doctrine of mutual assured destruction created a precarious balance of power.

During this period, American hegemony operated primarily within the Western camp. The United States led NATO and maintained alliances in Asia through bilateral security treaties with Japan, South Korea, and others. It promoted capitalism and democracy among its allies while containing communist expansion. The Truman Doctrine committed America to supporting free peoples resisting subjugation. This ideological framework justified American intervention in conflicts worldwide.

❑ Cold war confined hegemony to western camp

Despite bipolar competition, certain elements of world order emerged through a tacit understanding between the superpowers. Both sides gradually accepted each other's spheres of influence. They cooperated on nuclear non-proliferation through treaties like the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. After the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, both sought to avoid direct confrontation that could lead to nuclear war. This created a form of order even within rivalry.

Henry Kissinger, serving as National Security Advisor and Secretary of State in the 1970s, pursued a strategy of détente that sought to manage superpower relations through negotiation rather than confrontation. He worked to bring China into the international system as a counterweight to Soviet power. These efforts reflected an understanding that even a hegemon must accommodate other powers and work toward shared understandings about acceptable behaviour.

1.2.2.3 The Unipolar Moment: 1990s

The collapse of the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991 created what Charles Krauthammer called the unipolar moment. For the first time in centuries, great power rivalry seemed to disappear. Russia was economically weak and politically chaotic. China had not yet emerged as a major power. No state or coalition could challenge American preferences in the international system.

The 1990s represented a rare historical decade of relative stability, harmony, and peace in international relations. Many observers believed that major powers were converging on a single model of international order based on democracy, free markets, and international law. Francis Fukuyama famously



❑ 1990s :
convergence on
liberal order

argued that history had reached its endpoint with the universal acceptance of Western liberal democracy.

During this period, the United States expanded NATO to include former Soviet bloc countries in Eastern Europe. It intervened militarily in the Balkans to stop ethnic cleansing and promoted globalisation and the expansion of free trade. International institutions like the United Nations, IMF, and World Bank were transformed to reflect this new reality. The European Union deepened integration and adopted a common currency.

Major non-allied powers largely acquiesced to American leadership during this period. China chose to integrate into the global economy rather than balance against the United States. It joined the World Trade Organization in 2001 and embraced market reforms. Russia, under President Boris Yeltsin and later Dmitri Medvedev, spoke about partnership with the West and economic reform. India and Brazil appeared to be rising powers that could responsibly contribute to the existing order.

John Ikenberry argued that this period demonstrated a distinctly liberal logic to international order. The United States created institutions with rules that constrained even American behaviour. It made commitments that other states could rely upon. This institutional framework gave other countries a stake in preserving the system. Constraints and understandings between major powers became formalised rather than remaining informal bargains.

❑ Unipolarity could
not survive its
contradictions

However, this unipolar moment proved temporary. The United States possessed overwhelming material power but faced limits in converting this power into desired outcomes. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrated the difficulty of transforming societies through military intervention. The 2008 financial crisis revealed vulnerabilities in the American-led economic system. Meanwhile, China's rapid economic growth and Russia's recovery under Vladimir Putin created new centres of power.

1.2.3 Challenges to American Hegemony

1.2.3.1 The End of Consensus

The post-Cold War consensus began breaking down in the 2000s. Several developments marked this shift. The terrorist

❑ Unilateralism
fractured
post cold war
consensus

attacks of September 11, 2001, led the United States to launch a global war on terror that included invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. These wars divided American allies and consumed enormous resources. The unilateral decision to invade Iraq in 2003, despite opposition from France, Germany, and Russia, damaged American legitimacy.

By 2014, analysts increasingly wrote about the collapse of international order. Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea represented the first such territorial conquest in Europe since World War II. This flagrantly violated norms against changing borders through force. Significantly, Brazil and India abstained when the UN Security Council voted to condemn Russia's action, indicating that even democratic rising powers no longer automatically supported Western positions.

❑ China and Russia
challenge liberal
norms

China's behaviour also shifted dramatically. Beijing engaged in land reclamation projects in the South China Sea to advance territorial claims and control vital sea lanes. These actions violated international law as determined by arbitration tribunals, but China simply ignored unfavourable rulings. China became increasingly assertive in multilateral organisations, working to dilute criticism of its human rights record and weaken international norms of transparency and accountability.

China used its economic leverage to coerce other countries. It pressured nations to adopt Chinese technology, such as Huawei's 5G equipment. It forced countries to remain silent about human rights abuses, including what many observers called the largest internment of an ethnic or religious minority since World War II, targeting Uighurs in Xinjiang. China's Belt and Road Initiative, involving an estimated one trillion dollars in infrastructure investment, largely ignored World Bank standards and created new dependencies.

Russia's cooperation with the Syrian regime to inflict mass atrocities on civilians marked another departure from post-Cold War norms. Russia's interference in the 2016 US presidential election represented an unprecedented act that continued through massive social media manipulation. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, China adopted more assertive disinformation operations.

Even US allies diverged from the liberal order. Hungary's democracy withered under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Turkey became increasingly authoritarian under President Recep



❑ US itself undermined its own order

Tayyip Erdogan. Saudi Arabia's crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, abandoned cautious foreign policies in favour of violent intervention in Yemen, creating a humanitarian catastrophe.

These developments reflected the return of great power rivalry. China and Russia explicitly defended a Westphalian model of order organised around balance of power, national sovereignty, and spheres of influence. They opposed the American promotion of humanitarian intervention, democracy promotion, and strengthened alliances. Meanwhile, the United States, under President Donald Trump, questioned the value of alliances, imposed tariffs on allies and adversaries alike, abandoned support for human rights and democracy, and withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and the Paris climate accord.

1.2.3.2 Transformational Changes and New Challenges

Beyond geopolitical shifts, profound transformational changes challenged the foundations of the post-war order. New technologies in artificial intelligence and biological science, along with the internet and social media, fundamentally altered how people work and consume information. These changes affected basic structures of society that had been in place since the late nineteenth century.

❑ Technology and pandemic eroded US credibility

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated these trends. It changed societies at both micro and macro levels in ways most individuals could not understand or shape. The crisis revealed governance gaps, with some democracies like Germany, New Zealand, South Korea, and Taiwan mobilising effective responses while the United States fell far behind. This damaged American soft power and legitimacy.

International challenges have multiplied. How should the world integrate new technologies while mitigating negative effects? How can nations cooperate on transnational dangers like pandemic disease, terrorism, and nuclear proliferation? How can humanity reduce the long-term threat of climate change? How can the global economy produce benefits for the middle classes rather than creating vulnerabilities? How can the international community respond to China's rise without destabilising confrontation?

These questions require collective action, but the foundations for such cooperation have eroded. The world has moved away from a single set of shared constraints and common rules. Instead, many countries now choose their own paths without much reference to others' views. This heterogeneity reflects the projection of domestic characteristics of major powers into the international arena. Corruption, lack of accountability, and absence of freedom in autocratic countries have become their version of order exported globally.

1.2.3.3 American Domestic Dysfunction

Internal challenges within the United States have weakened its hegemonic position. The country faces a reputation as a dysfunctional superpower unable to pass budgets, manage debt, ratify treaties, or conduct coherent foreign policy. Domestic political polarisation has intensified. The January 6, 2021, insurrection at the US Capitol shocked international observers and raised questions about American democratic stability.

American dysfunction saps the public's will to play a leadership role globally. It reduces the legitimacy of American power overseas. Continued dysfunction puts the United States at a strategic disadvantage compared to China, which can pursue long-term strategies without electoral interruptions. The failure to invest adequately in education, infrastructure, and technology undermines competitiveness.

❑ Domestic dysfunction undermines external legitimacy

For twenty years, the United States has failed to effectively blend leverage and diplomacy in pursuit of geopolitical goals. Sometimes America acquired massive leverage but failed to convert it into diplomatic victory, as when threats of force in 2003 compelled Saddam Hussein to allow weapons inspectors into Iraq but led to war anyway. Other times, intensive diplomacy proceeded without real leverage, as in the failed 2014-15 Israeli-Palestinian peace effort.

❑ Leverage and diplomacy failed to integrate

The alliance system that provided enormous advantages has eroded. President Trump persistently undermined alliances by questioning their value and demanding higher payments from partners. Even under President Biden, allies question American reliability. How long will it take to reestablish trust? No longer can Washington routinely ignore the views of important like-minded states and still achieve policy success. Revolutionary changes in mind and practice are required to work collaboratively with allies rather than dictating to them.



1.2.3.4 Economic Vulnerabilities

Despite maintaining the world's largest economy, the United States faces significant economic vulnerabilities. The country runs persistent trade deficits, importing far more than it exports. National savings rates are low. The economy functions in some ways as a parasite, with deficits covered by capital inflows from Europe, Japan, China, and even poorer countries in the Global South.

❑ Deficits and overextension drain power

This dependence on foreign capital represents a serious vulnerability. America's superpower status relies on the daily flow of capital that sustains its consumption and investment. If other countries choose to redirect their surplus capital towards domestic uses rather than financing American deficits, the US economy would face severe adjustments. The dollar's role as the global reserve currency provides advantages but also creates what some call an exorbitant privilege that cannot be taken for granted indefinitely.

Military overextension compounds economic problems. The United States maintains nearly 750 military bases and installations in more than 130 countries. It has been involved in continuous wars since the early 1990s, including the Gulf War, interventions in Somalia and the Balkans, the invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the ongoing war on terror. These commitments drain resources and sap economic strength. Historical precedents from the Dutch and British hegemonies suggest that military overextension often precedes hegemonic decline.

1.2.3.5 Rise of Competing Powers and Blocs

The rise of China represents the most significant challenge to American hegemony. China has become the world's second-largest economy and is predicted to surpass the United States in total GDP within two decades. Chinese manufacturing output has exceeded American production. China has made massive investments in technology, infrastructure, and education. Its Belt and Road Initiative extends Chinese influence across Asia, Africa, and Europe.

❑ China leads challengers but faces limits

However, China faces severe domestic problems, including an aging population, environmental degradation, ethnic tensions, and the need to transition from export-led growth to domestic consumption. Questions remain about whether

China can convert material power into an acceptable form of international order that other states will voluntarily support. Chinese authoritarianism and human rights violations limit its soft power appeal.

Russia, under Vladimir Putin, has attempted to reassert influence, particularly in its near abroad. Russia's annexation of Crimea, intervention in Syria, and interference in Western elections demonstrate its willingness to challenge American-led norms. However, Russia's economy remains relatively small and dependent on energy exports, and its population is declining. Russia lacks the comprehensive capabilities required for global hegemony, though it can disrupt the existing order.

The European Union represents another potential pole of power, with a larger economy than the United States and a population of over 400 million. However, Europe remains divided on foreign policy, dependent on American security guarantees through NATO, and committed to economic neoliberalism that constrains growth. The Brexit departure of Britain further weakened European unity. Whether Europe can develop strategic autonomy and an independent vision remains uncertain.

❑ Other challengers have significant limitations

Collective groupings like BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) have sought to coordinate positions and create alternative institutions like the New Development Bank. However, these coalitions face internal divisions and divergent interests. India and China have border disputes, and Russia and China have historically been rivals. Brazil has experienced severe political and economic turmoil. Whether these groupings can mount effective counter-hegemonic challenges remains doubtful.

1.2.4 Theoretical Debates on the Future of Hegemony

1.2.4.1 Hegemonic Stability Theory

Hegemonic stability theory argues that a stable and open international economy requires a single dominant power willing and able to establish and maintain the rules of the system. The hegemon provides public goods such as security, a stable currency, and open markets. It enforces rules by rewarding compliant states and punishing violators. Without a hegemon, cooperation becomes difficult because states fear that others will cheat or free-ride on their contributions.

❑ Hegemonic stability theory : order needs a leader



- ❑ Cooperation possible without a single hegemon

- ❑ Declinists see inevitable hegemonic cycles

Intense debate surrounds the question of whether American hegemony is declining. One perspective, represented by scholars like Immanuel Wallerstein, argues that hegemonic cycles are inevitable. Hegemons overextend themselves militarily and economically and face rising challengers who eventually surpass them. The United Provinces (Netherlands) gave way to Britain, which in turn gave way to the United States. Now, America faces decline as China rises.

However, other scholars, following Susan Strange's argument about the myth of American decline, maintain that reports of hegemonic decline are greatly exaggerated. They note that American economic and military advantages remain

- ❑ Ati - declinists cite enduring structural advantages

overwhelming. The United States still has the world's largest economy, most powerful military, most dynamic technology sector, and most influential culture. Its alliance networks provide force multiplication that China and Russia cannot match. The dollar remains the global reserve currency, and American universities, research institutions, and companies lead in innovation.

Thomas White emphasises that international relationships truly underpin superpowers, and the notion of China leading a successful international coalition remains a fantasy. Despite economic gains, China lacks the alliance networks, institutional influence, and soft power appeal necessary for hegemony. Other countries fear Chinese dominance and prefer to balance against Beijing. The Belt and Road Initiative has generated backlash as countries become wary of debt traps and Chinese influence.

1.2.4.3 Alternative Futures: Multipolarity or Post-Hegemony

Several possible futures exist for international order. One scenario involves a transition to multipolarity, with several major powers sharing leadership responsibilities. The United States would remain *primus inter pares* (first among equals) but would no longer dominate unilaterally. China, Europe, India, and perhaps others would constitute additional poles. Order would emerge from bargaining and balance among these powers.

- ❑ Three possible futures for global order

This scenario resembles the Concert of Europe in the nineteenth century, where major powers managed the international system through consultation and compromise. However, creating such a system requires agreement on basic principles and a willingness to accommodate each other's core interests. Current tensions between the United States and China, as well as between liberal democracies and autocracies, make such agreement difficult.

- ❑ Political culture divides the triad

Another scenario involves movement toward a post-hegemonic world where no single power or group of powers can dominate. Order would emerge from international institutions, norms, and networks rather than hierarchical leadership. States and non-state actors would cooperate on specific issues through flexible arrangements. This might be more egalitarian but could also be less stable and more prone to conflict.



A third scenario involves what some call collective imperialism of the triad: the United States, Europe, and Japan (plus Canada, Australia, and New Zealand). This group would manage globalisation through institutions like the WTO, IMF, and World Bank, while NATO handles security. However, this arrangement requires Europe and Japan to accept subordinate status under American leadership, which has become increasingly difficult.

1.2.5 Contemporary State of American Power

1.2.5.1 Continuing Strengths

Despite challenges, the United States retains formidable strengths that sustain its hegemonic position. American military power remains unmatched. The United States spends more on defence than the next ten countries combined. It operates eleven aircraft carrier strike groups, while other nations have at most two. American forces can project power globally through bases, alliances, and logistics networks. Nuclear weapons provide ultimate deterrence.

Economically, the American market remains the world's largest and most attractive for foreign businesses. American companies dominate in technology, entertainment, finance, and numerous other sectors. Silicon Valley continues to generate innovations that shape global digital infrastructure. The dollar's role as a reserve currency provides economic and geopolitical advantages, allowing the United States to borrow in its own currency and use financial sanctions as policy tools.

❑ Military, economic and alliance strengths persist

American universities attract the world's best students and scholars. Research and development spending, while insufficient relative to China, generates breakthroughs in science and technology. American culture, from movies and music to fashion and fast food, enjoys global appeal. This soft power remains valuable even when American policies generate opposition.

The alliance system, despite strains, represents an enormous advantage. NATO includes most of the world's advanced democracies. Bilateral alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, and others extend American influence across the Asia-Pacific. These partners provide bases, legitimacy, burden-sharing, and political support. China and Russia have no comparable alliance networks.

International institutions created under American leadership continue to function largely according to rules that favour US interests. The United Nations, despite limitations, provides a forum where American positions receive attention. The IMF and World Bank, while including more diverse voices, operate according to market-oriented principles promoted by Washington. The WTO, though weakened, still structures international trade.

1.2.5.2 Pathways to Sustained Leadership

To maintain effective leadership, the United States faces several requirements. Domestically, it must address dysfunctions that undermine credibility. This requires investing in education, fixing immigration systems, reducing corruption, developing advanced technologies like 5G, and adequately funding government operations. Creating a persuasive model of competent governance would reinforce international leadership.

❑ Domestic reform underpins external leadership

American diplomacy must improve at wielding leverage effectively. Rather than relying primarily on sanctions, the United States should find creative ways to use national power to create diplomatic opportunities. Making military assistance conditional on partner behaviour, rejoining and strengthening international agreements like the Iran nuclear deal, and using pressure to support democracy and human rights in allied countries could restore diplomatic effectiveness.

Revitalising North American collaboration with Canada and Mexico would build on continental strengths. Five hundred million people, favourable demographics, and vast energy resources provide a foundation for increased integration. As supply chains shift away from China, North American infrastructure investment and expanded roles for multilateral development banks could boost trade and prosperity.

❑ Allies and institutions must be reinvested

The United States must fundamentally reform how it deals with treaty allies and partners. This means occasionally accepting "no" as an answer rather than demanding compliance. Welcoming European defence cooperation initiatives, listening to allied strategies regarding Iran and other issues, and treating partners as genuine equals rather than subordinates would strengthen relationships.



Increasing ambitions with Europe beyond defence spending arguments could revitalise the transatlantic partnership. Agreed rules on data and technology regulation, cooperation on developing 5G and artificial intelligence, and common approaches to China's economic and political challenge would address issues affecting people's lives directly.

Strengthening relations with India, the world's largest democracy, offers strategic benefits. India recognises that Chinese dominance would harm its interests and that partnership with America can prevent this. While differences on trade and other issues exist, the primary objective should remain balancing China. Progress toward this goal justifies tolerating disagreements on secondary matters.

Investing properly in international institutions rather than withdrawing or refusing to pay obligations would counter Chinese influence. The United States should fully engage with modernised visions of multilateral organisations. Working with democracies to address imbalances favouring China at the WTO, developing new incentive structures for climate action, and reforming the WHO would demonstrate continued commitment to institutional cooperation.

1.2.5.3 Managing Competition with China

The relationship with China represents the central challenge for American hegemony. Full-throated permanent confrontation, as some advocate, risks catastrophic conflict. However, returning to the earlier convergence strategy that assumed China would become a responsible stakeholder in the American-led order no longer appears realistic. Xi Jinping has clearly articulated an alternative vision of global order centred on China's "community of common destiny."

❑ Middle path avoids confrontation and naivety

A middle path requires stopping deterioration in the balance of power through enhanced military, diplomatic, and economic power projection into Asia, increased interaction with allies and partners, and building up allied capabilities. The United States needs deployable assets to conduct successful diplomacy. Only by convincing Beijing that America will compete effectively over the long term can serious negotiations become possible.

Competition with China need not mean conflict across all domains. During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union cooperated on nuclear weapons management, non-

❑ Compartmentalise competition and cooperation

proliferation, smallpox eradication, and freedom of the seas even while competing fiercely elsewhere. Similarly, the United States and China should compartmentalise shared problems like climate change, pandemics, nuclear proliferation, cyberspace, and global economic stability. Making clear to the public that cooperation on these issues will continue even as competition proceeds in other domains could reduce the risks of catastrophic confrontation.

Comprehensive strategy towards China must be fully coordinated with allies and address trade and finance, international institutions, technology transfer, defence, cyber, and critical infrastructure. Joining a reconstituted Trans-Pacific Partnership would create economic leverage. Without intense collaboration, the United States cannot successfully compete with China, which will remain the preeminent strategic challenger for decades.

Pessimism about this competition is misplaced. With proper policies, the United States and its allies can successfully compete while avoiding combustible confrontation and defending their interests and values. This requires sustained focus, resource commitment, and alliance solidarity.

Summarised Overview

American hegemony remains a complex and contested reality. The United States continues to possess formidable material capabilities, influential institutions, attractive cultural products, and valuable alliance networks. However, the consensus that sustained American leadership during the unipolar moment has fractured. China's rise, Russia's assertiveness, European ambivalence, domestic American dysfunction, and profound global transformations challenge the foundations of the post-World War II order.

Whether we are witnessing hegemonic decline or merely a transition to a new form of leadership remains uncertain. Hegemonic cycles operate over centuries rather than decades, making definitive judgments premature. The United States retains unique advantages that no competitor can match in the foreseeable future. At the same time, the legitimacy that converts material power into accepted leadership has eroded significantly.

The future likely involves neither Chinese replacement of American hegemony nor the simple continuation of the post-1945 system. Instead, we may be entering a period of interregnum between orders, characterised by increased multipolarity, fragmented governance, and parallel systems operating according to different rules. How this transition unfolds, whether peacefully through institutional adaptation or violently

through great power conflict, depends on choices made by leaders and publics in the coming years.

Understanding hegemony as more than simple dominance, recognising the importance of legitimacy and consent, and appreciating how material power combines with ideas and institutions to create sustainable order provides essential tools for navigating these complex dynamics. The debates examined in this unit will shape international relations for decades to come, making them vital for students seeking to understand our rapidly changing world.

Self-Assessment Questions

1. What is the main difference between hegemony and dominance in international relations?
2. How did the United States use both hard power and soft power to establish its hegemonic position after World War II?
3. What characterised the unipolar moment of the 1990s, and why did it prove temporary?
4. Name three major challenges to American hegemony that emerged after 2001.
5. How did Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 violate international norms?
6. What domestic problems within the United States have weakened its global leadership?
7. Why is China's rise considered the most significant challenge to American hegemony?
8. According to hegemonic stability theory, what role does a hegemon play in the international economy?
9. What advantages does the United States still possess despite challenges to its hegemony?
10. How do political cultures differ between the United States and Europe according to the analysis in this unit?

Assignment

1. Analyze how the concept of hegemony differs from simple dominance by examining specific examples of American leadership after World War II. How did the United States combine material power with ideational influence?
2. Evaluate the argument that the 1990s represented a unipolar moment in international relations. What factors created this unique period, and what developments ended it?
3. Compare and contrast the challenges to American hegemony posed by China and Russia. Which represents the more significant long-term challenge, and why?
4. Assess the impact of domestic political dysfunction on American global leadership. How do internal problems affect international perceptions of US legitimacy and capability?
5. Critically examine hegemonic stability theory. Does historical evidence support the claim that international order requires a single dominant power? What are the theory's strengths and weaknesses?
6. Analyze the role of international institutions in sustaining American hegemony. How have institutions like the UN, IMF, and World Bank embedded American preferences in global governance?
7. Evaluate competing perspectives on whether American hegemony is declining. What evidence supports the decline thesis, and what evidence suggests continued American dominance?
8. Discuss the concept of collective imperialism of the triad (United States, Europe, Japan). How does this framework help explain contemporary patterns of global governance, and what are its limitations?

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Suggested Reading

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU



UNIT 3

Role of UN in Multipolar World

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, learners will be able to:

- analyze the concept of multipolarity and explain how the distribution of global power has shifted from the Cold War era to the present
- evaluate the evolution of the UN's role from its founding through the Cold War and post-Cold War periods
- critically assess the structural challenges facing the UN in a multipolar world and the limitations of enforcement mechanisms
- examine the UN's multiple roles as an actor, forum, and resource in contemporary global governance

Background

Imagine a global gathering where 193 nations, from the smallest island states to the most powerful superpowers, sit at the same table. This is the United Nations—the world's most ambitious experiment in collective governance. Born from the ashes of World War II in 1945, the UN was designed to prevent another catastrophic global conflict. For decades, it operated in the shadow of the Cold War, where two superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union—dominated world affairs. When the Cold War ended in 1991, many hoped the UN could finally fulfil its founding vision of maintaining global peace. However, the world did not become simpler. Instead, power began spreading across multiple countries and regions, creating what scholars call a "multipolar world." Today, the UN faces a fundamental question: Can an organisation designed for a 1945 world adapt to the realities of the 21st century, where China, India, Brazil, and other rising powers demand their rightful place at the table?

The challenges are immense. The UN Security Council, which holds the most power, still reflects the world as it was in 1945, not as it is today. Africa, Latin America, and much of Asia lack permanent representation despite being home to billions of people. Meanwhile, global crises from climate change to pandemics to regional conflicts test

the UN's ability to respond effectively. Some critics argue the organisation has become irrelevant, paralysed by great power rivalries and outdated structures. Others insist the UN remains indispensable—the only truly universal forum where all nations can meet, deliberate, and coordinate responses to shared challenges. This unit explores how the UN is evolving in our multipolar world, examining its successes, failures, structural challenges, and the reforms necessary for it to remain relevant in the decades ahead.

Keywords

Multipolarity, Sovereign Equality, Security Council Reform, Veto Power, Global South, Post-Cold War Order, Collective Security, Peacekeeping, Norm-Setting, Global Governance, Decentralisation, Democratisation

Discussion

The United Nations stands at a critical turning point in its institutional history. Established in 1945, when an American-led global order dominated international relations, the organisation now confronts a fundamentally transformed geopolitical landscape. The contemporary international system is characterised by multipolarity, where power is dispersed among multiple states and regional blocs rather than concentrated in a single hegemon. This shift from the unipolar moment following the Cold War to an era of diffused influence creates both existential challenges and potential opportunities for the UN. The organisation faces a profound crisis of credibility stemming from repeated failures to act decisively in major crises and from structural arrangements that remain frozen in 1945 power dynamics. Yet the UN retains essential functions that no other institution can perform, serving as the primary platform for multilateral dialogue and the principal arbiter of international legitimacy. This unit examines how the UN must adapt to survive and remain relevant in the multipolar era, analysing the organisation's evolution, assessing its effectiveness in contemporary contexts, and exploring necessary reforms.

1.3.1 Defining Multipolarity and its Implications

1.3.1.1 Understanding Multipolarity

Multipolarity describes a global system where multiple nations or power centres hold significant influence rather than



a single dominant power dictating international order. This framework results in a more balanced distribution of power among various countries and regional blocs. The contemporary multipolar system includes the United States, China, the European Union, Russia, India, and emerging coalitions such as BRICS Plus as major power centres. Each of these actors possesses substantial economic, military, or normative influence within their regions and increasingly on global issues.

1.3.1.2 Forces Driving Multipolarity

Power distribution in the multipolar system reflects several driving forces. Economic redistribution has elevated emerging markets, particularly China and India, to positions of global significance. China's rise as the world's second-largest economy and India's rapid growth trajectory have fundamentally altered global economic balances. Technological diffusion means innovation no longer remains confined to Western nations, with multiple countries developing advanced technological capabilities. Strategic realignment has produced new alliances and partnerships that challenge traditional Western-led institutional arrangements. Organisations like BRICS Plus and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation represent alternatives to Western-dominated forums.

1.3.1.3 Characteristics of the Multipolar System

Global governance and decision-making become more decentralised in multipolar systems, requiring negotiation among diverse actors with varying interests and values. No single power possesses sufficient authority to impose solutions or enforce compliance unilaterally. Instead, outcomes emerge from bargaining, coalition-building, and compromise among multiple stakeholders. This decentralisation increases complexity, as international relations involve managing

relationships among numerous power centres rather than navigating a simpler bipolar or unipolar structure.

❑ Decentralisation, fluidity and competing models

The multipolar system encourages fluid alliances and partnerships based on specific issues rather than fixed ideological camps. Countries may cooperate on some matters while competing on others, creating cross-cutting coalitions that shift based on context. This flexibility contrasts with Cold War bipolarity, where alliances remained relatively stable and opposition between camps defined most international interactions. The current system allows middle powers and regional actors greater autonomy to pursue their interests and forge partnerships across traditional divides.

Competing governance models characterise the multipolar landscape. Different powers promote varying approaches to organising political and economic systems, from liberal democracy and market capitalism to authoritarian state capitalism and hybrid regimes. This diversity of models challenges the post-Cold War assumption that liberal democracy represented the inevitable endpoint of political development. Instead, multiple pathways coexist, each claiming legitimacy and attracting adherents. The absence of consensus on fundamental governance principles complicates international cooperation on issues requiring shared normative frameworks.

1.3.1.4 The Global South's Growing Influence

The Global South has emerged as a more assertive bloc in the multipolar era, refusing to choose sides in great power competitions and demanding more inclusive governance structures. Developing countries increasingly reject binary choices between Western and non-Western camps, instead pursuing strategic autonomy that allows them to engage with multiple powers based on national interests. This assertiveness reflects dissatisfaction with existing global institutions that developing countries perceive as unrepresentative and skewed towards Western interests.

❑ Global south asserts strategic autonomy

The Global South's growing influence manifests in several ways. These countries constitute voting majorities in international organisations, enabling them to shape agendas and outcomes when they coordinate effectively. They increasingly possess economic leverage as markets, investment destinations, and resource suppliers that major powers seek to cultivate. Regional powers within the Global South, including Brazil,



- South forces more inclusive deliberation

1.3.2 Historical Context and Evolution of the UN

- UN structure reflected 1945 power realities

The UN Charter enshrined principles including the sovereign equality of states, a prohibition on the use of force except in self-defence or with Security Council authorisation, peaceful settlement of disputes, and respect for human rights. These principles reflected lessons from the failures of the interwar period and aspirations for a more stable and just international order. The organisation's structure incorporated both great power prerogatives through the Security Council and sovereign equality through the General Assembly, where each member state possessed one vote, regardless of size or power.

1.3.2.2 The Cold War Period

During its early decades, the UN operated within the constraints of Cold War bipolarity. Superpower competition frequently paralysed the Security Council as the United States and the Soviet Union wielded vetoes to protect their interests and allies. The organisation became an arena for East-West competition rather than the collective security mechanism its founders envisioned. However, the UN found roles in mediating regional conflicts, overseeing decolonisation, and developing international human rights and development frameworks that expanded its relevance beyond great power politics.

1.3.2.3 Post-Cold War Expansion

The end of the Cold War created expectations that the UN could finally fulfil its collective security mandate without superpower deadlock. The 1991 Gulf War, authorised by the Security Council with both American and Soviet support, suggested possibilities for unified international action against aggression. The 1990s witnessed significant UN activism, including peacekeeping operations in Cambodia, Mozambique, and El Salvador, humanitarian interventions in Somalia and Haiti, and the establishment of international criminal tribunals for Yugoslavia and Rwanda.

❑ Post cold war activism revealed UN limits

However, this period also exposed severe limitations. The UN failed to prevent or halt genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica despite peacekeepers on the ground. Controversial interventions in Somalia ended in withdrawal after casualties and mission failure. The 1999 Kosovo intervention proceeded without Security Council authorisation due to anticipated Russian vetoes, raising questions about whether humanitarian necessity could justify bypassing the UN. These experiences generated debates about UN effectiveness, appropriate mandates for peacekeeping operations, and tensions between sovereignty and humanitarian protection.

❑ Iraq and 2008 crisis accelerated multipolar shift

The unipolar moment following the Cold War proved brief. American dominance reached its zenith in the 1990s and early 2000s, but this period witnessed growing resistance to unilateral American power and Western-dominated institutions. The 2003 invasion of Iraq, conducted without Security Council authorisation despite intense diplomatic efforts, demonstrated the limits of American influence and deepened divisions between Western powers and much of the Global South.



Simultaneously, China's rapid economic rise and Russia's recovery from post-Soviet weakness began shifting global power distributions towards multipolarity.

1.3.2.4 Transition to Multipolarity

The global financial crisis of 2008 accelerated the transition towards multipolarity by exposing vulnerabilities in Western economic models and elevating the importance of emerging economies. The G20, rather than the traditional G7, became the primary forum for international economic coordination, symbolising the recognition that addressing global economic challenges required the inclusion of major developing countries. China's continued rapid growth, even as Western economies stagnated, reinforced perceptions of power shifting from West to East.

❑ Ukraine war crystallised multipolar reality

The 2010s witnessed increasingly assertive behaviour by rising powers challenging Western dominance. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and intervention in Syria demonstrated a willingness to use force to assert regional interests despite Western opposition. China's Belt and Road Initiative expanded its economic and political influence across Asia, Africa, and beyond. Regional organisations, including ASEAN, the African Union, and Mercosur, gained prominence as forums for coordinating positions and managing regional affairs with reduced Western involvement.

By the 2020s, multipolarity had become the defining characteristic of international relations. The war in Ukraine, beginning in 2022, both reflected and accelerated this transition. While Western nations united in supporting Ukraine and imposing sanctions on Russia, much of the Global South refused to choose sides, instead calling for negotiated settlements while maintaining relations with both camps. This response illustrated how multipolarity enables countries to pursue independent policies rather than aligning automatically with either Western or anti-Western blocs.

1.3.3 Evolution of the UN's Role Post-Cold War

1.3.3.1 Expanding Interpretation of Security Threats

The Charter's core rules, including sovereign equality, non-intervention, and the prohibition on the use of force, remained

- ❑ Security definition expanded significantly post - cold war

formally intact after the Cold War, but their interpretation evolved significantly. The Security Council increasingly linked internal crises to threats to international peace and security, expanding the scope of UN involvement beyond traditional interstate disputes. The ambiguity around what counts as essentially within domestic jurisdiction enabled the Council to redefine formerly internal issues, such as civil wars or mass atrocities, as international security problems.

Specific cases, such as North Korea's nuclear programme and atrocities in Darfur, illustrate this evolution. Once the Council labels such situations as threats to international peace, claims of exclusive domestic jurisdiction by the states concerned lose their legal force.

This practice effectively widened the scope of UN security governance, allowing the organisation to intervene politically, economically, or even militarily in areas that would previously have been treated as internal affairs.

1.3.3.2 Enforcement Powers and Their Limitations

- ❑ Enforcement remains largely symbolic

Post-Cold War practice confirms that the Security Council rarely uses full-scale enforcement powers, relying more on sanctions, political pressure, and the implicit threat of collective action than on Chapter VII military operations. The first Gulf War is presented as the clearest example of a fully centralised UN enforcement operation, but it proved to be exceptional. Subsequent practice shows that political disagreements among states usually prevent similar robust enforcement. The UN lacks its own military forces and relies on voluntary contributions from states for any enforcement action, which seriously limits the Security Council's ability to turn legal authority into actual operations, especially when major powers are unwilling to commit troops.

1.3.3.3 Evolving Role of UN Organs

- ❑ Organs evolved but remain state dependent

The General Assembly's role also evolved during the post-Cold War period. Although still legally limited to recommendations, its resolutions have achieved considerable political weight, especially in areas such as human rights, decolonisation, and normative declarations. The General Assembly played a crucial role in launching the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and continues to shape international norms through declaratory resolutions. Instruments like the Uniting for Peace resolution



demonstrate the Assembly's attempt to address peace and security when the Council is blocked, indicating a post-Cold War trend of using the UN's deliberative organs to compensate, at least symbolically, for great power deadlock.

The Secretariat, and especially the Secretary-General, increasingly act as political entrepreneurs. They can put issues on the agenda, propose solutions, and sometimes broker agreements, but their influence still depends on the willingness of states to use the UN as a vehicle. The Secretary-General's unique position as both chief administrative officer and global diplomat enables them to raise issues, mediate disputes, and invoke the UN's moral authority. However, even when the UN leadership has workable peace plans, regional and great power politics can sideline the organisation for years until broader geopolitical conditions change.

1.3.4 Structure and Organisational Framework

1.3.4.1 The UN System Architecture

The UN system extends far beyond the headquarters in New York to encompass a vast network of organs, specialised agencies, programmes, and affiliated organisations. This complexity reflects the organisation's comprehensive mandate spanning peace and security, development, human rights, humanitarian action, and international law. Six principal organs anchor the core UN structure: the General Assembly, Security Council, Secretariat, International Court of Justice, Economic and Social Council, and the now largely inactive Trusteeship Council.

❑ Complex architecture creates coordination challenges

Subsidiary bodies created by these principal organs implement specific mandates. Peacekeeping operations deploy military and civilian personnel to conflict zones under Security Council authorisation. Human rights bodies, including the Human Rights Council, monitor compliance with international human rights standards. Programmes like UNICEF, UNDP, and UNHCR address specific development and humanitarian challenges. These subsidiary entities vary greatly in independence, with some maintaining considerable operational autonomy while others remain under tight oversight from parent organs.

Specialised agencies operate with substantial independence while coordinating with the UN on shared objectives. These

include the World Health Organization, International Labour Organization, Food and Agriculture Organization, UNESCO, and the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. These agencies possess their own memberships, governing structures, and budgets, although they report to ECOSOC and collaborate with UN programmes. This decentralised architecture reflects the UN's pluralistic character but also creates coordination challenges when multiple entities work on related issues without integrated strategies.

1.3.4.2 The General Assembly and Democratic Representation

The General Assembly embodies the principle of sovereign equality, providing each member state one vote regardless of size, population, or power. This democratic structure gives smaller and developing countries the collective influence they lack in other forums where power relates more directly to economic or military capabilities. The Assembly serves as the primary arena for negotiation, agenda-setting, and the creation of subsidiary bodies addressing emerging global challenges.

❑ Assembly enable but cannot enforce

General Assembly resolutions are non-binding recommendations rather than enforceable obligations, limiting the body's direct power. However, these resolutions generate international legitimacy, establish norms, and signal global consensus or division on issues.

The Assembly's budget authority gives it significant influence, as UN operations depend on assessed contributions from member states. Developing countries, particularly through the Group of 77 coalition, have used budget processes to influence resource allocation toward development and Global South priorities. The Assembly provides a platform where small states can raise concerns, form coalitions, and shape international discourse.

1.3.4.3 The Security Council and Crisis of - Representation

The Security Council's structure reflects the power realities of 1945, which no longer correspond to contemporary global distributions. The five permanent members with veto power—the United States, United Kingdom, France, Russia, and China—represent the victorious World War II Allies. Ten non-permanent members elected for two-year terms



❑ Security council composition is anachronistic

provide limited additional representation. This arrangement grants disproportionate influence to the permanent five while excluding major contemporary powers and entire regions from permanent representation.

The Council's mandate focuses on maintaining international peace and security, with unique authority to authorise military force, impose sanctions, and issue binding decisions under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. In principle, this concentrated authority enables decisive action when threats to peace arise. In practice, the veto power frequently prevents action when the interests of permanent members diverge. Syria provides a stark example, where Russian and Chinese vetoes blocked Western-supported resolutions for over a decade despite massive civilian casualties and humanitarian catastrophe.

Calls for Security Council reform have intensified as the gap between its composition and global power realities has widened. India, with its enormous population and growing economic and military capabilities, lacks permanent membership. No Latin American or African country holds permanent status despite these continents' populations exceeding two billion people. Brazil, South Africa, Nigeria, Germany, and Japan have been proposed as potential additional permanent members under various reform scenarios. However, achieving reform requires a Charter amendment with two-thirds General Assembly approval and ratification by all current permanent members, creating a high bar that existing members have shown little willingness to clear.

❑ Selective application destroys credibility

The Council's legitimacy crisis deepens when it acts selectively based on the interests of permanent members rather than consistently applying principles. Resolutions condemning certain aggressions pass, while similar actions by permanent members or their allies escape censure.

This selective application reinforces perceptions that international law operates conditionally, applying strictly to weaker states while powerful nations evade accountability. Without reform that enhances representativeness and constrains the use of vetoes, the Council risks declining relevance as states increasingly bypass it or create alternative mechanisms.

1.3.5 Structural Challenges in a Multipolar Setting

1.3.5.1 Sovereign Equality Versus Real Power

The Charter's commitment to sovereign equality, expressed through the one state, one vote principle, coexists with significant disparities in real power among member states. This structural contradiction becomes more visible as more states acquire substantial capabilities, creating friction between formal equality and material inequality. The UN lacks mechanisms to reconcile this tension between the democratic ideal of an equal voice and the practical reality that some states possess far greater capacity to shape outcomes than others.

❑ Legitimacy and effectiveness structurally oppose

The Security Council's composition and veto structure institutionalise great power privilege by giving the permanent five members decisive blocking authority over enforcement decisions. This limits the Council's responsiveness to broader membership preferences and creates a deliberately inverse relationship between democratic structure and decision-making power. The more representative and majoritarian a body is, such as the General Assembly, the less binding power it has. Conversely, the more exclusive and controlled a body is, like the Security Council, the more coercive authority it holds.

This design makes it very difficult to align legitimacy with effectiveness. Organs that can act decisively lack broad representation, while organs that are broadly representative lack binding authority. This represents a core structural problem in a diversified power system where the gap between the UN's formal powers and its actual practice becomes especially visible in security matters. Although the Security Council has a legal monopoly over authorising force, in reality, states frequently engage in wars without its approval, revealing the limits of centralised authority in a plural power system.

1.3.5.2 Enforcement Limitations

The UN lacks its own military forces and relies on voluntary contributions from states for any enforcement action. This severely limits the Security Council's ability to translate legal authority into actual operations, especially when major powers are unwilling to commit troops. As a result, the UN's most robust enforcement operations are rare and highly contingent, while many resolutions remain under-implemented or symbolic,

❑ Enforcement and finance remain power dependent



exposing a structural gap between legal design and practical capacity.

1.3.5.3 Budgetary Politics and Power Asymmetries

Budgetary politics reveal another structural challenge. Formally, the General Assembly decides on the budget by majority vote, but in practice, key financial contributors exercise substantial influence through specialised committees and consensus procedures. This leads to tension between the ideal of financial decisions made by the whole membership and the reality that large contributors can informally block or shape budgets, reflecting underlying power asymmetries in a supposedly egalitarian institution.

1.3.5.4 Conditional Autonomy

The UN's autonomy as an actor is always conditional. Although it is legally recognised as an independent entity in international law, its ability to act depends on political alignments among states, especially powerful ones. Overstating or understating this autonomy are both errors. The organisation has some independent agenda-setting and normative power, but its room for manoeuvre shrinks when key states are hostile or indifferent, representing a structural vulnerability in a fragmented power landscape.

❑ UN roles interact and create tensions

The three functional roles that the UN plays—actor, forum, and resource—are often in tension. Seeing the UN only as a forum ignores its capacity to provide collective legitimacy, while viewing it solely as an actor overlooks how its actions depend on member state decisions and resource provision. In practice, any major decision or crisis outcome reflects a complex interplay of these roles. States use the UN as a tool, the UN frames and labels situations, and the forum setting creates pressures and opportunities, making governance slow, contested, and often inconsistent.

1.3.6 Roles and Functions in Contemporary Global Governance

1.3.6.1 The UN as Actor, Forum, and Resource

The UN embodies three overlapping roles that allow it to remain relevant despite shifting power balances among states. As an actor, the UN, especially through organs like the Security Council and Secretariat, can shape state behaviour, generate

- ❑ Actor, forum, resource : three overlapping roles

norms, and sometimes constrain powerful states by conferring or withholding legitimacy. As a forum, the UN provides an inclusive space where all member states can deliberate, signal preferences, build coalitions, and negotiate, which is especially important when no single bloc can dominate the system. As a resource, states use UN decisions, resolutions, and symbols to support their own diplomatic positions, to criticise opponents, or to mobilise coalitions, showing that the organisation's outputs have political value in a contested, multipolar environment.

1.3.6.2 Facilitating Dialogue Among Diverse Powers

- ❑ Dialogue becomes more vital without hegemon

The UN's most fundamental role in the multipolar system involves providing platforms for dialogue among diverse power centres. In the absence of a dominant hegemon capable of imposing order, sustained communication becomes essential for managing tensions, coordinating responses to shared challenges, and preventing miscalculation that could escalate into conflict. The UN offers universal membership and established procedures that enable discussion even when bilateral relationships deteriorate or when no single power possesses sufficient legitimacy to convene negotiations.

Global negotiations increasingly occur in UN contexts despite states occasionally bypassing these processes. Climate negotiations proceed through UN frameworks even when actual commitments emerge from parallel agreements. Development priorities are articulated through UN processes, including the Sustainable Development Goals, which establish shared targets for international cooperation. This agenda-setting function creates focal points around which diverse actors can coordinate even when they disagree on specific approaches or timeframes.

1.3.6.3 Norm-Setting and Standard Development

- ❑ Norms matter even without enforcement

The UN plays crucial roles in developing international law and norms that shape state behaviour, even when enforcement remains weak. Through treaty negotiations, General Assembly declarations, and customary practice, the UN establishes standards on issues including human rights, humanitarian law, environmental protection, and the use of force. These norms create expectations about appropriate conduct and provide reference points for assessing state behaviour.

Norm development proves particularly important in addressing emerging challenges where existing legal frameworks



provide insufficient guidance. The UN has attempted to develop norms around the responsible use of artificial intelligence, autonomous weapons systems, and cyber operations in armed conflict. Climate negotiations proceed through UN frameworks attempting to establish burden-sharing principles and emission reduction commitments.

Debates about emerging technologies and their governance increasingly occur in UN contexts, even when binding agreements remain elusive.

1.3.6.4 Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Coordination

UN peacekeeping operations represent the organisation's most visible field presence, deploying military and civilian personnel to conflict zones to monitor ceasefires, protect civilians, support political transitions, and assist with post-conflict reconstruction. Peacekeeping has evolved from traditional missions monitoring agreements between states to multidimensional operations in complex internal conflicts involving multiple armed groups, humanitarian crises, and fragile state institutions.

❑ Peace keeping evolved to complex multidimensional missions

The UN coordinates international humanitarian responses to natural disasters, conflicts, and complex emergencies through agencies including UNHCR for refugees, WFP for food assistance, and OCHA for overall coordination. This function becomes more critical as climate change increases disaster frequency and severity, while protracted conflicts create massive displacement and humanitarian needs. The UN's presence in crisis zones and relationships with diverse actors enable it to reach vulnerable populations that individual states or NGOs cannot access independently.

1.3.7 Impact and Effectiveness

1.3.7.1 Successes and Micro-Utility

Despite systemic challenges, UN mechanisms remain essential for addressing specific problems in ongoing crises. In Ukraine, Lebanon, Yemen, and numerous other conflicts, UN agencies provide humanitarian assistance, document violations, and maintain channels for limited cooperation, even when broader political solutions prove impossible. This micro-utility, addressing particular challenges within larger tragedies, justifies continued UN engagement even when macro-level peace remains elusive.

❑ Micro - utility justifies ongoing engagement

The UN has facilitated diplomatic breakthroughs on specific issues, including various ceasefire agreements that temporarily reduced violence. Peacekeeping operations have successfully supported transitions in countries such as Cambodia, Mozambique, and Timor-Leste, although many other missions face indefinite mandates in frozen conflicts. Development programmes have contributed to dramatic reductions in extreme poverty, improvements in health and education, and strengthened governance capacity in numerous countries.

1.3.7.2 Patterns of Failure and Institutional Paralysis

However, the UN exhibits troubling patterns of institutional paralysis, demonstrated by repeated failures to act decisively when facing mass atrocities. Rwanda in 1994, Srebrenica in 1995, Darfur in the 2000s, Myanmar with the Rohingya, Ukraine since 2014, and Gaza repeatedly illustrate how divisions within the Security Council prevent effective responses to humanitarian catastrophes. These failures stem from structural arrangements granting veto power to permanent members whose interests diverge regarding when and how to intervene.

☐ Veto power produces paralysis at critical moments

☐ Unenforced resolutions evade the rules based order

The UN's inability to enforce its own resolutions severely damages its credibility. Dozens of Security Council resolutions regarding various conflicts remain unimplemented, with no consequences for non-compliance. Resolutions demanding ceasefires or humanitarian access are frequently ignored by parties to conflicts who calculate that violations will not trigger enforcement action. This pattern reinforces perceptions that international law operates conditionally, being strictly applied to weaker states while powerful nations and their clients evade accountability.

1.3.8 Necessary Reforms for Adaptation

1.3.8.1 Decentralization and Regional Cooperation

Decentralization represents the first pillar of necessary transformation, essential for developing faster and more flexible crisis response frameworks. This reform requires expanding cooperation with regional organisations, including the European Union, ASEAN, the African Union, and Mercosur, to support localised approaches to peacekeeping and conflict resolution. Regional organisations possess contextual knowledge, established relationships with conflict parties, and geographic proximity that enable more nimble responses than globally oriented institutions can typically achieve.



❑ Regionalisation enables faster, contextual response

The Security Council must adapt to reflect twenty-first-century power distributions. This means expanding permanent membership to include major emerging powers from different regions and constraining veto use through requirements that any veto be accompanied by an explanation and proposals for alternative action. Peacekeeping mandates should broaden to include stronger conflict prevention, enhanced civilian protection, and comprehensive post-conflict reconstruction that addresses root causes rather than merely managing symptoms.

Decentralization also means granting broad financial and administrative autonomy to UN development and humanitarian arms. Currently, these bodies remain constrained by political considerations from major powers and funding dependencies that limit their autonomy. Liberating them from great power politics would enable more needs-based programming responsive to the actual priorities of developing countries rather than donor preferences.

1.3.8.2 Democratization and Inclusive Representation

Democratization, the second transformation pillar, is fundamental to renewing UN credibility and effectiveness. This requires empowering developing nations and regional blocs within UN institutions. The General Assembly's role must be strengthened by granting its resolutions greater weight, perhaps through qualified majority voting on certain issues that would create political pressure even if not legally binding. Financial and logistical resources should be more equitably distributed to enable meaningful participation by all member states.

❑ Representation must match today's power realities

Security Council reform remains the most urgent democratization priority. The current composition dramatically underrepresents the Global South despite these countries constituting the majority of UN membership and global population. Africa, Latin America, and Asia all merit expanded representation, while existing permanent members should face constraints on unilateral veto exercise. Various reform proposals circulate, including expanding to twenty-five members with six new permanent seats allocated regionally, though achieving consensus on specific formulas proves difficult given divergent member state interests.

1.3.8.3 Digitalization and Technological Integration

Digitalization, the third transformation pillar, involves leveraging the technological revolution to modernise

❑ Technology can democratise UN participation

governance. This includes utilising artificial intelligence and robotics to automate and redesign administrative processes for enhanced transparency, accountability, and participatory governance. Real-time data analytics can reinforce peacekeeping by providing better situational awareness, tracking humanitarian crises through remote sensing and pattern analysis, and monitoring compliance with international agreements through verification technologies.

Digital platforms can democratise participation beyond elite corridors by enabling direct engagement from smaller nations and civil society organisations that lack resources for a constant physical presence at UN headquarters. Virtual participation reduces costs and environmental impacts of constant travel while enabling more inclusive involvement in deliberations. Technology can enhance transparency by making documents, proceedings, and outcomes readily accessible to global publics rather than remaining confined to diplomatic circles.

However, digitalisation also creates risks, including digital divides that could disadvantage less technologically advanced countries, cybersecurity vulnerabilities that could compromise sensitive negotiations, and concerns about surveillance and data privacy. Implementation must address these challenges through capacity building, robust security measures, and governance frameworks that ensure technology serves inclusive objectives rather than creating new forms of exclusion.

1.3.9 The Secretary-General's New Agenda for Peace

The New Agenda for Peace, launched by Secretary-General António Guterres, outlines a vision for more robust multilateral frameworks specifically designed for the multipolar world. This agenda explicitly recognises that the post-Cold War period has ended and that the world is moving towards a new global order characterised by diffused power. The framework emphasises trust, solidarity, and universality as essential principles for stable international relations and effective UN functioning in this transformed context.

❑ New agenda acknowledges multipolar reality

The Agenda identifies five priority areas for UN action. First, preventing conflict at the global level requires strong measures addressing geopolitical divisions, prioritising diplomacy above military responses, and investing in regional security architectures that can manage tensions before they escalate. Second, a new prevention paradigm must focus on mediation,



social cohesion, respect for human rights, meaningful women's participation in decision-making, and recognising links between sustainable development, climate action, and peace.

Third, peacekeeping operations must adapt to today's complex conflicts through clear, prioritised, and realistic mandates centred on political solutions rather than indefinite stabilisation missions. Fourth, preventing the weaponisation of emerging domains requires promoting responsible innovation and establishing global governance to address threats from new technologies, including artificial intelligence and autonomous weapons systems. Fifth, urgent institutional reforms must address the Security Council, General Assembly, disarmament machinery, and Peacebuilding Commission to enhance collective security effectiveness.

- ❑ Five priorities define reform agenda

These priorities acknowledge that effective action in the multipolar era requires adaptation across multiple dimensions simultaneously. The Agenda serves as a framework for the 2024 Summit of the Future, which aims to deliver the Pact for the Future, updating global systems and frameworks to address current and future challenges while restoring trust in multilateral action.

1.3.10 Emerging Challenges and Future Directions

1.3.10.1 New Security Threats

The UN must adapt to security threats that extend beyond traditional interstate war to include terrorism, cyber operations, autonomous weapons systems, and the weaponisation of emerging technologies. These threats transcend borders and require international cooperation for an effective response; yet existing frameworks were designed for different challenges. The UN has attempted to develop norms around responsible state behaviour in cyberspace and constraints on autonomous weapons, but progress remains slow due to disagreement among major powers about basic principles.

- ❑ New threats require new governance frameworks

Climate change represents an emerging security threat multiplier that the UN must address through integrated approaches linking environmental, development, and security concerns. Climate-related displacement, resource competition, and extreme weather events will increasingly drive conflicts and humanitarian crises, requiring coordinated responses. Nuclear risks have intensified as arms control agreements erode and as more states pursue nuclear capabilities.

1.3.10.2 Regional Organisations and Alternative Forums

The rise of regional organisations presents both competition and partnership opportunities for the UN. Organisations like the African Union, ASEAN, and the European Union increasingly manage regional conflicts, coordinate development initiatives, and articulate collective positions on global issues. Regional organisations can complement UN efforts through subsidiarity principles, where issues are addressed at the most appropriate level. Regional bodies possess advantages for managing conflicts within their regions, including cultural understanding, geographic proximity, and political relationships that facilitate engagement.

❑ Alternative forums challenge UN centrality

The proliferation of alternative forums, including the G20, BRICS Plus, and various mini-lateral groupings, creates competition for the UN's traditional centrality in global governance. These alternatives emerge partly from frustration with UN gridlock and a perceived lack of representativeness. Maintaining relevance amid forum competition requires the UN to demonstrate comparative advantages, including inclusivity, legitimacy, and the capacity to address issues requiring truly global responses.

The UN's survival as a truly international organisation depends on successfully serving as a platform for controlled decoupling from the West-centric order that characterised its first seven decades. This decoupling does not mean excluding Western nations or rejecting the liberal principles they championed. Rather, it requires transcending the assumption that Western preferences automatically define universal interests and that Western powers should exercise disproportionate control over global institutions.

If the UN fails to disassociate itself from Western political and economic interests, its future role will be reduced to that of a humanitarian organisation with marginal political relevance. Avoiding marginalisation requires holistic transformation, strengthening operational capabilities, embracing regional cooperation, democratising organisational structures, and integrating technological innovation simultaneously. This transformation demands political courage from UN leadership, sustained pressure from civil society and reformist governments, and recognition that preserving the UN's relevance serves the collective interest in stable, rule-bound international relations.



Summarised Overview

The United Nations confronts an existential challenge as the international system transitions from the Western-dominated unipolar moment to a multipolar order, where power disperses among diverse states and regional blocs. The organisation's structure remains frozen in the 1945 postwar power dynamics that no longer correspond to contemporary realities, creating a profound crisis of credibility and legitimacy. Repeated failures to prevent atrocities, selective application of international law, and Security Council paralysis due to great power divisions have damaged trust in the UN's capacity to fulfil its fundamental mandate of maintaining peace and security.

However, dismissing the UN as irrelevant would be premature and dangerous. The organisation retains essential functions, including providing platforms for multilateral dialogue, coordinating humanitarian responses, setting international standards, and offering legitimacy for collective action. In the multipolar era, where no hegemon can impose order unilaterally, these functions become more critical, even as institutional gridlock makes them harder to perform effectively.

Survival and continued relevance require comprehensive transformation across three dimensions. Decentralisation means expanding regional cooperation, granting autonomy to development and humanitarian operations, and creating more flexible crisis response frameworks. Democratisation requires expanding Security Council membership, strengthening the General Assembly, and ensuring institutions reflect contemporary power distributions. Digitalisation involves leveraging technology for enhanced transparency, efficiency, and inclusive participation.

The stakes extend beyond the UN's institutional survival to the broader question of whether humanity can develop effective global governance for an interconnected world facing existential challenges, including climate change, nuclear risks, pandemics, and technological disruptions. The multipolar transition creates both dangers of increased conflict and opportunities for more inclusive, legitimate governance reflecting diverse perspectives and power centres. Only through bold transformation can the UN rise to the challenge of steering an increasingly fragmented world toward unity and shared purpose.

Self-Assessment Questions

1. What is multipolarity, and how does it differ from bipolarity and unipolarity?
2. Name three major power centres in the current multipolar world system.
3. What are the five permanent members of the UN Security Council?

4. Why is the UN General Assembly considered more democratic than the Security Council?
5. What major event in 1991 was considered the end of the Cold War?
6. What does the veto power allow permanent Security Council members to do?
7. Name two UN specialised agencies and their focus areas.
8. What are the three functional roles the UN plays in global governance?
9. What is meant by the UN's "credibility crisis"?
10. What are the three pillars of reform proposed for the UN's adaptation to multipolarity?

1. Analyse how the shift from a unipolar to a multipolar world system has impacted the effectiveness of the United Nations Security Council. Provide specific examples from recent international crises.
2. Evaluate the argument that the UN Security Council's composition reflects outdated 1945 power dynamics. Which countries or regions deserve permanent representation, and why?
3. Compare and contrast the roles and powers of the UN General Assembly and the UN Security Council. Which body better reflects the principle of sovereign equality?
4. Discuss the successes and failures of UN peacekeeping operations in the post-Cold War era. What factors determine whether peacekeeping missions succeed or fail?
5. Examine the relationship between the UN and regional organisations such as the African Union or ASEAN. How can improved cooperation enhance global governance?
6. Assess the three proposed reform pillars for the UN: decentralisation, democratisation, and digitalisation. Which pillar is most critical for ensuring the UN's future relevance?
7. Analyse how the Global South's growing assertiveness in international relations challenges traditional Western dominance within the UN system.
8. Evaluate the claim that the UN's inconsistent application of international law creates a "credibility crisis." How does this affect smaller and developing nations' faith in the rules-based international order?

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU





BLOCK 2

Global Security Issues

UNIT 1

Terrorism, Cyber Security

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, learners will be able to:

- analyse the evolution of terrorism from conventional physical attacks to cyber-enabled threats and explain how digitalisation has transformed terrorist tactics, strategies, and capabilities in the contemporary international system
- critically evaluate competing definitions of cyberterrorism and distinguish it from related concepts such as cybercrime, cyberwarfare, and cyber espionage
- assess the effectiveness and limitations of national cybersecurity strategies across different political systems
- examine the role of informal governance mechanisms, including UN expert groups and multistakeholder initiatives, in developing international norms for responsible state behaviour in cyberspace despite the absence of binding multilateral treaties

Background

In October 2016, a massive cyberattack disrupted major websites across the United States and Europe. Twitter, Netflix, Amazon, and The New York Times suddenly became inaccessible to millions of users. The weapon was not a bomb or a gun, but thousands of hacked home devices—baby monitors, digital cameras, and smart refrigerators—all infected with malicious software and turned into an army of digital attackers. This incident revealed how our increasingly connected world creates new vulnerabilities that can be exploited for political purposes. Just as terrorists once hijacked airplanes to create fear and achieve political goals, today's actors can potentially hijack the internet itself. This transformation challenges traditional understandings of security, sovereignty, and safety in the twenty-first century.

Consider another scenario: a hospital's computer systems are locked by hackers who demand payment to restore access to critical patient records. Is this simply a crime, or does it become terrorism when the attackers have political motives? When does a cyberattack



on a power grid cross the line from vandalism to an act of war? These questions reflect the complex realities that modern states and international organisations must address. Traditional terrorism involved physical violence in recognizable forms—bombings, hijackings, and armed attacks. Today, the lines between physical and digital violence are blurring. Understanding this evolution is essential for students of international relations, as cyber threats now rank alongside conventional security challenges in national defence strategies worldwide. This unit explores how terrorism has evolved in the digital age and examines the global responses being developed to address these emerging threats.

Keywords

Cyberterrorism, Critical Infrastructure, Digital Surveillance, Cyber Norms, Attribution Problem, Information Security, Multistakeholder Governance, Threat Perception, Cyber Diplomacy, Public-Private Partnership, Confidence-Building Measures

Discussion

The contemporary international system faces security challenges that would have been unimaginable just a few decades ago. Terrorism, once primarily associated with bombings and armed attacks in physical spaces, has evolved alongside technological advancement. Today, states must defend not only their territorial borders and physical infrastructure but also their digital networks and information systems. This transformation represents one of the most significant shifts in the nature of security threats in the post-Cold War era. Understanding terrorism and cybersecurity together is essential because they increasingly overlap and intersect in ways that challenge traditional approaches to national defence and international cooperation. This unit examines the evolution of terrorism into the digital age and explores how states and international organisations are responding to these complex, interconnected threats.

2.1.1 Understanding Conventional Terrorism Defining Terrorism

Terrorism has long been recognised as a distinct form of political violence characterised by specific features that separate it from conventional warfare or ordinary crime. At its core, terrorism involves the use or threat of violence directed against civilians or non-combatants with the explicit intention of creating fear, intimidation, or psychological impact beyond

- ❑ Terrorism targets audiences beyond victims

the immediate victims. This violence is employed as a means to achieve political, religious, or ideological objectives rather than purely personal or economic gain. The psychological dimension is crucial because terrorists typically seek to influence a broader audience—governments, populations, or international communities—through the symbolic impact of their violent acts.

❑ Core terrorist logic remains unchanged

Traditional terrorism manifests through recognizable methods, including bombings of public spaces, hijackings of aircraft or vehicles, armed attacks against civilian targets, kidnappings and hostage-taking, and assassinations of political figures or symbolic targets. These tactics share common characteristics: they deliberately target or affect civilians, generate widespread media attention and public fear, communicate political messages or demands, and challenge state authority and the government's ability to provide security to its citizens. The historical evolution of terrorism shows adaptation to changing technologies and security environments, but the core logic has remained consistent—using violence against soft targets to create psychological effects that advance political goals.

❑ Violence as calculated political instrument

2.1.1.1 The Political Nature of Terrorism

What fundamentally distinguishes terrorism from other forms of violence is its political motivation. Common criminals may use violence for personal enrichment or revenge, and individuals may commit violent acts due to mental illness or personal grievances; however, terrorists employ violence as a calculated instrument to achieve political change. This political dimension creates unique challenges for states because terrorist acts often aim to provoke government overreaction, polarise societies, demonstrate state weakness, undermine public confidence in authorities, and generate international attention for political causes. The political nature of terrorism also explains why it is often described as "propaganda by deed"—the violent act itself serves as a form of communication intended to convey messages to multiple audiences simultaneously.

❑ Political logic demands political responses

Terrorist organisations throughout history have pursued various political objectives, including national liberation and independence movements, religious or ideological transformation of societies, overthrowing existing governments or political systems, preventing political change or modernisation, and attracting attention to marginalised political



causes. The methods may be universally condemned, but understanding the political logic behind terrorism is essential for developing effective responses. Ignoring the political dimension and treating terrorism purely as criminal behaviour or irrational violence often leads to ineffective policies that fail to address underlying conflicts or inadvertently strengthen terrorist narratives.

2.1.1.2 Terrorism in the Post-Cold War Era

The global landscape of terrorism has transformed significantly since the end of the Cold War in 1990. This period marked a watershed moment in international conflict patterns, with the year 1990 recording thirty-eight active armed conflicts, the highest number since World War II. The nature of these conflicts also changed dramatically, with internal wars coming to dominate the international security landscape. More than two-thirds of conflicts since 1990 have occurred within national boundaries rather than between states, representing a fundamental shift from the interstate warfare that characterised much of the twentieth century. This internalisation of conflict has created new opportunities and challenges for terrorist organisations operating within fragile or contested states.

❑ Internal conflicts dominate post-Cold War terrorism

Modern patterns of civil conflict reveal important trends relevant to understanding contemporary terrorism. Since 1940, there have been seventy-four wars fought for state control and sixty-two wars fought for separation or autonomy. The outcomes of these conflicts shape the environments in which terrorist groups emerge and operate. Approximately half of state-control wars have ended in negotiated power-sharing arrangements, while about one-third of separatist wars have resulted in some form of autonomy for the regions involved. These statistics highlight that many internal conflicts remain unresolved or only partially resolved, creating ongoing grievances and ungoverned spaces where terrorist organisations can establish themselves and recruit supporters.

❑ Unresolved conflicts breed terrorist spaces

A disturbing feature of modern conflict is that contemporary states often kill more of their own citizens than external enemies, reflecting the internal nature of most armed conflicts and the breakdown of the traditional distinction between combatants and civilians in civil wars. This violence by states against their own populations can fuel cycles of terrorism and counter-terrorism, as opposition groups resort to terrorist tactics when conventional political participation is blocked or

❑ State repression fuels terrorist recruitment

violently suppressed. The relationship between state violence, political repression, and terrorism is complex and varies across contexts, but the post-Cold War era has demonstrated that internal political conflicts often generate conditions conducive to terrorist activity.

2.1.1.3 The Democratization of Violence

- ❑ Light weapons lower barrier to terrorism

One significant development affecting contemporary terrorism is what scholars call the democratization of violence through the proliferation of light weapons and accessible technology. Cheap and readily available weaponry, including assault rifles, explosives, and improvised devices, has made physical terrorism more feasible for non-state actors with limited resources. This accessibility reduces the barriers to entry for groups seeking to employ violence for political purposes and explains why many terrorist organisations continue to rely on conventional weapons rather than pursuing more sophisticated cyber capabilities. The ease of obtaining and using traditional weapons means that physical terrorism remains a persistent threat despite the emergence of new digital vulnerabilities.

- ❑ Conventional weapons outperform cyber for terror

This democratization of violence has important implications for understanding why pure cyberterrorism remains relatively rare. From a terrorist organisation's perspective, conventional weapons offer several advantages, including proven effectiveness in causing casualties and damage, relative simplicity in planning and execution, immediate and visible impact, and established operational knowledge within terrorist networks. In contrast, sophisticated cyberattacks require specialised technical skills, often produce less visible or dramatic results, may have unpredictable effects, and require sustained access to target systems. The rational calculation for many terrorist groups therefore continues to favour traditional methods that are cheaper, simpler, and more reliably produce the fear and attention they seek.

2.1.2 The Emergence of Cybersecurity as a Global Challenge

2.1.2.1 Defining Cybersecurity

Cybersecurity encompasses the protection of computer systems, networks, and data from unauthorized access, theft, damage, or disruption through technical and operational controls designed to ensure the confidentiality, integrity, and availability



- ❑ Three pillars: confidentiality, integrity, availability

- ❑ Cybersecurity is now national security

- ❑ Borderless threats demand international cooperation

- ❑ State actors create asymmetric cyber advantage

of information. This definition highlights three core principles that guide cybersecurity practice. Confidentiality ensures that sensitive information is accessible only to authorized individuals or systems. Integrity maintains the accuracy and completeness of data, preventing unauthorized modification or corruption. Availability ensures that authorised users can access systems and information when needed, preventing disruptions that could harm individuals, organisations, or societies.

The scope of cybersecurity has expanded dramatically as societies have become increasingly dependent on digital technologies for essential functions. Modern states rely heavily on cyberspace and telecommunication networks for critical services including power generation and distribution, water treatment and supply systems, financial transactions and banking services, healthcare delivery and medical records, transportation management and logistics, communication and information dissemination, and government administration and public services. This extensive dependence means that cybersecurity is no longer merely a technical issue for information technology specialists but has become a fundamental component of national security strategy and international relations.

The borderless nature of cyber threats represents a defining characteristic that distinguishes cybersecurity from many traditional security challenges. Attackers can target any country or organisation regardless of geographic location, routing their attacks through multiple jurisdictions to hide their identity and location. A single individual or small group operating from anywhere in the world can potentially compromise systems on the other side of the planet, making national-only defensive approaches insufficient. This reality necessitates international cooperation and coordination, as no state can effectively secure its cyberspace in isolation from the global internet infrastructure and the international flow of data and digital communications.

2.1.2.2 The Expanding Threat Landscape

The variety and sophistication of cyber threats facing states and societies continue to grow, creating a complex security environment that requires constant adaptation. State-sponsored attacks and advanced persistent threats represent some of the most serious concerns, involving highly skilled actors often backed by national governments who conduct long-term campaigns targeting government networks, critical infrastructure, defence industries, and strategic commercial sectors. These sophisticated actors possess resources and

capabilities that rival or exceed those available to most defensive organisations, creating an asymmetric challenge where defenders must succeed constantly while attackers need only succeed occasionally.

- ❑ Cybercrime overlaps with politically motivated threats

Cybercrime constitutes another major category of threats, ranging from individual hackers seeking financial gain to organised criminal networks operating sophisticated operations. Common cybercrime activities include ransomware attacks that encrypt victim data and demand payment for its release, financial fraud and theft targeting individuals and institutions, identity theft and personal information compromise, and exploitation of individuals, including children, through online platforms. While much cybercrime lacks the political motivation that defines terrorism, the techniques and vulnerabilities exploited by criminals often overlap with those relevant to politically motivated actors, creating a shared technical challenge for defenders.

- ❑ Influence operations destabilise without physical damage

Information warfare and digital influence operations represent an increasingly prominent category of cyber threats that blur traditional boundaries between peace and conflict. These operations involve the manipulation of information environments through disinformation campaigns spreading false narratives, election interference aimed at undermining democratic processes, propaganda and psychological operations targeting domestic or foreign audiences, and coordinated inauthentic behaviour on social media platforms. While these activities may not cause physical damage, they can undermine social cohesion, erode trust in institutions, polarise political discourse, and destabilise democratic societies in ways that serve adversary interests.

- ❑ Networked infrastructure creates cascading vulnerabilities

2.1.2.3 Critical Infrastructure Vulnerabilities

Governments and the public are especially concerned about cyberattacks targeting critical infrastructure, which includes the systems and assets essential for the functioning of modern societies. Critical infrastructure sectors encompass energy systems, including power grids, oil pipelines, and nuclear facilities; water treatment and distribution networks; transportation systems, including railways, airports, and traffic management; healthcare institutions and hospital systems; financial services and banking infrastructure; food production and supply chain systems; and communications networks enabling internet, telephone, and broadcast services. These



sectors are increasingly networked and computerised, making them potentially vulnerable to cyber intrusions that could cause widespread disruption or even physical harm.

The concern about attacks on critical infrastructure reflects several factors that make them particularly significant from a security perspective. First, attacks on essential services directly test government responsibility to protect citizens and maintain social order. When hospitals cannot access patient records, when power fails across regions, or when water treatment systems malfunction, the immediate harm to populations is visible and attributable to government failure to provide security. Second, critical infrastructure attacks are more likely to push the public towards accepting trade-offs between civil liberties and security compared to attacks on purely commercial targets. The perception that essential services are at risk creates political pressure for governments to adopt more aggressive defensive measures, even if these measures involve expanded surveillance or restrictions on digital freedoms.

❑ Infrastructure attacks shift liberty-security trade-offs

Recent incidents and concerns cited in public discourse illustrate the range of potential threats to critical infrastructure. There have been documented attempts to compromise water treatment systems, potentially allowing attackers to alter chemical levels and endanger public health. Cyberattacks on energy pipelines have caused temporary disruptions to fuel supplies and economic activity. Compromises in railway systems could potentially affect signalling and safety systems. Hospitals have experienced ransomware attacks that disrupted medical services and endangered patients. These incidents, even when they have not resulted in mass casualties, demonstrate the vulnerabilities that exist and fuel the narrative of potential cyber catastrophe that shapes public debate and policy formation.

❑ Real incidents fuel cyber catastrophe narratives

2.1.3 Conceptualizing Cyberterrorism

2.1.3.1 Competing Definitions

Cyberterrorism remains a contested and ambiguous concept, with varying definitions across academic, policy, and media contexts. This definitional diversity reflects genuine uncertainty about what should constitute cyberterrorism and reveals the political stakes in how the term is defined and applied. The lack of international consensus on defining cyberterrorism creates challenges for cooperation, policy development, and legal responses, as states may be addressing different phenomena

❑ No consensus definition creates policy gaps

under the same label. Understanding the range of definitions and the distinctions between narrow and broad approaches is essential for a clear analysis of cyberterrorism as a security challenge.

- ❑ Narrow definition demands dual cyber-terrorism criteria

The narrow academic definition of cyberterrorism focuses specifically on attacks that use computers as both weapon and target, with the intention of causing real-world physical harm or severe economic damage. This approach reserves the term for incidents where digital means are employed to create effects comparable to conventional terrorism, such as violence against persons or property, the generation of widespread fear or panic, and severe economic disruption affecting large populations. Under this narrow definition, cyberterrorism must meet two distinct criteria simultaneously: the cyber criterion, requiring a computer-based attack using malicious code against networked targets with the intent to cause destructive harm, and the terrorism criterion, requiring intent to intimidate or coerce societies or governments for political, religious, or ideological purposes.

- ❑ Denning: real-world impact distinguishes cyberterrorism

Scholar Dorothy Denning has articulated an influential narrow definition, describing cyberterrorism as unlawful attacks and threats against computers, networks, and the information stored therein when conducted to intimidate or coerce a government or its people in furtherance of political or social objectives. This definition emphasises that mere disruption or defacement is insufficient; true cyberterrorism must aim for effects comparable to physical terrorism. The requirement for real-world impact beyond data damage distinguishes cyberterrorism from vandalism or ordinary hacking, even when such activities target government or military systems. Violence against persons or property, the generation of substantial fear, or severe economic loss become the markers separating cyberterrorism from lesser cyber incidents.

- ❑ Broad definitions capture all terrorist internet use

In contrast, broader definitions of cyberterrorism encompass preparatory and supporting activities conducted via digital means by terrorist groups. This expansive approach includes any application of terrorism on the internet, covering communication among members, recruitment of new supporters, fundraising and financial transactions, propaganda dissemination and psychological operations, coordination and planning of operations, and intelligence gathering about potential targets. Policymakers and media organisations often



adopt these broader interpretations, which capture any terrorist use of the internet, reflecting concern not only about destructive attacks but also about how digital technologies enable and amplify conventional terrorist activities.

2.1.3.2 Distinguishing Cyberterrorism from Related Concepts

❑ Motivation distinguishes crime from terrorism

Cyberterrorism overlaps with several related concepts, and distinguishing among them is important for analytical clarity and appropriate policy responses. Cybercrime refers to criminal activities conducted through or targeting computer systems, typically motivated by financial gain rather than political objectives. While the technical methods may be similar—both cybercriminals and cyberterrorists may use malware, exploit system vulnerabilities, or conduct social engineering attacks—the motivation differs fundamentally. Cybercriminals seek money, personal information for resale, or other economic benefits, whereas cyberterrorists pursue political change through intimidation and fear. This distinction matters because criminal justice and counter-terrorism frameworks involve different legal authorities, international cooperation mechanisms, and policy tools.

❑ State or non-state actors define the distinction

Cyberwarfare involves the use of cyber capabilities to achieve military objectives within broader conflicts between states. It encompasses attacks on military command and control systems, intelligence gathering through cyber espionage, disruption of adversary communications and logistics, and strategic operations targeting critical infrastructure during armed conflict. The primary distinction from cyberterrorism lies in the actors involved: cyberwarfare is conducted by or on behalf of states, while cyberterrorism involves non-state actors, particularly terrorist organisations. However, the line can blur when states sponsor or enable terrorist cyber activities or when non-state actors achieve capabilities previously available only to governments. The legal frameworks governing these activities also differ significantly, with cyberwarfare potentially subject to international humanitarian law and the laws of armed conflict, while cyberterrorism falls under criminal law and counter-terrorism authorities.

Cyber espionage refers to the covert collection of sensitive information through digital means, typically conducted by state intelligence agencies or sophisticated non-state actors. Unlike cyberterrorism, which aims to cause disruption, damage, or fear,

cyber espionage seeks to remain undetected while extracting valuable information for strategic, military, or economic advantage. The objectives differ fundamentally: espionage supports decision-making and provides strategic advantages through knowledge, while terrorism seeks psychological impact and political change through visible acts of violence or disruption. That said, the same vulnerabilities and access points exploited for espionage could potentially be used for destructive cyberterrorism, creating concerns about escalation from intelligence collection to active attack.

2.1.3.3 Pure Cyberterrorism versus Cyber-Enabled Terrorism

☐ Pure cyberterrorism has never materialised

A crucial conceptual distinction exists between pure cyberterrorism and cyber-enabled terrorism. Pure cyberterrorism refers to attacks where digital systems are both the weapon and the target, with the cyberattack itself being the means through which terror is generated and political objectives are pursued. This would involve scenarios such as cyberattacks that cause mass casualties by disrupting hospital systems or medical devices, attacks that produce environmental disasters through compromising industrial control systems, disruptions to power grids that cause widespread blackouts lasting days or weeks with cascading effects on society, or the compromise of transportation systems leading to accidents and loss of life. Notably, pure cyberterrorism as thus defined has never actually materialised despite persistent fears and predictions.

☐ Most terrorism is cyber-enabled, not pure cyber

Cyber-enabled terrorism, by contrast, refers to the terrorist use of digital technologies to support and enhance conventional terrorist activities without the cyber component being the direct instrument of violence. This includes using the internet and social media for propaganda dissemination that reaches global audiences, employing encrypted communications for operational security and coordination, conducting online recruitment of members and supporters, fundraising through digital payment systems and cryptocurrency, gathering intelligence on potential targets through open sources, and planning and coordinating physical attacks using digital tools. The vast majority of what is commonly referred to as terrorist cyber activity falls into this cyber-enabled category rather than pure cyberterrorism, representing the application of technology to traditional terrorist functions rather than fundamentally new forms of attack.



This distinction has important implications for threat assessment and policy responses. The capabilities required for pure cyberterrorism are significantly higher than those needed for cyber-enabled terrorism, involving specialised technical knowledge of industrial control systems, network infrastructure, and exploitation techniques that most terrorist organisations have not demonstrated. The dramatic, visible impact that terrorist groups typically seek is also more reliably achieved through conventional weapons than through cyberattacks, which may have unpredictable or invisible effects. The economic logic reinforces this pattern: readily available light weapons provide a cheaper and more effective means of producing terror than investing in developing sophisticated cyber capabilities. Consequently, while the potential for pure cyberterrorism remains a concern, the actual threat is better characterised as one of terrorists using cyber means to enhance their conventional operations rather than replacing physical violence with digital attacks.

2.1.4.1 The United States Approach

The United States has developed one of the most comprehensive national approaches to cybersecurity, though its strategy has evolved significantly over time in how it frames and addresses cyber threats, including potential cyberterrorism. Notably, the 2018 National Cyber Strategy avoided explicit reference to cyberterrorism as a distinct category, instead framing online terrorism primarily as an issue of international cooperation and soft power projection. This approach reflects the American emphasis on internet freedom principles and a preference for counter-narratives over content removal, distinguishing the US position from some other democracies that have adopted more aggressive content regulation and preemptive intervention strategies.

The foundational policy response to terrorism in the digital age was the USA Patriot Act, enacted after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. This legislation significantly expanded government surveillance and investigative powers, deliberately blurring the lines between domestic and international security to address perceived gaps in intelligence collection. The Act granted authorities broader access to electronic communications and digital records, reduced restrictions on intelligence sharing

between agencies, expanded the definition of terrorism to cover cyber-enabled activities, and lowered thresholds for surveillance of suspected terrorist supporters. The Patriot Act represented a paradigm shift toward preemptive security logic, seeking to intervene before terrorist activities occur rather than simply responding after attacks, with significant implications for privacy and civil liberties that continue to generate controversy.

❑ Offensive and defensive capabilities integrated in US strategy

American cybersecurity strategy emphasises several core elements beyond counter-terrorism specifically. These include defending critical infrastructure through public-private partnerships, developing offensive cyber capabilities to deter and respond to attacks, promoting secure technology development and supply chain integrity, building international coalitions around shared cyber norms, and maintaining technological superiority through research and development. The establishment of US Cyber Command as a unified military command reflects the elevation of cyber operations to a central component of national defence doctrine. This military dimension coexists with civilian cybersecurity efforts led by the Department of Homeland Security, creating a complex organisational landscape that sometimes generates coordination challenges.

2.1.4.2 The United Kingdom's Explicit Approach

❑ UK treats low-capability attacks as significant

Unlike the United States, the United Kingdom has explicitly maintained cyberterrorism language in its national security strategies, even while acknowledging that terrorist technical capabilities remain relatively low. British security documents describe cyberterrorism as a significant and varied threat, focusing particular attention on the high publicity impact of even low-capability activities such as website defacements, doxing of government personnel, and disruption of online services. This framing reflects recognition that the psychological and political effects of cyber incidents can be substantial even when the technical sophistication or actual damage is limited, aligning with the broader understanding of terrorism as primarily psychological warfare aimed at audiences beyond immediate victims.

The UK has developed a National Offensive Cyber Programme that explicitly includes the disruption of terrorist cyber actors among its objectives, representing a proactive approach to counter-terrorism in digital spaces. This offensive capability exists alongside defensive measures, reflecting a

- ❑ UK offensive posture raises civil liberties concerns

comprehensive strategy that seeks to actively degrade terrorist online presence rather than simply protecting British systems from attack. The offensive dimension raises complex questions about international law, sovereignty, and the boundaries of legitimate counter-terrorism action, particularly when operations target individuals or infrastructure located in third countries without necessarily involving traditional military force or seeking host nation permission.

Legislation has accompanied strategic doctrine, with the Counter Terrorism and Border Security Act of 2019 criminalising one-time viewing of terrorist planning information, representing an expansion of preparatory offences into the digital realm. This provision reflects the pre-emptive logic that has come to characterise much counter-terrorism law, extending criminal liability to activities that precede actual planning or preparation for specific attacks. Critics have expressed concern that such broadly drawn offences may criminalise curiosity or research, potentially chilling legitimate journalism, academic inquiry, or simply inquisitive browsing by individuals with no terrorist intent. The challenge of balancing security objectives with the protection of civil liberties in the digital age remains central to British debates about counter-terrorism policy.

2.1.4.3 France and Content Regulation

- ❑ France leads EU content regulation agenda

France has positioned cyberterrorism as a key justification for developing cyber-offensive capabilities, emphasising the high symbolic value of attacks over their actual technical damage or casualties. This framing aligns with the understanding of terrorism as symbolic violence aimed at generating psychological effects and media attention rather than simply maximising physical destruction. French strategy documents treat even minor cyber incidents as potentially significant when they involve terrorist actors or symbolic targets, reflecting concerns that visible government inability to protect digital infrastructure can undermine public confidence and serve terrorist propaganda objectives, regardless of the actual harm caused.

France has been a leading force behind European Union efforts to regulate terrorist content online, particularly through the Terrorist Content Regulation (TERREG), which requires online platforms to remove identified terrorist content within one hour of notification by authorities. This aggressive approach to content moderation reflects the French emphasis on preventing

❑ Constitutional limits constrain aggressive content removal

radicalisation and limiting terrorists' ability to use internet platforms for propaganda and recruitment. France has also championed the Christchurch Call, an initiative launched after the 2019 terrorist attack in New Zealand that was livestreamed on social media, calling for cooperation between governments and technology companies to prevent the use of the internet for terrorist purposes.

The French approach has encountered constitutional limits, however, demonstrating tensions between security objectives and fundamental rights protections. A national content moderation law was struck down by France's Constitutional Council in 2020 for infringing freedom of expression, specifically because it required platforms to make rapid content removal decisions without adequate safeguards or judicial oversight. This outcome illustrates the challenge democracies face in developing effective counter-terrorism measures that respect constitutional protections. The ruling does not necessarily indicate that France will abandon aggressive content regulation, but it does require more carefully calibrated approaches that incorporate procedural protections and clearer standards for what constitutes removable terrorist content.

2.1.4.4 China's Comprehensive Control Approach

❑ China treats internet as sovereign space to control

China represents a fundamentally different approach to cyberterrorism, one that makes no distinction between online and offline terrorism or between pure terrorist activities and incitement or preparatory behaviour. Chinese law and policy treat the internet primarily as a medium or tool for crimes rather than as an independent domain requiring distinct legal frameworks. This approach integrates cyberterrorism into a broader agenda of regulating, securitising, and surveilling what China describes as its sovereign cyberspace, with definitions of terrorism and extremism that are extraordinarily broad by international standards and lack the procedural protections and judicial oversight characteristic of democratic legal systems.

Chinese legislation criminalises the dissemination of what it terms fake terrorism information and terrorist propaganda, with severe penalties including minimum sentences of five years' imprisonment. The scope of prohibited content extends far beyond direct advocacy of violence to include material that Chinese authorities deem to promote separatism or extremism, terms that lack precise definition and are applied with considerable discretion. The lack of transparency in

- ❑ Vague laws target ethnic minorities in Xinjiang

- ❑ Information security frames content as security threat

- ❑ Russia conflates physical and information space threats

terrorism prosecutions and convictions makes it difficult to assess how these laws are applied in practice, but available evidence suggests they are used extensively in the Xinjiang region against Uyghur and other Muslim minority populations, with convictions recorded for activities as minor as accessing terrorism-related videos or images without any demonstrated connection to actual terrorist planning or activity.

China's approach reflects its preference for what it terms 'information security' over the narrower concept of 'cybersecurity' favoured by Western states. Information security encompasses not only the protection of technical infrastructure and data but also control over content and narratives, treating information flows as potential security threats requiring state management. This framework views online speech as subject to the same controls as offline speech, with no special protection for digital expression. The integration of counter-terrorism with broader content control creates a system where political opposition, ethnic minority cultural expression, and religious practice can all be framed as security threats subject to criminal sanction, illustrating how expansive definitions of cyberterrorism can be misappropriated to justify the repression of non-violent dissent.

2.1.4.5 Russia's Information Security Doctrine

Russia explicitly endorses the possibility of pure cyberterrorism in its legislative frameworks, addressing it as an information security threat to critical infrastructure. Russian doctrine covers what it describes as the destructive impact of terrorist and extremist organisations, making no clear distinction between threats to physical infrastructure and threats to information content within what Russian policy documents call the 'infosphere'. This holistic approach treats attacks on networks and data as equivalent to attacks on the ideas and narratives circulating through digital spaces, reflecting a conception of security that extends beyond protecting systems and into managing the information environment itself.

Legislation has given concrete form to this broad security conception. The Yarovaya Law enacted in 2018 requires internet service providers to store and share user information with security services without requiring court orders, representing a massive expansion of surveillance authority. The law mandates the retention of all communications metadata and content for specified periods, creating a comprehensive data collection infrastructure that security services can access for counter-

❑ Russia builds national internet control infrastructure

terrorism and other purposes. The Sovereign Internet Law, passed in 2019, goes further by mandating the installation of government-controlled software that enables direct content blocking by authorities, essentially creating infrastructure for a national internet firewall that can disconnect Russia from the global internet or selectively block content deemed threatening.

These measures reflect Russia's preference for state control over digital infrastructure and content, justified partly through reference to counter-terrorism but serving broader political objectives of managing information flows and limiting opposition organising. The Russian approach blurs cybersecurity with information control in ways that mirror Chinese practice, treating the internet as requiring comprehensive state management rather than as a relatively open space for communication and expression. This model stands in sharp contrast to the Western emphasis on internet freedom and has become a source of international tension in cyber diplomacy, with Russia advocating for international norms that would legitimise content control while Western states resist such frameworks as threats to human rights.

2.1.5 Preemptive Security Logic and Human Rights Concerns

2.1.5.1 The Shift Toward Prevention

❑ Prevention logic precedes actual criminal acts

A defining feature of contemporary counter-terrorism policy, including responses to cyberterrorism, is the embrace of preemptive security logic that shifts the focus from responding to attacks after they occur to intervening before they happen. This approach is often described as moving "left from the bang," referring to timelines where the "bang" represents the actual terrorist attack, and prevention requires action at earlier points when plotting, planning, preparation, or radicalisation is occurring. Preemptive thinking represents a fundamental change from traditional law enforcement models that typically require some overt criminal act before intervention, moving instead toward risk management frameworks that identify and address potential threats based on probability and possibility rather than demonstrated criminal behaviour.

This shift involves several conceptual changes in how security is understood and pursued. There is a move from probability to possibility, acting on potential futures rather than patterns derived from past data and requiring intervention when threats



❑ Prevention demands judgments about speech and intent

are deemed possible even if not probable. The transition from effects to intents means focusing on what adversaries might be planning or aspiring to do rather than waiting for concrete effects to materialise. There is also a change in focus from bad guys to bad content, particularly in digital contexts, where the concern shifts to identifying and removing material that might inspire, instruct, or facilitate terrorism rather than only tracking identified terrorist actors. Finally, there is entry into the semantic domain of determining what constitutes bad content, requiring authorities to make judgment calls about expression, ideas, and information that necessitate sophisticated interpretation and raise fundamental questions about who decides what crosses the line from protected speech to dangerous incitement.

Preemptive security requires expanded surveillance capabilities to detect potential threats before they fully develop. In the digital context, this includes automated content moderation using algorithms to identify potentially terrorist material across vast volumes of online content, predictive policing approaches that attempt to identify individuals at risk of radicalisation or likely to commit attacks based on behavioural patterns and data analytics, sophisticated monitoring of communications, social media activity, and online behaviour, and intelligence fusion across multiple databases and information sources to identify patterns invisible in any single dataset. These capabilities represent significant expansions of state power with substantial implications for privacy, expression, and other civil liberties, raising questions about appropriate limits and oversight mechanisms.

2.1.5.2 Threats to Freedom of Expression

❑ Preemption criminalises curiosity and research

The extension of preemptive counter-terrorism measures to low-impact cyber activities and online content creates significant risks to freedom of expression, a fundamental human right protected in international law and national constitutions. Several specific developments illustrate these concerns. There has been a criminalisation of viewing, expressing support for, or glorifying terrorism, extending criminal liability beyond direct participation in violence to encompass speech and information consumption. Laws now prohibit accessing certain material even once without any requirement to demonstrate that the individual intends to use the material for terrorist purposes, potentially capturing researchers, journalists, and simply curious individuals.

- ❑ Private moderation lacks accountability safeguards

Content moderation has been outsourced to private companies with vague normative guidance, shifting the enforcement of counter-terrorism law from trained law enforcement and judicial authorities to platform employees who make rapid decisions based on company policies that may or may not align with legal standards and constitutional protections. These private actors face strong pressure from governments to remove content quickly, creating incentives for over-removal that sweeps away protected expression along with genuinely dangerous material. The lack of transparency in how platforms interpret and apply counter-terrorism policies compounds concerns, as do questions about appeal mechanisms and due process when content is removed or accounts are suspended based on terrorism-related concerns.

There is a risk of criminalising what some scholars call inquisitive or foolish minds—individuals who view or share controversial content without any actual terrorist sympathy or intent but who may nonetheless face serious criminal liability. The challenge is particularly acute for young people who may encounter extremist material through social media, view it out of curiosity or peer pressure, and find themselves potentially subject to prosecution under laws designed to prevent terrorism. The breadth of some prohibitions and the severity of potential penalties create chilling effects on legitimate research, journalism, and political discourse, as individuals may avoid accessing or discussing certain topics for fear of attracting suspicion or prosecution.

2.1.5.3 Authoritarian Misappropriation

- ❑ Broad definitions enable minority persecution

Broad definitions of cyberterrorism and expansive counter-terrorism powers create opportunities for authoritarian misappropriation, where the language and tools of counter-terrorism are deployed to suppress legitimate political opposition, persecute minority populations, and consolidate state control over information and expression. This pattern is visible in multiple contexts where counter-terrorism frameworks are stretched to encompass activities that bear little resemblance to genuine terrorism but that challenge government authority or represent politically inconvenient expression.

China's approach illustrates these dangers vividly. The framework of what Chinese authorities call the three evils—terrorism, separatism, and extremism—elides distinctions among distinct phenomena and treats ethnic minority cultural



practices, religious observance, and political dissent as potential security threats. Terrorism prosecutions in Xinjiang province have targeted individuals for activities including watching videos with religious content, possessing books on Islam, contacting relatives abroad, refusing to eat pork, and maintaining traditional cultural practices. The lack of transparency in these proceedings and the severity of sentences, including lengthy imprisonment and extrajudicial detention in re-education camps, demonstrate how counter-terrorism authority can be weaponised against populations based on their identity rather than any actual threat they pose.

The problem extends beyond these obvious cases to subtler forms of abuse in democracies as well. When counter-terrorism law is drafted broadly or applied expansively, it can capture activists engaged in civil disobedience, protesters using confrontational tactics, or individuals associated with controversial political movements. The terrorist label, once applied, delegitimises the political claims being made and justifies extraordinary measures, including extended surveillance, preventive detention, and restrictions on movement and association. Even when prosecutions ultimately fail, the process itself serves to intimidate and burden activists, creating chilling effects on legitimate political activity.

Counter-terrorism efforts in digital spaces involve what scholars describe as a triangle of free speech online, consisting of states that set legal frameworks and exert political pressure, infrastructure companies that own and operate platforms and

- ❑ Platforms enforce state policy without accountability

- ❑ Speed mandates produce systematic over-removal

make content moderation decisions, and individual speakers whose expression may be amplified or silenced depending on platform rules and state demands. This multi-stakeholder environment creates complex dynamics where responsibilities and power are distributed unevenly and where different actors have divergent interests and incentives.

Technology platforms have increasingly become enforcers of state security policies, making judgments about what constitutes terrorist content and implementing removal and account suspension decisions at a massive scale. This role raises several concerns. Private companies lack the accountability mechanisms of public authorities, making decisions that affect fundamental rights without the procedural protections or democratic oversight that govern state action. The discretionary corporate powers exercised by platforms represent an erosion of traditional sovereign prerogatives, with governments effectively delegating authority to impose speech restrictions to companies motivated by commercial considerations, including advertiser preferences, user retention, and reputational management, rather than principled human rights analysis.

The tension between government mandates and platform responsibilities creates difficult dilemmas. Governments increasingly impose legal obligations on platforms to rapidly remove terrorist content, threatening significant fines for non-compliance. Platforms must balance these demands against user rights, free expression principles, the risk of over-removal that silences legitimate speech, and the practical challenges of moderating billions of pieces of content uploaded daily across multiple languages and cultural contexts. The result is often conservative moderation that removes borderline content to avoid regulatory penalties, even when such content might warrant protection as political speech, artistic expression, or documentation of human rights abuses.

2.1.6 International Diplomacy and Cybersecurity Governance

2.1.6.1 UN Group of Governmental Experts

The United Nations Group of Governmental Experts on Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security (commonly called the UN GGE) has served since 2004 as



- ❑ GGE shapes norms without binding authority

the primary forum for state-led discussions on international cybersecurity norms. The GGE operates through successive rounds in which appointed experts from typically fifteen to twenty-five countries meet over several years to develop consensus reports addressing how international law applies in cyberspace and what norms should govern responsible state behaviour. These reports are politically significant despite being non-binding, providing authoritative statements that shape subsequent diplomatic discourse and national policy development.

Cyberterrorism references in GGE reports have evolved over successive rounds, revealing changing state priorities and concerns. The 2010 GGE report noted few indications of terrorist attempts to use information and communication technologies for attacks but acknowledged the use of the internet by terrorists for communication and recruitment purposes, essentially recognising cyber-enabled terrorism while expressing limited concern about pure cyberterrorism. The 2013 report emphasised the need for international cooperation and capacity building to address terrorist use of ICTs, calling for information sharing, technical assistance, and coordinated responses without dramatically elevating the threat assessment.

- ❑ GGE acknowledges threat without endorsing excess

The 2015 GGE report explicitly linked terrorist use of ICTs to international peace and security threats, representing an increase in rhetorical weight being placed on the issue. However, the consistent message across all reports has been that terrorist use of cyberspace remains more a possibility than a current reality at scale, requiring vigilance and preparation but not justifying exceptional measures that would undermine an open and secure internet. The GGE's approach generally treats cyber-enabled terrorism as the primary concern while acknowledging the potential for more destructive pure cyberterrorism in the future, a framing that balances recognition of risks with resistance to exaggerated threat narratives that could justify excessive responses.

- ❑ OEWG democratises cyber norm development

2.1.6.2 The Open-Ended Working Group

The UN Open-Ended Working Group on Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security (OEWG) was established in 2018 as a more inclusive complement to the GGE, open to all UN member states rather than limited to appointed experts from selected countries. This broader participation reflects

developing countries' concerns about being excluded from norm development processes that affect their interests and sovereignty. The OEWG has proven more transparent than the GGE, conducting public deliberations and accepting written submissions from states and non-governmental stakeholders, creating opportunities for broader input into international cyber norms.

❑ Western states contained China's expansive proposals

Cyberterrorism has featured in OEWG discussions with varying prominence across participating states. China has been particularly active in proposing extensive counter-cyberterrorism norms, including intelligence exchanges among countries, cooperation requirements for internet service providers in investigating and prosecuting cyber terrorists, mandatory content takedowns when material is designated as terrorist-related, and joint capacity-building programmes focused on technical and legal measures. These proposals reflect China's comprehensive control approach to cyber governance and its preference for state-centric, information-security frameworks that extend beyond the technical protection of infrastructure to encompass content regulation.

Western states have generally downplayed cyberterrorism in OEWG contexts or argued that discussions belong in other forums such as the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee or regional security organisations rather than in general cybersecurity governance discussions. This positioning reflects concern that elevating cyberterrorism in cyber norms discussions legitimises expansive approaches that conflate security with content control and provides diplomatic cover for repressive practices. The final 2021 OEWG report referenced cyberterrorism minimally despite strong advocacy from some states, suggesting that Western diplomatic efforts to contain the issue were at least partially successful in preventing it from becoming a central pillar of UN cyber norms.

2.1.6.3 Cyber Security versus Information Security

❑ Cybersecurity vs. information security reflects ideological divide

A persistent tension in international cyber diplomacy concerns competing conceptual frameworks designated as cybersecurity and information security. Western states, led by the United States and the European Union, generally prefer cybersecurity language that focuses on the technical security of networks and the protection of infrastructure against attacks and disruptions. This framing treats the internet primarily as



technical infrastructure requiring protection from malicious actors while remaining open for free expression and commerce. Cybersecurity, in this conception, is about defending systems while maintaining the internet's character as a platform for communication and innovation.

Russia and China advocate for information security frameworks that encompass broader concerns, including content control, the protection of state sovereignty over information flows, and managing the political and social effects of digital communications. Information security treats information itself as something requiring management and control, not simply the technical systems that transmit it. This approach justifies state authority to regulate online content, block access to foreign websites and platforms, and monitor citizen communications in the name of security, stability, and sovereignty. The information security framework explicitly rejects Western notions of internet freedom, treating them as vehicles for Western political interference in the domestic affairs of other states.

❑ Democracies risk adopting authoritarian frameworks

The risk for Western states is that engagement with information operations, foreign election interference, and disinformation may draw them toward information security frameworks that they have traditionally resisted. As democracies confront digital manipulation and influence campaigns, there is a temptation to adopt language and measures that address content rather than only infrastructure, potentially legitimising the broader information security approach advocated by authoritarian states. The challenge is to address genuine threats from disinformation and influence operations while maintaining principled distinctions from authoritarian content control—a difficult balance requiring clear articulation of democratic values and human rights standards that should constrain responses even to serious information threats.

2.1.6.4 The Shared Language Problem

A troubling feature of international cyber diplomacy is the extent to which liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes use similar counter-terrorism vocabulary while applying it to fundamentally different practices. When both democratic and repressive governments reference threats from cyberterrorism, the need to protect critical infrastructure, and the importance of removing terrorist content from the internet, the shared language can obscure profound differences in what is actually being done, who is targeted, what procedural protections exist,

❑ Informality reflects treaty-making constraints

and what oversight mechanisms operate. This similarity in diplomatic rhetoric feels too close for comfort when it enables authoritarian states to deflect criticism by citing democratic precedents for surveillance, content removal, or restrictions on encrypted communications.

- ❑ Non-binding norms achieve compliance through reputation

The problem is compounded by the ways that democratic states' own practices push the boundaries of human rights protections in the name of counter-terrorism. Mass surveillance programmes revealed by whistleblowers, content moderation systems that over-remove protected expression, expansive criminal prohibitions on accessing information, and the use of algorithms to predict and prevent terrorist activity before it occurs all represent areas where democratic practice falls short of human rights ideals. These shortcomings weaken the moral authority with which democracies can criticise authoritarian approaches, as critics can point to Western hypocrisy or double standards. The result is diplomatic language on cyberterrorism that can be misappropriated to deflect criticism of domestic repression, with authoritarians claiming they are simply following international norms and best practices established by the very democracies that now criticise them.

2.1.7 Public Perceptions and Policy Support

2.1.7.1 Threat Perception as a Psychological Mechanism

- ❑ Perceived threats drive policy support in democracies

Public attitudes toward cybersecurity and surveillance policies are significantly shaped by threat perceptions—individuals' assessments of risks to themselves, their communities, and their nations from terrorism and other dangers. Psychological research demonstrates that perceived threats function as cognitive mechanisms linking exposure to terrorism with support for aggressive security policies. Understanding these mechanisms is important because public support or opposition significantly constrains what policies governments can implement in democracies, and because perceptions of threats may diverge substantially from objective risk assessments based on actual incidence and likelihood of attacks.

Scholars distinguish between different types of threat perceptions with potentially different political consequences. Personal threats refer to risks to oneself and close others, encompassing the sense of direct vulnerability to attack or



❑ Personal and collective threats produce different responses

❑ High threat perception expands acceptance of surveillance

❑ Low digital literacy enables narrative manipulation

victimisation. Collective threats concern risks to the broader in-group, such as the nation, community, or social group, including security threats to physical safety and social order as well as economic threats to livelihoods, prosperity, and material wellbeing. Realistic Conflict Theory suggests that perceived threats to the in-group's tangible assets—security, resources, economic stability—strongly shape political attitudes, including support for exclusionary policies, restrictions on civil liberties justified as necessary for protection, and aggressive responses to out-groups perceived as threatening.

Research consistently shows that elevated perceptions of security threats are associated with specific political attitudes and policy preferences. Individuals experiencing high security threats are more likely to support exclusionist policies toward minority groups or foreigners, tolerate sacrifices of civil liberties in favour of security measures, back military retaliation and robust counter-terrorism approaches, and grant authorities expansive surveillance and investigative powers. Economic threat perceptions, though less studied in terrorism contexts, can also increase support for aggressive policies, particularly when linked to anger or broader insecurity about jobs, resources, or national prosperity. The mechanism appears to involve threats increasing anxiety, anger, or fear, which in turn generates demand for strong protective action by authorities, even when such action incurs costs to rights or freedoms.

2.1.7.2 Cyber-Specific Threat Perception

Threat perception in cyberspace faces unique challenges because most people have a limited ability to directly assess cyber risks. Digital literacy remains generally low, and the technical complexities of cybersecurity make it difficult for laypeople to evaluate whether specific incidents represent serious threats or what level of risk they personally face from various cyber phenomena. As a result, people rely heavily on elites and media narratives to form views about cyber threats, creating opportunities for those narratives to shape perceptions in ways that may exaggerate or minimise actual risks depending on the sources' interests and framing choices.

Cognitive and emotional biases significantly shape cyber threat perceptions. Fear, dread, and uncertainty all tend to magnify perceived risks, particularly for low-probability but high-consequence events like catastrophic cyberattacks on critical infrastructure. The cyber doom narrative—the discourse

- ❑ Cyber doom narrative amplifies disproportionate fear

emphasising the potential for devastating cyberattacks causing mass casualties, widespread destruction, or civilisational disruption—functions as a cognitive mechanism that amplifies fear even when actual incidents fall far short of these catastrophic scenarios. This perception can help explain why even relatively minor cyber incidents may influence policy preferences if framed as indicators of looming catastrophe or as precursors to more serious attacks that could follow.

Studies demonstrate that perceived cyber threats significantly affect attitudes toward cybersecurity policies, just as perceived conventional threats affect attitudes toward traditional security measures. People who believe cyber threats are serious and imminent are more likely to support intrusive surveillance, accept restrictions on encryption and privacy, grant authorities broad powers for monitoring online activity, and prioritise security over civil liberties in digital contexts. However, the relationship between threat perception and policy support is not automatic or universal; it depends on contextual factors including the specific nature of the threat, the particular policies being proposed, individuals' prior attitudes toward government and privacy, and broader political and cultural contexts.

2.1.7.3 Experimental Evidence on Cyberterrorism and Support for Surveillance

- ❑ Experimental design isolates cyber versus physical effects

Research using survey experiments in the United Kingdom has provided important evidence on how exposure to cyberterrorism affects public attitudes toward digital surveillance and security policies. These experiments involved showing participants simulated television news reports professionally produced to resemble trusted British news coverage about attacks on the national railway network. The experiments varied both the intensity of attacks (fatal versus non-fatal) and the mode of attack (cyber versus conventional physical sabotage), allowing researchers to isolate how these factors affect support for stringent surveillance measures.

- ❑ Fatality, not mode, drives surveillance support

The findings reveal several important patterns. Fatal attacks increased support for surveillance policies compared to non-fatal attacks, supporting the hypothesis that more destructive, lethal incidents produce larger shifts in policy preferences. This fatality threshold effect suggests that cyberattacks must cause visible physical harm or significant casualties to generate the same policy responses as conventional terrorism. However, the expected difference between cyber and conventional terrorism



was not consistently observed—exposure to cyberterrorism did not produce reliably different levels of support for security policies compared to conventional attacks of similar severity, contradicting assumptions that conventional terrorism inevitably elicits stronger reactions.

Economic threat perceptions emerged as consistently and positively associated with support for security policies across experimental conditions. Individuals who perceived high economic threats showed stronger support for surveillance regardless of attack type, and economic threat interacted with attack intensity such that those with high economic threat perceptions showed especially strong support for surveillance after fatal attacks. This finding suggests that economic insecurity amplifies the policy effects of terrorism exposure, a relationship deserving further attention given ongoing economic disruptions and inequalities in many societies.

❑ Economic insecurity amplifies terrorism policy effects

Security threat perceptions showed more complex patterns. While they did not exhibit a uniform main effect on support for security policies overall, security threat perceptions moderated reactions to attack type. People with high security threat perceptions showed more support for surveillance after conventional attacks than after cyberattacks, while at high threat levels, support for security policies remained high regardless of attack type. Conversely, at low security threat levels, conventional attacks increased support for restrictive policies more than cyberterrorism did. These patterns suggest that pre-existing security concerns shape how people interpret different types of threats and what policy responses seem appropriate.

Item-level analyses examining specific surveillance measures revealed that effects were particularly visible for highly intrusive powers, such as granting security agencies the right to read and monitor all email content and allowing intelligence agencies broad access to mobile data. For individuals already high in threat perception, fatal attacks significantly increased willingness to allow agencies to obtain personal email logs for security purposes, demonstrating how severe incidents can shift acceptance of surveillance that might normally face resistance. Interestingly, in some conditions, exposure to cyberterrorism actually reduced support for intrusive policies among individuals lower in threat perception, possibly because cyber incidents seemed less immediately dangerous than physical attacks or because respondents were sceptical about

whether surveillance would prevent technically sophisticated cyberattacks.

2.1.8 Emerging Technologies and Future Challenges

2.1.8.1 Artificial Intelligence and Cyber Threats

- ❑ AI accelerates both attack and defence capabilities

Artificial intelligence represents both a tool for enhancing cybersecurity and a source of new cyber threats and vulnerabilities. On the defensive side, AI and machine learning enable proactive threat identification by analysing vast amounts of network data to detect anomalies, automated security responses that can react to attacks faster than human operators, improved compliance monitoring of security policies across large organisations, and enhanced prediction of vulnerabilities before they are exploited. These capabilities support a more effective defence against the growing volume and sophistication of cyber threats, particularly as human analysts cannot keep pace with the scale of data and speed of attacks in modern digital environments.

However, AI also enables new forms of cyberattack with troubling implications, including AI-driven attacks that adapt to defensive measures in real time, automated exploitation tools that can discover and exploit vulnerabilities without human direction, sophisticated distributed denial-of-service attacks coordinated by artificial intelligence, and targeted social engineering using AI-generated content customised to individual victims based on collected data. These offensive applications of AI create escalation risks, where attack and defence capabilities accelerate in an arms race dynamic, and attribution challenges become even more severe when AI systems autonomously develop and execute attacks without direct human control at each stage.

- ❑ AI governance lags behind capability development

In the context of cyber diplomacy and international governance, AI introduces additional complications. While AI can assist in threat intelligence analysis, negotiation support, and verification of cyber arms control commitments, it also raises ethical and governance challenges regarding autonomous cyber weapons, liability and accountability for AI-directed attacks, the potential for AI systems to misinterpret situations and escalate conflicts, and the risk that AI capabilities will be concentrated in a few technologically advanced states, exacerbating global inequality in cybersecurity capacity. The development of international norms for the responsible use of

AI in cyber contexts is still in the early stages, with significant disagreement among states about whether and how to constrain military applications of artificial intelligence.

2.1.8.2 Internet of Things and Expanding Attack Surface

- ❑ IoT multiplies vulnerable entry points exponentially

The Internet of Things—the proliferation of connected devices including home appliances, industrial sensors, medical devices, and infrastructure control systems—greatly enlarges the attack surface vulnerable to cyber exploitation. IoT devices are often deployed with minimal security features, lacking encryption, using default passwords, having no mechanism for security updates, and providing entry points into networks that can be exploited to reach more valuable targets. The Mirai botnet attack of 2016 demonstrated how hundreds of thousands of compromised IoT devices could be coordinated to launch devastating distributed denial-of-service attacks, revealing vulnerabilities that remain largely unaddressed.

- ❑ IoT vulnerabilities could enable pure cyberterrorism

IoT creates specific risks to critical infrastructure because industrial control systems and supervisory control and data acquisition systems increasingly rely on networked sensors and controllers that may be vulnerable to remote exploitation. Cyberterrorists or hostile states gaining access to these systems could potentially disrupt water treatment, manipulate power distribution, interfere with transportation systems, or compromise healthcare devices, creating the real-world physical harms that would constitute pure cyberterrorism. The challenge is compounded by the long operational lives of industrial systems, which may remain in service for decades, making it difficult to retrofit security into devices and networks that were designed without serious attention to cyber threats.

The cross-border nature of IoT data flows and device manufacturing complicates jurisdiction and governance. Devices may be manufactured in one country, sold in another, and communicate with cloud servers in a third, raising questions about which national laws apply and how security can be enforced across supply chains and operational networks. International cooperation on IoT security standards, shared best practices, and coordinated response procedures for IoT-enabled attacks is essential but remains underdeveloped, with fragmented national approaches creating global vulnerabilities through weak links in interconnected networks.

2.1.9 Policy Recommendations and Best Practices

2.1.9.1 Language Precision and Definitional Clarity

❑ Precision prevents authoritarian misappropriation

Effective cyber governance requires avoiding vague terminology that authoritarian regimes can misappropriate to justify repression while appearing to follow international norms and best practices. Specifically, international discussions should clearly distinguish between violent cyber attacks causing physical harm and preparatory online activities such as propaganda and recruitment, acknowledging that both require attention but applying different legal frameworks and policy responses. Conflating these distinct phenomena under broad cyberterrorism definitions creates confusion and enables states to treat any online activity they dislike as terrorism, undermining protection for legitimate expression and political activity.

National legislation should explicitly anchor fundamental rights protections, including freedom of expression, privacy, presumption of innocence, and due process, making clear that counter-terrorism measures must comply with constitutional and international human rights standards rather than operating as exceptions to normal legal protections. When surveillance powers or content removal authorities are granted, they should be accompanied by robust oversight mechanisms, transparency requirements, independent review procedures, and clear limits on scope and duration to prevent the normalisation of exceptional measures. The principle should be that counter-terrorism authorities are temporary responses to specific threats rather than permanent expansions of state power.

International discussions should develop a shared vocabulary that is sufficiently precise to enable meaningful cooperation without being so broad that it legitimises repression. This requires sustained diplomatic engagement on what specific behaviours constitute cyber threats warranting international attention, what distinguishes terrorism from legitimate political opposition or protest, what procedural protections must accompany counter-terrorism measures, and what oversight and accountability mechanisms are necessary to prevent abuse. Building this common understanding is difficult given diverse political systems and threat perceptions, but the alternative—shared vocabulary without shared values—enables authoritarian misappropriation of democratic security discourse.



❑ Proportionality, transparency, and design protect rights

Balancing Security and Human Rights

The challenge of balancing legitimate security concerns with the protection of fundamental rights runs throughout cybersecurity and counter-terrorism policy. Several principles should guide this balance. First, necessity and proportionality should be applied rigorously, requiring that security measures be actually necessary to address identified threats and that they are proportionate to the threat's severity, imposing the minimum restrictions necessary to achieve legitimate security objectives. Security measures that sweep more broadly than necessary or that continue indefinitely without regular review fail these tests and should be reformed or abandoned.

Second, transparency and oversight are essential for accountability. Secret security programmes, surveillance without judicial oversight, and content moderation without clear standards or appeal mechanisms all create opportunities for abuse and undermine public trust, even when authorities are acting in good faith. To the extent consistent with operational security, information about counter-terrorism policies, surveillance authorities, and content removal should be made public, subjected to independent review by courts or parliamentary bodies, and evaluated regularly for effectiveness and impact on rights. Individuals affected by security measures should have access to remedies, including appeal procedures, compensation for wrongful actions, and the ability to challenge the legal basis of measures.

Third, technological design choices can support privacy and security simultaneously, rather than treating them as zero-sum. Encryption protects both individual privacy and cybersecurity by making data unreadable to attackers, suggesting that weakening encryption for law enforcement access also weakens overall security. Privacy-enhancing technologies can enable necessary functions, like verifying age, while minimising data collection. Security-by-design principles build protection into systems from the start rather than adding it afterwards. Investment in these approaches can reduce the perceived trade-off between security and rights.

International Cooperation Frameworks

Addressing cyber threats, including cyberterrorism, requires international cooperation because digital threats cross borders instantly, and effective defence depends on coordination

❑ Technical cooperation precedes political agreement

across states and sectors. Several elements would strengthen international frameworks. First, technical cooperation on shared interests can proceed even when political agreement on broader issues remains elusive. Information sharing about vulnerabilities, threat actors, and attack methods benefits all parties and builds trust that can support cooperation on more contentious issues. Joint training and capacity building, particularly for developing countries, strengthens global defence by reducing weak points in international networks.

Second, confidence-building measures, including hotlines for crisis communication, joint exercises simulating cyber incidents, transparency about cyber doctrines and capabilities, and regular dialogues among security officials, can reduce risks of miscalculation and escalation when cyber incidents occur. These measures do not require agreement on comprehensive legal frameworks but can function even among states with significant disagreements, providing channels for managing tensions and preventing cyber incidents from triggering broader conflicts.

Third, multistakeholder engagement, involving governments, private sector technology companies, civil society, and technical experts, enriches policy development by incorporating diverse perspectives and expertise. Track 1.5 diplomacy, where experts work alongside official representatives, can generate creative solutions that purely governmental processes might miss. However, multistakeholder participation must be structured to ensure that powerful corporate actors do not capture processes and that civil society, representing users and rights-holders, has a meaningful voice.

Fourth, maintaining long-term engagement and avoiding escalatory cyber actions during negotiations demonstrates commitment to cooperative approaches and builds the trust necessary for effective collaboration. States that launch major cyberattacks or implement aggressive unilateral measures while simultaneously participating in multilateral discussions undermine their credibility and make cooperation more difficult. Restraint and consistency between stated principles and actual practice are essential for functional international cyber governance.



Summarised Overview

Terrorism has evolved significantly in the digital age, with information and communication technologies transforming how terrorist groups operate while also creating new forms of potential threat. The concept of cyberterrorism captures both the use of digital means to support conventional terrorism and the theoretical possibility of purely digital attacks causing serious harm comparable to physical terrorism. While pure cyberterrorism has not materialised despite persistent concerns, the integration of digital technologies into terrorist operations is well established, and the vulnerabilities of critical infrastructure to cyberattacks represent genuine risks that responsible governments must address.

The international response to cyber threats and cyberterrorism has been characterised by the expansion of surveillance and security powers, the development of national cybersecurity strategies, and efforts to build international norms through informal processes at the United Nations and in multistakeholder forums. These responses face significant challenges, including the difficulty of attributing cyberattacks, divergent national interests and threat perceptions, geopolitical competition between democratic and authoritarian approaches to internet governance, and the tension between security imperatives and the protection of civil liberties and human rights.

A critical concern is that broad or imprecise definitions of cyberterrorism can be misappropriated by authoritarian regimes to justify the repression of political opposition and minority populations under the guise of counter-terrorism. Shared language between democracies and autocracies about cyber threats can enable this misappropriation while weakening the moral authority of democratic states to criticise abuses. Maintaining clear distinctions between legitimate security measures and repressive content control requires sustained attention to human rights standards and resistance to normalising exceptional powers as permanent features of governance.

Public attitudes toward cybersecurity and surveillance are shaped by threat perceptions that may not align with objective risk assessments. Research demonstrates that fatal cyberattacks increase support for intrusive surveillance, but this support is conditional on severity and context rather than being automatic. Understanding how citizens perceive and respond to cyber threats is essential for developing policies that maintain democratic legitimacy while addressing genuine security needs. The challenge is particularly acute because most people lack the technical knowledge to assess cyber risks directly and rely on media narratives and elite framing that may exaggerate or minimise threats for political purposes.

Looking forward, emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things, and quantum computing, will create new cyber threats and vulnerabilities while also offering tools for enhanced defence. International cooperation will remain essential, requiring continued diplomatic engagement to develop shared norms, build

capacity, and manage crises, even in the absence of comprehensive binding treaties. The informal governance structures that have characterised cybersecurity diplomacy are likely to persist given geopolitical divisions and the complexity of cyberspace, though their effectiveness depends on sustained commitment from states and meaningful participation from non-state actors.

Ultimately, addressing cyberterrorism and broader cyber threats requires integrated approaches that combine technical security measures with diplomatic engagement, legal frameworks that respect human rights, public-private cooperation, and sustained attention to the political and social dimensions of digital security. The goal must be not merely to prevent attacks but to preserve an open, secure, and rights-respecting internet that benefits humanity while protecting against those who would exploit digital technologies for destructive purposes.

Achieving this balance is among the most significant challenges facing the international community in the twenty-first century.

Self-Assessment Questions

1. What are the three core elements that distinguish terrorism from other forms of violence?
2. Explain the difference between "pure cyberterrorism" and "cyber-enabled terrorism" with examples.
3. Why does the "democratization of violence" through light weapons affect terrorist choices about using cyber versus conventional methods?
4. What is the difference between "cybersecurity" and "information security" as frameworks for understanding cyber threats?
5. How do narrow and broad definitions of cyberterrorism differ, and why does this matter for policy?
6. What is "preemptive security logic," and how has it changed counter-terrorism approaches?
7. Explain why attribution is a major challenge in responding to cyberattacks and cyberterrorism.
8. What are confidence-building measures in cyber diplomacy, and why are they useful?
9. How can broad definitions of cyberterrorism be misappropriated by authoritarian regimes?
10. Why has international cybersecurity governance relied on informal mechanisms rather than formal treaties?



Assignment

1. Compare and contrast the approaches to cyberterrorism taken by the United States, United Kingdom, France, China, and Russia. What do these differences reveal about broader political values and governance models? (1500 words)
2. Critically analyse the tension between cybersecurity imperatives and the protection of civil liberties. Can democracies effectively counter cyberterrorism while maintaining respect for fundamental rights? Use specific policy examples to support your argument. (2000 words)
3. Evaluate the effectiveness of informal governance mechanisms like the UN GGE and OEWG in developing international cybersecurity norms. What are the advantages and limitations of this approach compared to formal treaties? (1500 words)
4. Assess the argument that pure cyberterrorism remains rare because conventional weapons offer terrorists more reliable means of achieving their objectives. What factors might change this calculation in the future? (1500 words)
5. Examine the role of threat perception in shaping public support for surveillance and security policies in response to cyberterrorism. How should policymakers account for psychological factors in developing proportionate responses? (1500 words)
6. Analyse how emerging technologies (artificial intelligence, Internet of Things, quantum computing) will reshape cyber threats and cyberterrorism over the next decade. What policy adaptations are needed? (2000 words)
7. Discuss the concept of "authoritarian misappropriation" of counter-terrorism frameworks. Provide specific examples and propose mechanisms to prevent such abuse while maintaining effective security cooperation. (1500 words)
8. Evaluate the role of private technology companies in cyber diplomacy and counter-terrorism efforts. Should these companies have as much influence as they currently do in shaping cybersecurity governance? (1500 words)

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU

UNIT 2

Climate Change, Refugee Crisis and Global Governance

| Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, learners will be able to:

- explain the fundamental differences between migrants and refugees and analyse how states use these categories to control borders and express sovereignty
- evaluate the effectiveness of the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol in addressing contemporary displacement crises, particularly in developing countries
- assess climate change as a multidimensional security threat that intersects with development, trade, and human displacement in international relations
- analyse the historical evolution of global climate governance from the 1992 UNFCCC through the Kyoto Protocol and subsequent negotiations
- critically examine the challenges of multilateral cooperation in addressing both refugee crises and climate change, including issues of responsibility-sharing, funding, and market-based mechanisms

| Background

Imagine waking up one morning to find that your coastal village has been submerged by rising sea levels, or that violence has erupted in your city, forcing you to flee with only what you can carry. Where would you go? Who would take you in? These questions face millions of people today. At the same time, scientists warn that our planet is warming at an unprecedented rate due to human activities. The smoke from factories, the exhaust from vehicles, and the clearing of forests are trapping heat in our atmosphere like a thick blanket. But here is the puzzle: the countries that produced most of this pollution are often the wealthiest and most secure, while the poorest nations suffer the worst consequences. They face droughts, floods, and storms that destroy crops and homes, forcing people to move. Yet when these displaced people seek safety elsewhere, they often find closed borders and hostile receptions.



This unit explores two of the most pressing challenges facing our world today: the global refugee and displacement crisis, and climate change as a security threat. These issues are deeply connected. Both involve questions of who is responsible and who should pay the costs and how the international community can work together when national interests conflict. The refugee crisis reveals how states decide who can enter their territory and who deserves protection, while climate change shows how difficult it is for countries to cooperate on a problem that affects everyone but in very unequal ways. Understanding these challenges is essential for anyone studying international relations, as they test the limits of our global governance systems and raise fundamental questions about justice, sovereignty, and human rights in an interconnected world.

Keywords

Migration, Refugee, Forced Displacement, Sovereignty, Persecution, Non-refoulement, Protracted Refugee Situations, Climate Change, Greenhouse Gases, UNFCCC, Kyoto Protocol, Common But Differentiated Responsibility

Discussion

The contemporary international system faces two interconnected crises that challenge traditional notions of state sovereignty and global cooperation. The first is the global refugee and displacement crisis, which has seen tens of millions of people forced from their homes by conflict, persecution, and increasingly by environmental disasters. The second is climate change, which threatens not only the physical environment but also international peace, economic development, and human security. Both challenges expose deep inequalities in the international system. Developing countries host the vast majority of the world's refugees while contributing least to climate change, yet suffering its worst impacts. Meanwhile, developed states struggle to balance domestic political pressures with international responsibilities. This unit examines how these crises emerged, how the international community has attempted to manage them through multilateral frameworks, and why these efforts have often fallen short. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for grasping the complexities of global governance in the twenty-first century.

2.2.1 The Refugee and Displacement Crisis

2.2.1.1 Definitions and Scope: Understanding - Migrants, Refugees, and Forced Displacement

- ❑ Border categories express state sovereignty

- ❑ Choice distinguishes migrants from refugees

- ❑ Legal categories determine treatment and protection

Modern states treat the control of borders and the decision of who may enter their territory as fundamental expressions of sovereignty and national identity. As states developed clearly defined borders, they created categories to distinguish between citizens and outsiders. These categories include foreigners, aliens, migrants, and refugees. Each category carries different legal meanings and determines what rights a person has and how a state will treat them.

A migrant is someone who chooses to leave their country of origin. This choice may be motivated by the desire for better economic opportunities, education, or to join family members. The key point is that migration is understood as voluntary. The receiving state also makes a choice to accept the migrant, typically through a visa system, immigration quotas, or points-based systems that favour certain skills or qualifications. Migration is therefore a mutual process involving choices by both the individual and the state.

A refugee, in contrast, has little or no meaningful choice about leaving. Flight is forced by circumstances such as war, persecution, or violence. Refugees may arrive at a border without prior permission and may be unwelcome. From the receiving state's perspective, refugees represent an imposition because they have nowhere else to go. The state did not choose to accept them through a normal migration process; yet, international law and humanitarian principles may require the state to provide protection.

Forced migrants occupy a middle ground. They did not leave by choice, but they may not meet the strict legal definition of a refugee under international law. For example, people fleeing general violence, economic collapse, or natural disasters are forced migrants, but they may not qualify for refugee status. Irregular or illegal migrants are people who enter a state without permission or stay beyond the terms of their visa. They may have entered secretly or overstayed a legal entry. However, it is important to note that a person cannot be treated as an illegal immigrant if they are later recognised as a refugee. International law requires that asylum seekers have their cases assessed before they are penalised or deported.



These classifications are not just legal technicalities; they are political and moral categories that shape how states respond to human movement. People in very similar situations of danger or need can be classified differently and treated very differently depending on which category applies to them. This creates significant challenges for fairness and consistency in the international system.

2.2.1.2 History and Evolution: From Early Practices to Modern Refugee Law

The concept of a refugee is relatively new in the English language. The term entered English from French at the end of the seventeenth century. It originally meant someone seeking refuge and assistance, and it quickly became associated with flight from persecution. One of the earliest and most famous examples involved the French Protestant Huguenots who fled religious persecution in Catholic France. England and the Netherlands accepted many Huguenots; however, this acceptance was not purely humanitarian. The Huguenots often had wealth, aristocratic connections, and valuable skills. They also shared religious beliefs with the ruling elites in their host countries. This historical example illustrates an important pattern: states have always been more willing to accept refugees who are perceived as economically, socially, or culturally compatible.

❑ Refugee acceptance has always been selective

As modern nation-states developed, they sought to fix populations to specific territories. This process, called territorialization, allowed governments to register, tax, conscript, and monitor their populations more effectively. Industrialising settler states such as the United States, Canada, and Australia welcomed migrants to provide labour and build their populations. However, these states ranked groups by desirability and used laws to exclude people they considered undesirable. For example, Alien Laws, racial quotas, language tests, and health tests were employed to keep out Asians, Jews, and other groups. Australia's Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, known as the White Australia Policy, is a clear example of a racially selective migration policy. This history demonstrates that migration policy has long been shaped by labour needs, racial hierarchies, and fears about assimilation.

❑ Migration policy historically driven by racial hierarchies

The scale of refugee crises expanded dramatically in the twentieth century. The Russian Revolution of 1917 and the end

❑ UNHCR and 1951 Convention codified refugee law

of World War I created approximately twenty million refugees in Europe. Borders were redrawn, new states emerged, and citizenship rules changed, leaving many people unable to return to their original homes. Emerging states often resisted accepting large numbers of displaced persons because they were struggling with post-war reconstruction, unemployment, housing shortages, and weak welfare systems. The sheer scale of displacement pushed states to seek international mechanisms to manage refugees collectively rather than leaving each state to handle the problem alone.

After World War II, the situation became even more severe. Tens of millions of people were displaced across Europe. The newly created United Nations established the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to respond to this crisis. In 1951, UN member states drafted the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. This Convention provided a legal framework defining who is a refugee, how asylum seekers should be treated at borders, and what rights refugees have in host states. It also established the principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits states from forcibly returning refugees to places where their life or freedom would be threatened.

❑ 1967 Protocol globalised but retained narrow definition

The original 1951 Convention had important limitations. It applied only to events that occurred before January 1, 1951, and it initially focused on Europe, though states could choose to apply it more broadly. In 1967, the Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees removed these time and geographic limits. This allowed the refugee definition to apply globally to new refugee situations while keeping the core legal framework intact. Despite these changes, the definition of a refugee remains narrow and politically focused.

2.2.1.3 The Legal Definition of a Refugee and Its Limitations

❑ 1967 Protocol globalised but retained narrow definition

Under the 1951 Convention, a refugee is defined as a person who has a well-founded fear of persecution based on five specific grounds: race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. This definition was shaped by the historical and political context of the early Cold War. Western states wanted to prioritise people fleeing communist regimes, framing them as victims of the worst forms of political persecution. As a result, the definition strongly privileges political persecution and excludes many other causes of forced migration.



This narrow focus has important consequences. People fleeing generalised violence, civil war, state collapse, extreme poverty, famine, lack of medical care, or natural disasters do not automatically qualify as refugees under international law. Yet these conditions force millions of people to flee their homes every year. The restrictive definition means that many forced migrants remain in a legal grey area. They may stay in neighbouring countries without formal refugee status, often in camps or informal settlements, without access to durable solutions such as resettlement or local integration.

The narrow definition also reflects the political purposes that refugee law serves. On one hand, refugee law provides recognition procedures that allow states to identify people who have entered without permission and determine whether they qualify for protection. It ensures that those who arrive irregularly are not automatically criminalised but are given a fair assessment. On the other hand, refugee law also serves to exclude. It gives states tools to reject individuals who do not meet the strict persecution test or who are suspected of using refugee claims to bypass normal migration controls. People considered security risks or criminals can also be excluded from refugee protection.

Once a person is recognised as a refugee, international law grants them important protections. Article 31 of the Convention states that refugees should not be penalised or detained for illegal entry if they come directly from a place of danger and present themselves promptly to the authorities. Article 33 establishes the principle of non-refoulement, prohibiting forced return to danger. Article 34 encourages states to facilitate the naturalisation and citizenship of refugees. However, the process of proving that one meets the refugee definition is often difficult, slow, and resource-intensive. Individual assessments are required, and the burden of proof is on the asylum seeker.

In rare cases, the UN General Assembly has authorised UNHCR to grant mass refugee recognition to entire groups fleeing particular crises. Examples include Hungarians fleeing a communist crackdown in the mid-1950s and Indochinese refugees fleeing communist regimes in the late 1970s and 1980s. However, these cases are exceptional. Most refugee situations today still rely on individual assessments, which cannot keep pace with large, sudden displacement crises.

2.2.1.4 Global Distribution of Refugees and - Protracted Displacement

❑ Displacement crises overwhelm neighbouring states

Today, tens of millions of people are forcibly displaced worldwide. Roughly ten to eleven million are recognised as refugees under international law, and approximately fifteen million are internally displaced persons (IDPs) who have fled their homes but remain within their own country's borders. Refugee numbers have spiked during periods of major conflict, particularly after the end of the Cold War, when territorial wars, ethnic conflicts, and state collapses generated massive displacement.

Specific examples illustrate the scale of the problem. About one in four refugees worldwide is Afghan, with millions living in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran for decades. In 1994, approximately 250,000 Rwandans fled to Tanzania within just two days during the genocide. Hundreds of thousands of Somalis fled to neighbouring countries in single years as conflict continued. After the 2003 invasion of Iraq, over a million Iraqis sought refuge in Syria. These sudden, large-scale movements overwhelm the capacity of neighbouring states to respond.

❑ Protracted displacement entraps multiple generations

A particularly troubling feature of the current refugee system is the prevalence of protracted refugee situations. A protracted situation is defined as one in which large numbers of refugees live for five years or more without a durable solution. They cannot safely return home because conflict continues. The host state cannot or will not offer permanent residency or citizenship. And resettlement to a third country is extremely limited. More than eighty percent of protracted refugee situations occur in developing countries. Some camps now house second and even third generations of refugees who were born and raised in displacement.

Examples of protracted situations include Afghans who have been in Pakistan and Iran since the 1990s, Somalis who have lived in camps in Kenya since the 1990s, and Myanmar asylum seekers in Thailand who have lived for decades as irregular migrants without secure legal status. These people live in uncertain legal limbo, often in harsh conditions with limited access to education, healthcare, or livelihoods. Their lives are effectively on hold, and the international community has failed to provide lasting solutions.



2.2.1.5 Why Developing Countries Bear Most of the Refugee Burden

❑ Fragile states generate and absorb displacement

Developing countries host the vast majority of the world's refugees. There are four main reasons for this deeply unequal distribution of responsibility. First, the narrow refugee definition excludes many common drivers of forced migration. As discussed above, the 1951 Convention focuses on persecution, not on generalised violence, state collapse, poverty, famine, or environmental disasters. People fleeing these conditions still move, but they often remain in nearby developing countries without formal refugee status or durable solutions. They may integrate informally into local communities, but without legal recognition, they are vulnerable to deportation and exploitation.

Second, political instability and weak state capacity in many developing regions generate displacement. Many post-colonial states inherited fragile institutions, weak legal systems, and limited economic resources. Political instability, corruption, and economic volatility have fuelled conflicts and displacement, particularly from the 1970s through the 1980s and continuing today. Wars in Central Africa, the Horn of Africa, and conflicts following the breakup of the Soviet Union have produced cross-border refugee flows. Neighbouring countries, themselves often poor and unstable, have been forced to absorb these populations.

❑ Geography and politics protect wealthy states

Third, geography plays a critical role. Developing states often share land borders with conflict zones and become the first receivers of refugees. In contrast, many developed states are protected by distance or oceans. Australia and North America are geographically isolated from most major refugee-producing regions. European states have increasingly relied on neighbouring countries as buffer zones. For example, Eastern European states were required to join the Refugee Convention and adopt asylum systems as a condition of joining the European Union. Similarly, European agreements with Turkey and North African states aim to prevent refugees from reaching European territory. As a result, developed states see more controlled arrivals through visas and airports, while developing states face large, uncontrolled land-based inflows.

Fourth, resettlement policies in developed states have changed over time. During the Cold War, Western states sometimes used generous resettlement for people fleeing

communism as a form of ideological propaganda. Accepting refugees from the Soviet bloc or Vietnam was a way to demonstrate the superiority of Western democracies. However, even during this period, refugees from Africa and South Asia received far fewer resettlement offers. In the 1980s, economic downturns, rising unemployment, and budget pressures led to domestic resistance against high refugee intakes in developed countries. Governments began to emphasise regional solutions, meaning support for hosting refugees in neighbouring developing countries and voluntary repatriation once conflicts ended. The outcome has been the growth of under-funded, overcrowded camps in poor countries. Refugees live in states that are themselves unstable and lack resources. Many integrate informally without legal status, leaving them vulnerable.

2.2.1.6 Contemporary Debates: Broadening - Protection and the Limits of the Refugee Regime

Critics argue that the current focus on political persecution no longer reflects the realities of forced migration. People today flee economic collapse, extreme poverty, environmental disasters, climate change impacts, inadequate healthcare, domestic violence, and gang violence. Many of these threats are as life-threatening as political persecution. Yet international law offers no automatic protection for people fleeing these conditions. This raises a fundamental question: why should those fleeing life-threatening conditions be excluded from refugee-type protection simply because the threat does not stem from state persecution based on one of the five Convention grounds?

❑ Regional instruments extend beyond 1951 definition

Advocates of complementary protection argue for additional legal categories or statuses beyond the 1951 definition. They want states, especially wealthy states in the global North, to protect people fleeing serious deprivation, insecurity, and environmental harm, not solely classic political persecution. Some regional instruments have moved in this direction. For example, the 1969 Organization of African Unity Convention and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration in Latin America include broader definitions that cover people fleeing generalised violence and public disorder.

However, opponents raise concerns about broadening the refugee definition. One concern is that expanding the grounds for protection may trigger a political backlash. States

may respond by becoming more restrictive, rather than more generous. For example, when courts interpret existing laws broadly to protect more people, governments may tighten laws or withdraw from international agreements. A second concern is that the refugee regime was originally conceived as a narrow, exceptional protection for people expelled or persecuted as enemies of the state. Blending this political character with broader socio-economic or environmental harms may dilute the specific purpose of refugee law. It also creates unresolved questions about which states are responsible for protection, for how long, and under what conditions.

Faced with long waits, harsh camp conditions, and minimal prospects for resettlement, some refugees turn to dangerous irregular journeys. They may board unseaworthy boats, hide in cargo containers, or pay smugglers who profit from their desperation. Developed countries are attractive destinations because they are perceived to offer better security, legal rights, economic opportunities, and reliable pathways to permanent residence and citizenship. Irregular migration and people smuggling have become major political issues in developed countries. Governments often respond with deterrence-focused policies, including border patrols, offshore processing, mandatory detention, and agreements with transit countries to prevent refugees from reaching their territory. These policies can increase risks for refugees without addressing the root causes of displacement or the global imbalances in responsibility-sharing.

There is growing recognition that border control alone cannot resolve refugee crises. Political solutions to conflicts, development assistance, state-building in fragile regions, and diplomatic engagement to prevent conflicts are all necessary.

However, these long-term strategies require sustained commitment and resources that are often lacking. In the meantime, several policy options are being debated.

Temporary protection would allow refugees to stay safely in a host country for a limited period, with the expectation of return when conditions improve. This approach is controversial because it creates uncertainty for refugees and may not be realistic if conflicts persist or recur. Refugees may be sent back to unstable situations, only to flee again.

Expanded resettlement is another option. If more developed states adopted annual resettlement quotas and raised existing quotas, this would provide more protection, reduce demand for dangerous irregular journeys, undercut smuggling networks, and share the burden more equitably with developing host states. However, resettlement is politically unpopular in many developed countries where anti-immigration sentiment is strong. Governments face domestic pressure to reduce, rather than increase, refugee admissions.

Ultimately, meaningful change requires both legal and political reforms. It necessitates recognising that refugees are a shared responsibility of the international community, not solely of neighbouring or poorer countries. Without such reforms, the system will continue to leave millions of people in limbo, living in camps or informal settlements with no prospect of a normal life, while a small number of wealthier states host relatively few refugees and maintain highly restrictive policies.

2.2.2 Climate Change as a Security Threat

2.2.2.1 Core Nature of Climate Change in International Relations

☐ Climate change is fundamentally a justice issue

Climate change has moved to the centre of the international agenda because scientific consensus now strongly supports the view that uncontrolled warming poses severe risks requiring immediate action by states. The problem is structurally difficult. It arises from a vast range of everyday activities, including energy use, agriculture, transport, and industry. Coordinating action across all these sectors and nearly two hundred sovereign states is extremely challenging.

Climate change is also deeply unjust. Responsibility and vulnerability are unevenly distributed. High-emitting, mostly



richer states have historically contributed most to the problem. Yet many of the worst impacts will fall on poorer and more vulnerable populations who have contributed least to global emissions. This makes climate change a major issue of global social justice. It also creates political friction because developing countries demand that industrialised countries take primary responsibility for solving the problem, while industrialised countries increasingly argue that rapidly growing emerging economies must also take on binding commitments.

❑ Climate links environment, economy, security, and justice

Climate change has a strong intergenerational dimension as well. Many serious impacts will be felt decades or centuries in the future. This gives current political leaders weak incentives to bear high economic and political costs now for benefits that will be enjoyed mainly by future generations. Voters tend to prioritise immediate concerns such as jobs, healthcare, and education over long-term environmental threats.

Finally, climate change is now tightly linked to other high-politics issues. It affects development policy because poor countries need financial and technological assistance to reduce emissions and adapt to climate impacts. It influences trade policy, as states consider border tax adjustments on imports from countries without strong climate policies. It affects security policy, as climate change contributes to resource conflicts over water and arable land and may create large numbers of climate refugees and migrants. Understanding climate change, therefore, requires considering the connections between environment, economy, security, and justice.

2.2.2.2 What Climate Change Means: Basic Concepts

❑ Human emissions cause dangerous radiative forcing

The Earth's climate has always varied over time due to natural causes such as volcanic eruptions, changes in solar radiation, and shifts in ocean currents. However, current concern focuses on observed increases in global surface temperatures resulting from radiative forcing driven primarily by human greenhouse gas emissions. Radiative forcing refers to the change in the balance between incoming solar energy and outgoing heat. When this balance shifts towards retaining more heat, the planet warms.

Key greenhouse gases include carbon dioxide (CO₂), methane (CH₄), nitrous oxide (N₂O), and certain chlorine-family gases. These gases create a greenhouse effect. They allow sunlight to pass through the atmosphere and warm the Earth's surface, but

they trap heat that would otherwise escape back into space. This trapped heat warms the planet. Human activities such as burning fossil fuels for energy, deforestation, industrial processes, and agriculture have dramatically increased the concentration of these gases in the atmosphere.

❑ Poorest communities face worst climate impacts

The consequences of warming include rising sea levels, more frequent and severe storms, droughts, floods, disruptions to agriculture, loss of biodiversity, and threats to human health. Small island states face the risk of being completely submerged. Coastal cities and low-lying regions are increasingly vulnerable to flooding. Agricultural productivity may decline in regions that are already food-insecure, and water scarcity may intensify conflicts. These impacts are not evenly distributed; the poorest countries and communities, which have contributed least to emissions, are often the most vulnerable.

2.2.2.3 Historical Evolution of Global Climate Governance

Concern about climate change began with scientists and gradually moved into high-level politics. The typical pattern of environmental diplomacy is to first negotiate a framework agreement that defines the problem and sets general goals, and then to negotiate more specific protocols with binding commitments. Climate governance followed this pattern.

❑ UNFCCC established differentiated responsibility principle

In 1988, strong warnings from scientists and policymakers indicated that humanity was conducting a dangerous global experiment with the atmosphere. There were early calls to cut carbon dioxide emissions significantly. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was created to provide authoritative scientific assessments. The IPCC's Assessment Reports synthesise research from thousands of scientists and provide the scientific consensus that drives political momentum.

In 1992, at the Rio Earth Summit, states adopted the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The Convention's objective is to stabilise greenhouse gas concentrations at a level that avoids dangerous interference with the climate system. The initial goal was to stabilise emissions around 1990 levels by the year 2000. The UNFCCC established the principle of common but differentiated responsibility, meaning that all states share responsibility for the problem, but industrialised states bear greater responsibility and obligations because they produced most historical emissions. Developing

countries were not expected to take on binding commitments until they received adequate finance and technology transfer that was genuinely additional to normal development aid.

As scientific evidence became clearer and the inadequacy of early efforts became evident, pressure grew for more concrete and binding measures. This led directly to negotiations for a protocol with quantified emissions targets.

2.2.2.4 The Kyoto Protocol and Flexible Mechanisms

❑ Kyoto introduced market-based compliance mechanisms

At the first Conference of the Parties (CoP 1) in Berlin in 1995, states agreed on the Berlin Mandate, which recognised that binding commitments by industrialised countries were necessary. Negotiations began towards quantified emissions limitations and reduction obligations (QELROs). In 1997, the Kyoto Protocol was signed by over 150 countries. It legally bound 38 industrialised (Annex I) countries to reduce their collective greenhouse gas emissions by about 5.2% below 1990 levels during the commitment period of 2008–2012. Different national targets were set, with some countries required to reduce emissions by 8%, others by 6%, and some allowed small increases or freezes.

The Kyoto Protocol introduced three flexible or market-based mechanisms designed to lower the cost of compliance. The Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) allows developed countries to invest in emissions-reduction projects in developing countries and receive credits that count towards their own targets. The idea is that emissions reductions should occur where they are cheapest, and that CDM projects should promote sustainable development in host countries. Joint Implementation (JI) is similar but applies to projects between Annex I countries. Emissions Trading allows countries to trade emission allowances among themselves. If one country reduces emissions more than required, it can sell its surplus allowances to another country that is struggling to meet its target.

❑ Market mechanisms reduce costs but enable avoidance

These mechanisms reflect an attempt to marketise climate governance by turning emissions reductions into tradable commodities. Supporters argue that this lowers total compliance costs and encourages innovation. Critics contend that it allows wealthy countries to avoid making deep domestic cuts and creates perverse incentives and opportunities for fraud or abuse.

2.2.2.5 Politics of Kyoto Implementation and Beyond

❑ US withdrawal failed to kill Kyoto

The implementation of the Kyoto Protocol was politically fraught. At CoP 4 in Buenos Aires in 1998, states adopted the Buenos Aires Plan of Action, which set a schedule for finalising detailed rules. However, CoP 6 in The Hague in 2000 collapsed due to deep disagreements, particularly between the United States and the European Union, over the use of flexible mechanisms and rules for counting emissions reductions from forests and carbon sinks.

In 2001, US President George W. Bush announced that the United States would not proceed with the Kyoto Protocol. A key argument was that the treaty was economically unfair because large emerging economies like China and India were not bound by reduction targets. The US withdrawal raised serious doubts about Kyoto's survival, as the United States was the largest historical emitter and the world's largest economy. However, instead of collapsing, the European Union and the Group of 77 plus China rallied support. Russia ratified the treaty in 2005, allowing it to enter into force.

❑ Copenhagen failure exposed emerging power influence

At CoP 7 in Marrakesh, states finalised detailed rules for the flexible mechanisms and created three climate funds: the Least Developed Countries Fund, the Special Climate Change Fund, and the Adaptation Fund. These funds were intended to support adaptation and mitigation in the poorest and most vulnerable countries.

Subsequent meetings attempted to deepen commitments and address adaptation needs. At CoP 10 in Buenos Aires in 2004, states adopted the Buenos Aires Programme of Work on Adaptation and Response Measures. CoP 12 in Nairobi in 2006, known as the Africa CoP, emphasised adaptation and finance and launched the Nairobi Work Programme on Adaptation and the Nairobi Framework to increase CDM projects in sub-Saharan Africa and other underrepresented regions.

At CoP 13 in Bali in 2007, states adopted the Bali Action Plan, which set a roadmap towards a new agreement to be concluded in Copenhagen. The Action Plan called for a long-term emissions reduction goal, measurable and verifiable mitigation commitments, including nationally appropriate actions by developing countries, and enhanced adaptation, technology transfer, and financial support.



CoP 15 in Copenhagen in 2009 was heavily anticipated but ultimately failed to deliver a new binding agreement. Instead, a small group of powerful states, including China, India, Brazil, and South Africa, drafted the non-binding Copenhagen Accord. This outcome highlighted the rising influence and emissions of major emerging economies and exposed fractures and distrust in the UN process.

CoP 16 in Cancún in 2010 attempted to repair trust and keep negotiations on track. States adopted decisions on adaptation, forests, climate finance (including establishing the Green Climate Fund), technology cooperation, and capacity building. These steps were incremental but helped maintain momentum in the multilateral process.

2.2.2.6 Institutional Architecture of Climate-Negotiations

The UNFCCC Secretariat, based in Bonn, Germany, organises and supports negotiations. It prepares documents, compiles national emissions data, oversees reporting requirements, and manages project mechanisms under the Kyoto Protocol. The Secretariat provides technical expertise and information flows that significantly influence negotiation outcomes. It is led by an Executive Secretary who plays an important agenda-shaping and mediating role.

❑ Secretariat and CoP drive institutional negotiations

The Conference of the Parties (CoP) is the main decision-making body. It meets annually to review progress, update commitments, and negotiate new decisions. All parties to the Convention participate, and decisions are typically made by consensus, which can make progress slow.

Subsidiary Bodies and Working Groups provide technical and implementation support. The Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SBI) addresses compliance and implementation issues. The Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA) links science and technology to policy. Various Ad Hoc Working Groups handle specific negotiating tracks, such as further commitments for Annex I countries or long-term cooperative action.

2.2.2.7 State Coalitions, Blocs, and Their Positions

Climate negotiations involve complex coalitions of states with differing interests.

❑ Divergent interests fragment climate coalition building

OPEC (oil-exporting states) is generally the most resistant to strong climate action due to its dependence on oil revenues. OPEC states often demand greater scientific certainty before taking action, form alliances with industries opposed to climate policies, and employ tactics such as calling for compensation for lost oil income when others advocate for compensation for climate-related damages.

AOSIS (Alliance of Small Island States) is among the most vulnerable to sea-level rise and is therefore one of the strongest advocates for ambitious emissions cuts. AOSIS proposed, for example, a 20% reduction in 1990 emissions by 2005 early in the process. AOSIS receives legal and technical support from non-governmental organisations, demonstrating how non-state actors can shape formal negotiating positions.

G77 plus China is a large coalition of developing countries that emphasises the historical responsibility of industrialised nations and opposes premature binding commitments for the global South. The coalition demands that climate finance be genuinely additional to existing development aid. Over time, internal cohesion has been challenged by divergent interests among members, such as between large emerging emitters like China and India and the least developed countries.

The European Union generally supports stronger multilateral agreements and binding targets. It has positioned itself as a climate leader, especially after the US withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol. The EU has implemented its own emissions trading system and set ambitious internal targets.

The United States and JUSCANZ (Japan, US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand) have often resisted legally binding cuts and pushed for maximum flexibility in how states meet their commitments. The US position has varied depending on the administration in power. Japan is ambivalent: it hosted the Kyoto conference and formally supports the regime, but faces strong domestic industry pressure to limit commitments.

2.2.2.8 Role of Non-State Actors and Process Challenges

A wide range of non-governmental organisations, businesses, city networks, indigenous groups, and other actors participate in climate negotiations as observers and sometimes as members



❑ Non-state actors shape but cannot vote in negotiations

of state delegations. Although they lack formal voting power, they provide expertise, draft texts, lobby delegations, represent specific constituencies, and shape framing and media narratives. These actors function as non-governmental diplomats, performing many roles similar to those of official negotiators.

The sheer scale of participation creates logistical and governance challenges. Copenhagen CoP 15 saw record numbers of observers and world leaders. Physical capacity and security constraints led to rationed access, with many actors locked out of key meetings. This raised questions about inclusiveness, transparency, and the feasibility of managing such large, complex negotiations.

Theoretical Approaches to Climate Politics

Different theoretical perspectives from International Relations offer varied insights into climate politics. Regime theory and neo-liberal institutionalism focus on how and why states cooperate and form international regimes. This perspective highlights the role of hegemonic powers in enabling or blocking cooperation, the ways institutions reduce transaction costs and improve information sharing, and the influence of expert communities, such as the IPCC, in shaping agendas and consensus. Regime theory helps explain the evolution of the UNFCCC-Kyoto framework and the micro-politics of negotiations and institutional design.

Realism traditionally focuses on security, anarchy, and power politics among states. It has difficulty explaining climate politics beyond emerging security concerns, such as climate-related conflicts or climate refugees. Realism offers limited insight into the complex, multi-actor, multi-level governance structures of climate policy.

Knowledge and power perspectives analyse how scientific and economic expertise frames climate change. For example, framing climate change as a technical, market-manageable problem privileges certain solutions (like carbon trading) over others (like radical changes in production and consumption). These perspectives examine which narratives become dominant and which voices are marginalised in policy debates.

Non-state actor and transnational governance approaches show how NGOs, firms, cities, and networks influence state preferences and create their own governance arrangements. These arrangements include voluntary standards, targets, funding schemes, and project oversight mechanisms that complement or sometimes bypass UN processes.

Marxist and Critical Theory perspectives focus on the relationship between states and capital in a global capitalist system. They argue that obstacles to strong climate action stem less from inter-state free-rider problems and more from the structural dependence of states on high-emitting industries for economic growth, jobs, tax revenue, and political support. Effective climate action, from this perspective, requires either fundamental changes in the economic system or the rise of new business sectors that see climate policies as profitable opportunities, such as renewable energy and low-carbon technologies.

Overall, different theories illuminate different aspects of climate politics—institutions, power, ideas, and social forces. Climate governance challenges conventional IR assumptions about actors, scales, and modes of governance, pushing scholars to think beyond state-centric and single-theory explanations.

The refugee crisis and climate change are increasingly recognised as interconnected challenges. Climate change is already contributing to displacement and is expected to become a major driver of forced migration in the future. Rising sea levels threaten to submerge small island states and low-lying coastal areas, forcing entire populations to relocate. Droughts, floods, and extreme weather events destroy crops, livestock, and livelihoods, pushing people to move in search of survival. Competition over dwindling water and arable land can fuel conflicts, which in turn generate refugees.

However, people fleeing climate-related disasters do not fit neatly into the 1951 refugee definition. They are not fleeing persecution based on race, religion, nationality, social group, or political opinion. As a result, they have no automatic right to international protection. This legal gap is a growing concern. Some scholars and advocates call for a new legal category of climate refugees or environmental migrants, while others argue



for expanding complementary protection mechanisms to cover people displaced by environmental factors.

The challenge is compounded by the fact that climate impacts often intersect with existing vulnerabilities. Regions that are already poor, politically unstable, or suffering from weak governance are more likely to experience climate-related displacement. In such cases, it is difficult to separate climate factors from political, economic, and social causes of displacement. Yet, the international community has been slow to develop coherent legal and policy responses to climate-induced migration.

Both the refugee crisis and climate change also raise profound questions about responsibility and burden-sharing. Developed countries have contributed most to historical greenhouse gas emissions but are geographically and economically better positioned to protect themselves from climate impacts. Similarly, developed countries host relatively few refugees, while developing countries, many of which are highly vulnerable to climate change, bear the primary burden of hosting displaced populations. This overlap reinforces global inequalities and highlights the need for international solidarity and cooperation.

Summarised Overview

This unit has examined two of the most pressing challenges facing the international community: the global refugee and displacement crisis, and climate change as a multidimensional security threat. Both challenges expose deep structural inequalities in the international system. The refugee regime, built on a narrow definition of persecution rooted in Cold War politics, leaves millions of forced migrants without adequate protection. Developing countries host the vast majority of refugees, often in protracted situations with no durable solutions, while developed countries maintain restrictive policies and limited resettlement programmes. Climate change, driven primarily by emissions from industrialised countries, threatens the poorest and most vulnerable populations who have contributed least to the problem. Efforts to build effective multilateral governance have been hindered by conflicting national interests, inadequate financing, and the difficulty of coordinating action across diverse actors and scales.

Understanding these crises requires moving beyond traditional state-centric approaches in International Relations. Both challenges involve complex interactions among states, international organisations, non-governmental actors, markets, and local communities. Both require thinking about long-term global responsibilities, inter-generational justice, and the limits of sovereignty in an interconnected world. The

connections between climate change and displacement are becoming increasingly clear, yet the international legal and policy frameworks remain fragmented and inadequate. Addressing these challenges effectively will require political will, innovative governance mechanisms, equitable burden-sharing, and a recognition that security, development, human rights, and environmental sustainability are deeply interconnected. For students of International Relations, these issues offer critical insights into the possibilities and limitations of global cooperation in the twenty-first century.

Self-Assessment Questions

1. What is the key difference between a migrant and a refugee under international law?
2. Why was the 1951 Refugee Convention originally limited to events before 1951 and focused on Europe?
3. What does the principle of non-refoulement mean?
4. Why do developing countries host the majority of the world's refugees?
5. What are protracted refugee situations, and why are they a problem?
6. What is the greenhouse effect, and how do human activities contribute to it?
7. What does the principle of common but differentiated responsibility mean in climate governance?
8. What are the three flexible mechanisms introduced by the Kyoto Protocol?
9. Why did the United States withdraw from the Kyoto Protocol in 2001?
10. How are climate change and refugee crises interconnected?

Assignment

1. Critically evaluate the 1951 Refugee Convention definition of a refugee. Does it adequately address contemporary displacement crises? What changes, if any, would you propose?
2. Analyze the reasons why developing countries bear the majority of the global refugee burden. What measures could promote more equitable responsibility-sharing?
3. Discuss the concept of complementary protection. Should states expand protection to people fleeing climate change, generalised violence, or extreme poverty? What are the arguments for and against?
4. Examine the role of market-based mechanisms such as the Clean Development Mechanism in global climate governance. Do they represent effective solutions, or do they allow developed countries to avoid deep domestic emissions cuts?



5. Compare the governance challenges faced in addressing the refugee crisis and climate change. What common obstacles exist, and what lessons can be drawn from one issue to inform the other?
6. Assess the principle of common but differentiated responsibility in climate negotiations. Is it still relevant, or should emerging economies like China and India take on binding emissions reduction commitments?
7. Explain the concept of protracted refugee situations with specific examples. What policy options exist to address these situations, and what are their limitations?
8. Discuss how climate change can act as a threat multiplier for displacement and conflict. Provide specific examples and explain the policy implications for the international community.

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU



Maritime Security and Ocean Governance

Learning Outcomes

Upon completing this unit, learners will be able to:

- explain the concept of maritime security and differentiate between traditional state-centric threats and emerging non-state challenges in the maritime domain
- analyze the historical evolution of ocean governance from the mare liberum versus mare clausum debate to the establishment of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)
- evaluate the effectiveness of international legal and institutional frameworks, including UNCLOS, in managing maritime zones, resolving disputes, and addressing security threats
- assess contemporary challenges to maritime security, such as piracy, illegal fishing, territorial disputes, climate change impacts, and the tensions between freedom of navigation and coastal state sovereignty

Background

Imagine standing on the shores of Kochi or Mumbai, watching massive cargo ships disappear into the horizon. These vessels carry the smartphones in our pockets, the fuel that powers our vehicles, and the raw materials that build our cities. But what governs these ships once they sail beyond India's territorial waters? Who ensures that pirates don't hijack them, that nations don't fight over fishing rights, or that the oceans themselves don't become polluted wastelands? These questions lead us to the fascinating world of maritime security and ocean governance.

India's coastline stretches over 7,500 kilometres, touching nine states and four union territories. The Indian Ocean, which bears our nation's name, connects us to the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia. Through this ocean flows 90% of global trade and most of India's energy imports. The 26/11 Mumbai attacks arrived by sea, reminding us how vulnerable our coasts can be. From ancient times when Indian merchants sailed to

Southeast Asia to today when our Navy patrols distant waters, the sea has shaped our history and continues to define our future. Understanding how nations work together to keep oceans safe and well-governed is not just an academic exercise—it is essential knowledge for citizens of a maritime nation in an increasingly interconnected world.

Keywords

UNCLOS, Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), Freedom of Navigation, Mare Liberum, Piracy, Blue Economy, Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC), Maritime Domain Awareness, International Seabed Authority, Territorial Waters

Discussion

The world's oceans cover more than 70% of Earth's surface and serve as highways for international commerce, sources of food and energy, and crucial elements of the global climate system. Maritime security and ocean governance have become critical areas of study in International Relations because the seas connect nations, economies, and peoples while simultaneously creating challenges that no single country can solve alone. This unit explores how the international community has attempted to create order in the vast oceanic spaces and examines the strategic, legal, and practical dimensions of keeping the seas safe and well managed.

Maritime security is not simply about naval warfare or protecting ships from pirates; it encompasses a wide spectrum of concerns ranging from state-to-state conflicts over territory to environmental degradation, from illegal fishing to human trafficking, and from securing underwater cables that carry internet data to managing the effects of climate change on small island nations. Ocean governance refers to the systems of rules, institutions, and practices that states and other actors use to manage human activities at sea. Together, these two concepts shape how we understand and interact with the maritime domain in the twenty-first century.

2.3.1 Definitions and Scope of Maritime Security

2.3.1.1 Understanding Maritime Security

Maritime security does not have a single, universally accepted definition in international law. The concept is deliberately



- ❑ Maritime security defies single definition

broad and encompasses multiple dimensions of threats and activities involving both state and non-state actors. Scholars describe maritime security as an expansive constellation that defies clear boundaries. It includes everything from the fish on our dinner plates to military operations conducted from aircraft carriers; from the electricity infrastructure powered by offshore wind farms to the internet connectivity that depends on undersea cables; and from the activities of fishing communities to the movements of asylum seekers crossing seas in desperate circumstances.

One useful approach defines maritime security as the protection of a state's land and maritime territory, infrastructure, economy, environment, and society from harmful acts occurring at sea. Another perspective emphasises maritime security as the establishment of a stable order of oceans subject to the rule of law at sea. These definitions share common elements. They recognise that maritime security involves multiple types of threats, requires responses from various actors, including governments and international organisations, and aims to create predictable conditions where legitimate maritime activities can occur safely.

- ❑ Security meaning varies by actor and perspective

The concept is also deeply relational and perspectival. This means that how humans experience and interact with the sea determines which aspects of maritime activity should be secured and protected. For coastal fishing communities, maritime security might mean protecting their traditional fishing grounds from illegal foreign trawlers. For major naval powers, it might mean ensuring freedom of navigation for warships across the world's oceans. For environmental organisations, it might focus on preventing ocean pollution and protecting marine biodiversity. This multiplicity of perspectives makes maritime security simultaneously a military, economic, environmental, legal, and human security concern.

2.3.1.2 The Scope of Maritime Threats

Maritime security encompasses threats across a broad spectrum, from traditional military challenges to transnational criminal activities. Traditional kinetic threats include state-on-state conflicts, naval blockades, and what scholars call "gunboat diplomacy"—the use of naval forces to coerce other nations in situations short of war. These remain important, as navies worldwide still consider conflict between states as their primary reason for existence. Recent examples include Russia's

- ❑ State-on-state maritime threats persist

blockades in the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea during the Ukraine conflict, and the United Kingdom's maritime exclusion zones during the Falklands War in 1982.

❑ Non-traditional threats now dominate maritime security agenda

Beyond traditional military threats, a range of non-traditional and transnational challenges has gained prominence. Piracy and armed robbery at sea, particularly the surge of Somali piracy in the Gulf of Aden during the late 2000s, required coordinated responses from over twenty navies and dramatically shaped international understanding of maritime security. Maritime terrorism poses another significant threat, exemplified by the attack on the USS Cole in 2000 and the Mumbai attacks in 2008, which demonstrated how terrorists could exploit porous coastlines and maritime routes to strike targets on land.

Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing represents a massive economic and environmental security challenge. Studies estimate that IUU fishing accounts for 10-19% of the global catch, causing annual losses of approximately 50 billion US dollars to coastal states. This activity not only depletes fish stocks but also undermines the livelihoods of legitimate fishers and threatens food security, particularly for small and poor countries that lack the capacity to monitor their Exclusive Economic Zones effectively. Vessels engaged in IUU fishing often switch off their Automatic Identification System (AIS) transponders during illegal activities, becoming "dark ships" that are difficult to track and apprehend.

Other significant maritime security concerns include human trafficking and migrant smuggling, drug trafficking, arms smuggling, including weapons of mass destruction, environmental crimes such as deliberate pollution, and even threats to submarine infrastructure. The fibre-optic cables lying on the seabed carry over 95% of the world's digital communications and are critical to the functioning of global financial systems and national military operations. Intentional or accidental damage to these cables could have catastrophic consequences for globally integrated economies and security systems.

2.3.1.3 Maritime Security as a Hyperobject

Scholars have characterised maritime security as a "hyperobject"—something so multidimensional and vast that it exceeds normal human empirical capacity to fully comprehend. The maritime domain connects distant places



- ❑ Hyperobject framing captures maritime complexity

and diverse activities in complex ways. A decision made about fisheries management in one part of the ocean can affect food security thousands of miles away. A territorial dispute in one sea can disrupt global supply chains. Climate change impacts on sea levels can redraw maritime boundaries and threaten the very existence of small island nations. This interconnectedness means that maritime security challenges cannot be understood or addressed in isolation. They require comprehensive, multidimensional responses that bring together military, legal, economic, environmental, and social perspectives.

2.3.2 Historical Evolution of Ocean Governance

2.3.2.1 The Mare Liberum versus Mare Clausum Debate

- ❑ Freedom versus sovereignty defines ocean governance history

The foundations of modern ocean governance can be traced to debates among European thinkers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In 1609, Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius published his influential work *Mare Liberum* (The Free Sea), arguing that the oceans were international territory and could not be subject to the sovereignty of any single nation. Grotius asserted that the sea was open to all nations for navigation and fishing, and that no one could claim ownership over it. This doctrine emerged partly to challenge Portuguese and Spanish claims to vast oceanic spaces based on papal decrees.

In contrast, English scholar John Selden published *Mare Clausum* (The Closed Sea) in 1663, defending the right of nations to claim sovereignty over adjacent seas. This position reflected the interests of coastal states that wanted control over nearby maritime areas for security and economic reasons. The tension between these two principles—freedom of the seas and coastal state sovereignty—has shaped ocean governance throughout history and continues to influence contemporary maritime disputes.

- ❑ Cannon-shot rule gave way to nautical miles

By the mid-eighteenth century, the mare liberum principle had largely prevailed as customary international law. However, an exception was recognised for territorial seas, where coastal states could exercise sovereignty. The "cannon-shot rule" proposed by Dutch jurist Cornelius van Bynkershoek in the early 1700s suggested that territorial waters should extend as far as a cannon could fire from shore, providing a buffer zone for coastal defence. As naval technology evolved and cannons could fire greater distances, this became impractical, and states

began defining territorial seas based on nautical miles from shore. Nevertheless, no international consensus existed on exactly how many miles territorial waters should extend.

2.3.2.2 The Twentieth Century and "Creeping Jurisdiction"

❑ Unilateral claims demanded a comprehensive treaty

Throughout the twentieth century, coastal states made increasingly expansive claims to maritime jurisdiction, a phenomenon termed "creeping jurisdiction." In 1945, United States President Harry Truman issued a proclamation extending US rights to the continental shelf for resource exploitation. Chile, Ecuador, and Peru subsequently declared 200-mile zones as territorial seas to protect fishing rights. These unilateral claims created confusion and the potential for conflict as different states asserted different rules.

In 1958, the United Nations convened the first Conference on the Law of the Sea in Geneva, which produced four separate conventions addressing territorial seas, continental shelves, high seas, and fishing. While these treaties provided some clarity, they failed to resolve the fundamental question of how far territorial seas should extend. States were also selectively ratifying only those conventions that served their interests, undermining the goal of creating a unified legal regime. A second conference in 1960 attempted to establish a six-mile territorial sea with an additional six-mile fisheries zone, but the proposal failed by a narrow margin.

The inability to reach consensus created ongoing tensions between coastal states seeking expanded jurisdiction and maritime powers wanting to maintain freedom of movement. For naval powers, widespread acceptance of large territorial seas could restrict their ability to operate globally and project power. For developing coastal nations, control over adjacent waters meant protecting valuable fish stocks and potential offshore mineral resources from exploitation by wealthier, distant-water fishing nations.

2.3.2.3 The Negotiation and Significance of UNCLOS

❑ UNCLOS: Constitution of the Oceans

The third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS III) convened in 1973 with the ambitious goal of creating a comprehensive treaty that would resolve all outstanding law of the sea issues. After eleven years of complex diplomatic negotiations involving over 160 countries,



the Convention was signed in Montego Bay, Jamaica, in 1982. UNCLOS is often called the "Constitution of the Oceans" because of its comprehensive scope. It contains 320 articles and nine annexes that address virtually every aspect of ocean use and governance.

UNCLOS introduced several crucial innovations. It established that territorial seas could extend up to 12 nautical miles from a coastal state's baseline, settling decades of disagreement. It created the concept of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), a 200-nautical-mile zone in which coastal states have sovereign rights over natural resources, while other states retain freedom of navigation and overflight. This compromise satisfied coastal states' demands for resource control while protecting maritime powers' interests in mobility. The Convention also defined continental shelf rights, established rules for international straits, created special provisions for archipelagic states like Indonesia and the Philippines, and designated the deep seabed beyond national jurisdiction as the "common heritage of mankind" to be managed by the International Seabed Authority.

❑ Decolonisation shaped UNCLOS resource provisions

The Convention did not enter into force immediately. It required ratification by 60 states, which was only achieved in 1994, twelve years after its adoption. As of today, UNCLOS has 168 parties, including 164 UN member states. Notably, the United States has not ratified the Convention, initially objecting to provisions regarding deep seabed mining and later citing concerns about sovereignty. Despite non-ratification, the US generally follows UNCLOS provisions it considers reflective of customary international law.

The negotiation of UNCLOS was heavily influenced by decolonisation. Newly independent nations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America used the negotiations to assert their rights against more powerful maritime states. Countries like Kenya led efforts to ensure that coastal states would have meaningful control over resources in adjacent waters, rather than seeing those resources exploited by distant industrial fishing fleets and multinational corporations. The final Convention reflected a complex compromise between the interests of developing coastal states and the freedom of movement demands of major naval and maritime commercial powers.

2.3.2.4 The Rainbow Warrior Incident and the Emergence of Non-State Actors

❑ Non-state actors reshaped maritime governance

While UNCLOS negotiations focused on state-to-state relations, developments outside formal diplomatic channels were also transforming maritime politics. A symbolic turning point came in 1985 when French Secret Service agents bombed the Greenpeace flagship *Rainbow Warrior* in Auckland harbour, New Zealand, killing photographer Fernando Pereira. Greenpeace had been campaigning against French nuclear testing in the Pacific. This violent encounter between state military power and a non-state environmental organisation marked a moment when maritime space ceased to be understood solely as an arena for interstate relations.

The incident occurred at a confluence of global currents in 1985: the rise of international non-governmental organisations, the growth of social movements focused on human rights and environmental protection, Cold War détente between superpowers, and the spread of neoliberal economic policies that elevated private actors. By this time, UNCLOS had been signed but had not yet entered into force, and only 25 countries, mostly postcolonial states, had ratified it. The maritime domain was becoming a space where states, international organisations, NGOs, environmental activists, commercial interests, and eventually criminal networks would all interact, compete, and sometimes violently clash.

This multiplicity of actors and interests challenges traditional state-centric approaches to maritime security. Modern ocean governance must account not only for relations between governments but also for the activities and perspectives of fishing communities, shipping companies, environmental organisations, humanitarian groups, private security firms, and transnational criminal networks. The seas have become, in the words of scholars, an "assemblage" of heterogeneous connections where security and insecurity are produced through the interactions of multiple human and non-human elements.

2.3.3 Legal and Institutional Frameworks for Ocean Governance

2.3.3.1 UNCLOS as the Foundation

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea provides the foundational legal framework for ocean governance.



❑ Innocent passage balances sovereignty and mobility

Its comprehensive nature addresses the vertical dimension of maritime space from the seabed to the superjacent airspace and the horizontal dimension from inland waters through territorial seas, contiguous zones, and Exclusive Economic Zones to the high seas beyond national jurisdiction. This zoning system creates different legal regimes for different maritime spaces, balancing the interests of coastal states in controlling nearby waters with the interests of all states in maintaining freedom of navigation and other uses of the seas.

In territorial waters (up to 12 nautical miles from shore), coastal states exercise sovereignty similar to that over land territory. However, this sovereignty is qualified by the right of innocent passage, which allows foreign vessels, including warships, to transit through territorial waters without seeking permission, provided their passage is not prejudicial to the peace, good order, or security of the coastal state. UNCLOS Article 19 specifies activities that are not considered innocent passage, including weapons exercises, spying, fishing, pollution, and the loading or unloading of goods or persons in violation of coastal state laws.

The Exclusive Economic Zone extends up to 200 nautical miles from the baseline. Within the EEZ, the coastal state has sovereign rights over natural resources, both living (fish) and non-living (oil and gas), and jurisdiction over marine scientific research, environmental protection, and the establishment of artificial structures. However, other states retain high seas freedoms of navigation, overflight, and the laying of submarine cables and pipelines. This dual regime creates potential for disputes when coastal states and maritime powers interpret their respective rights differently, particularly regarding military activities in the EEZ.

For international straits—passages connecting two parts of the high seas or EEZs that fall within the territorial seas of one or more states—UNCLOS establishes a regime of "transit passage" that is more permissive than innocent passage. Transit passage allows continuous and expeditious passage for all vessels and aircraft, including submerged submarines, which is crucial for maintaining global maritime mobility. Without this provision, the expansion of territorial seas from three to twelve miles would have placed many strategically important straits entirely within territorial waters, potentially giving coastal states the power to close them.

- ❑ ITLOS provides compulsory dispute settlement

UNCLOS created several important international institutions. The International Seabed Authority (ISA), headquartered in Jamaica, manages the seabed and ocean floor beyond national jurisdiction, designated as the "common heritage of mankind." The ISA issues contracts for seabed mineral exploration and eventual exploitation. By 2018, it had issued 29 such contracts. However, concerns persist about potential environmental damage from seabed mining and about ensuring that benefits are shared equitably among all nations, not just those with the technology to exploit deep-sea resources.

- IMO and regional bodies complement UNCLOS framework



SRI NARAYANAGURU

Regional organisations also contribute to maritime governance. The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) includes maritime security among its objectives. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) addresses maritime issues through the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). India has promoted its SAGAR doctrine (Security and Growth for All in the Region) as a framework for regional maritime security cooperation and launched the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) in 2019, which includes seven pillars such as maritime security, marine ecology, and disaster risk reduction.

2.3.4.1 Global Trade and Sea Lines of Communication

2.3.4.1 Global Trade and Sea Lines of Communication

Approximately 90% of global trade by volume travels by sea, carried on more than 50,000 merchant ships. In 2020-21, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, maritime trade totalled 10.6 billion tonnes. The safety and security of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs)—the major maritime routes connecting ports and regions—are therefore critical to the functioning of the global economy. Disruption of key SLOCs through conflict, piracy, terrorism, or other threats could have cascading economic consequences worldwide.

China's rapid economic rise has made it particularly dependent on seaborne energy imports, mostly from the

❑ Energy dependence shapes strategic maritime postures

Middle East and Africa. Much of this oil passes through the Strait of Malacca, a narrow passage between Malaysia and Indonesia. Chinese strategic thinkers refer to this as the "Malacca Dilemma"—the vulnerability of being dependent on a chokepoint that could potentially be blocked by hostile naval forces. This has motivated Chinese investments in alternative routes, such as pipelines through Pakistan and Myanmar, and has contributed to China's naval expansion and more assertive maritime posture.

For India, maritime security is crucial both economically and strategically. India imports significant quantities of crude oil and liquefied natural gas by sea and exports manufactured goods and services. The Indian Ocean is India's strategic backyard, and maintaining stable maritime conditions in the region is a national priority. India's 2015 SAGAR doctrine emphasises providing security and growth for all countries in the region through capacity building, information sharing, and cooperative maritime domain awareness.

2.3.4.2 Freedom of Navigation and Power Projection

❑ FONOPs reveal sovereignty versus navigation tensions

For major naval powers, maritime security involves the ability to project military power globally through freedom of navigation. The United States, as the world's leading maritime power despite not having ratified UNCLOS, conducts Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) to challenge what it considers excessive maritime claims by other states. US FONOPs have occurred in the South China Sea, challenging Chinese territorial claims and asserting the right of warships to operate in EEZs and to conduct innocent passage through territorial seas without prior notification.

These operations are controversial. China views them as unnecessary provocations and violations of its sovereignty. Some other countries, including India, also require prior notification for foreign military vessels entering their EEZ. In April 2021, the USS *John Paul Jones* conducted a FONOP in India's western EEZ without prior notification, leading India to object that this violated its domestic maritime laws. The United States maintained that its action was consistent with international law and customary practice. Such incidents reveal ongoing disagreements about the proper interpretation of UNCLOS provisions regarding military activities in the EEZ.



These disputes reflect deeper questions about the balance between coastal state sovereignty and maritime mobility. For the United States and allied maritime democracies, freedom of navigation is fundamental to maintaining the existing rules-based international order and enabling power projection to defend allies and interests worldwide. For countries like China, Russia, and India, restrictions on foreign military activities in their EEZs are matters of national security and sovereignty. China's position is particularly complicated because it demands that other states seek permission before conducting military activities in Chinese-claimed EEZs, yet Chinese vessels conduct similar activities in other states' EEZs without notification.

2.3.4.3 Maritime Domain Awareness

Effective maritime security requires Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), defined as "the art of obtaining actionable understanding of anything in the oceans that could affect safety, security, economy, or environment at sea." MDA has become increasingly important with the digitalisation of naval warfare, which necessitates the networking of surface ships, submarines, aircraft, and drones across vast oceanic spaces. Modern naval operations depend on secure electromagnetic spectrum communications and real-time information sharing.

❑ MDA gaps create ungoverned maritime spaces

Technology has significantly improved MDA capabilities. Satellites can track ship movements, and Automatic Identification System (AIS) transponders are mandatory for vessels over 300 tonnes or 20 metres in length, broadcasting unique identification and position data. However, vessels can switch off AIS transponders to become "dark ships," a tactic frequently employed by criminals and those engaged in IUU fishing. Underwater domain awareness is even more challenging, as submarines and submarine infrastructure are difficult to monitor continuously.

Regional differences in MDA capabilities are stark. A naval capacity assessment by the Stable Seas programme classified 71 countries in the Indian Ocean basin, western Africa, and the Levant according to their ability to perform maritime security tasks. Only eight countries (Egypt, India, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Africa, and the UAE) were classified as "regional naval powers" capable of executing the full range of naval tasks outside their EEZ. Five countries could operate effectively within their own EEZ, but 50 countries lacked even

- ❑ Piracy reflects state failure, not mere criminality

- ❑ Universal jurisdiction lacks enforcement capacity

The persistence of piracy reveals limitations in ocean governance. Under UNCLOS Article 105, any state can seize pirate ships on the high seas and prosecute the pirates. However, this universal jurisdiction does not address the practical problems of which country will actually prosecute and imprison captured pirates, raising questions about costs and legal procedures. Vessel flag states are often unwilling or unable to prosecute their nationals for piracy. Some pirates have been released after capture because no country was willing to take them for prosecution. These gaps highlight how international law provides frameworks but requires political will and practical capacity to be effective.

2.3.5.2 Territorial Disputes and Grey Zone Tactics

Territorial disputes over islands and maritime boundaries remain sources of tension and potential conflict. The South China Sea is the most prominent example. China claims approximately 80% of the South China Sea within its so-called "Nine-Dash Line," based on assertions of historic rights. China has reclaimed small features, building artificial islands with military facilities, including airstrips and missile batteries. These actions have alarmed neighbouring countries, including Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei, all of which have overlapping claims in the region.

In 2016, following a case brought by the Philippines, the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled that China's historic rights claim within the Nine-Dash Line has no legal basis under UNCLOS, that none of the Spratly Islands generates an EEZ or continental shelf, and that China's artificial island-building violated Philippine sovereign rights. Despite being a party to UNCLOS and a permanent member of the UN Security Council, China rejected the ruling, declaring it "neither accepts nor recognizes" the decision. This defiance reveals a fundamental challenge: international legal judgments are binding but lack enforcement mechanisms beyond diplomatic pressure and, potentially, freedom of navigation operations by other states.

China has employed what analysts call "grey zone" tactics—actions below the threshold of armed conflict but designed to advance territorial claims through *fait accompli*. These include coast guard and maritime militia operations that harass vessels from other countries, occupying and fortifying disputed features, and restricting other states' access to traditional fishing grounds. Grey zone tactics exploit ambiguity about when military responses are appropriate, and their incremental

❑ China's UNCLOS defiance reveals enforcement limits

❑ Grey zone tactics undermine deterrence effectiveness

nature makes it difficult for other states to formulate effective countermeasures without risking escalation to armed conflict.

Similar dynamics exist elsewhere. Russia's annexation of Crimea and its activities in the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait restrict Ukrainian maritime access and demonstrate how hybrid warfare can include maritime components. In the Arctic, melting ice due to climate change is opening new shipping routes and access to seabed resources, intensifying competition among Arctic states. Russia has expanded military installations in its Arctic territories, while other states, including China (which calls itself a "near-Arctic state"), are increasing their presence and investments in the region.

2.3.5.3 Illegal Fishing and the Blue Economy

❑ IUU fishing impoverishes developing coastal states

Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing threatens both food security and sustainable ocean management. The scale is enormous: IUU fishing is estimated to account for 10–19% of the annual global catch of 90 million tonnes, representing economic losses of approximately 50 billion US dollars per year to coastal states. Over 65% of high seas fish stocks are depleted or at high risk of collapse. The fishing sector employs 39 million people directly and supports the livelihoods of many more through processing and distribution.

Small, poor countries are most vulnerable to IUU fishing because they lack the naval and coast guard capacity to monitor their vast Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) effectively. Distant water fishing fleets from wealthier nations often operate in these poorly monitored zones, sometimes with the complicity of corrupt officials, extracting valuable fish stocks that should support local food security and economic development. The use of "flags of convenience"—where vessels register in states with minimal oversight—compounds the problem, as flag states turn a blind eye to irresponsible and illegal practices by "their" vessels.

❑ Blue Economy requires coordinated global action

The concept of the "Blue Economy" seeks to reconcile economic development with ocean sustainability. It emphasises the sustainable exploitation of ocean resources, including fisheries, aquaculture, marine biotechnology, offshore renewable energy, seabed mining, and marine tourism, while protecting marine ecosystems. United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 14 (Life Below Water) contains ten targets specifically for the marine environment, including reducing



marine pollution, protecting marine and coastal ecosystems, regulating fishing, and conserving coastal and marine areas.

However, achieving Blue Economy goals is challenging. The interconnected nature of the oceans means that irresponsible actions in one area affect distant regions. Land-based pollution, particularly plastics, accumulates in the oceans. Climate change is warming waters, causing ocean acidification, and redistributing fish stocks. The littering and environmental degradation resulting from marine tourism add stress to fragile ecosystems. Without coordinated international action, individual states have limited capacity to protect shared ocean resources, creating classic collective action problems.

2.3.5.4 Climate Change and Rising Seas

❑ Rising seas may eliminate state territory and baselines

Climate change represents an existential threat to maritime security and ocean governance. Oceans have absorbed over 90% of the excess heat generated by greenhouse gas emissions, leading to warming waters, increased stratification of ocean layers, and ocean acidification that dissolves the shells and skeletons of marine organisms. These changes are displacing fish stocks and other marine species, disrupting ecosystems, and affecting the livelihoods of fishing-dependent communities.

Rising sea levels pose direct challenges to ocean governance frameworks. UNCLOS defines maritime zones based on baselines drawn along coastlines. As sea levels rise, coastlines recede, and low-lying features may become submerged. This could necessitate redrawing maritime boundaries and potentially change which features qualify as islands capable of generating EEZs and continental shelves under Article 121. Small Island Developing States (SIDS) face the possibility of complete inundation, raising profound questions about the legal status of states whose territory disappears beneath the waves. Can a state exist without territory? Do its maritime zones persist even if the land from which they were measured no longer exists?

❑ Shipping emissions require urgent international regulation

Archipelagic states are particularly affected. UNCLOS Article 47 allows countries like Indonesia and the Philippines to draw straight baselines connecting the outermost points of their outermost islands, enclosing the waters between islands as archipelagic waters. Rising seas could submerge some of these baseline points, potentially shrinking the enclosed area. The implications for territorial integrity, resource rights, and national identity are profound.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicts sea level rise of up to 1.1 metres by 2100 in worst-case scenarios, though some experts suggest the actual rise could approach 2 metres. Even without considering legal complications, these physical changes will displace coastal populations, increase the frequency and severity of coastal flooding, damage port infrastructure, and raise the costs of coastal defence. Climate-induced natural disasters render coastal communities vulnerable, creating governance deficits that can be exploited by criminal and terrorist organisations.

Shipping itself contributes to climate change through greenhouse gas emissions. Without action, emissions from shipping could increase by 50-250% by 2050. The IMO has adopted interim and long-term strategies to reduce emissions, and MARPOL Annex VI provides the regulatory framework. However, progress has been slow, and tensions exist between the goal of reducing emissions and the interests of shipping companies and states that profit from maritime trade.

2.3.5.5 Terrorism and Smuggling

Maritime terrorism remains a significant concern despite relatively few successful large-scale attacks. The 2000 bombing of the USS *Cole* in Yemen killed 17 American sailors and damaged a sophisticated warship. The 2008 Mumbai attacks involved terrorists approaching the city by sea, landing at multiple locations, and conducting coordinated attacks that killed over 160 people. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka operated the Sea Tigers, a maritime wing that conducted attacks using suicide boats and even primitive submarines during the 25-year civil war.

❑ Maritime terrorism exploits coastline vulnerabilities

The maritime domain is attractive to terrorists for several reasons. Coastlines are difficult to defend comprehensively, especially for countries with limited resources. Container shipping is hard to monitor completely, with millions of containers in transit globally at any time. Offshore oil and gas platforms are vulnerable and lucrative targets. The Container Security Initiative and Proliferation Security Initiative attempt to address some of these vulnerabilities, but concerns persist about weapons of mass destruction being smuggled by sea.

Human trafficking and migrant smuggling represent major criminal enterprises with significant humanitarian implications. Desperate migrants and refugees attempting to



reach Europe, often via the Mediterranean Sea, or to reach Australia via Southeast Asian waters, pay criminal smuggling networks for passage on dangerous, overcrowded boats. Thousands have drowned when these vessels have capsized. Humanitarian organisations like Médecins Sans Frontières and SOS Mediterranée operate search and rescue ships, but their activities have become politically controversial, with some European governments viewing them as facilitating illegal migration. This situation reveals tensions between maritime security as border control and maritime security as humanitarian protection of lives at sea.

Drug trafficking by sea involves sophisticated transnational criminal organisations. Cocaine from South America, heroin from Afghanistan, and synthetic drugs from various origins are transported in commercial containers, hidden in legitimate cargo, or moved on "go-fast boats" and semi-submersible vessels designed to evade detection. Interdiction requires international cooperation, intelligence sharing, and legal agreements about which countries have jurisdiction to arrest traffickers and seize contraband in different maritime zones.

2.3.6 Effectiveness and Limitations of Maritime - Governance

2.3.6.1 Successes of UNCLOS

UNCLOS has achieved significant successes in reducing inter-state maritime conflicts. By establishing clear rules about the extent and nature of maritime zones, it has resolved decades of disputes about territorial sea breadth, fisheries jurisdictions, and continental shelf rights. The framework of EEZs and continental shelves has allowed states to negotiate maritime boundaries peacefully in most cases. When disputes have arisen, mechanisms like ITLOS and the International Court of Justice have provided forums for peaceful resolution based on legal principles rather than military power.

❑ UNCLOS
successfully
reduced inter-
state maritime
conflicts

The Convention has also established jurisdictional principles that enable states to enforce laws against non-state actors. Coastal states can regulate fishing, pollution, and other activities in their territorial seas and EEZs. On the high seas, flag state responsibility provides the basis for accountability, and universal jurisdiction for piracy allows any state to act against pirates wherever they are found. These frameworks have

enabled international cooperation against piracy, smuggling, and maritime terrorism.

The institutional architecture created or supported by UNCLOS has facilitated cooperation. The IMO develops technical standards that enhance safety and reduce environmental harm from shipping. The ISA manages the common heritage of seabed resources beyond national jurisdiction. Regional organisations coordinate responses to shared challenges. Information-sharing mechanisms improve maritime domain awareness. These institutional responses demonstrate how international law can enable collective action to address problems that no single state can solve alone.

2.3.6.2 Persistent Challenges and Gaps

Despite these achievements, significant challenges remain. First, the interpretation of UNCLOS provisions varies among states, particularly regarding military activities in EEZs, the balance between coastal state sovereignty and freedom of navigation in territorial seas, and the characteristics of features that can generate maritime zones. These interpretive disputes continue to generate tensions and occasional confrontations at sea.

❑ Non-compliance undermines UNCLOS effectiveness

Second, enforcement mechanisms are weak in some areas. Flag state responsibility is undermined by flags of convenience, where states issue registrations to vessels with minimal oversight and little genuine connection. This makes it difficult to hold vessels accountable for illegal activities on the high seas. While UNCLOS dispute settlement provisions are sophisticated, key disputes are excluded from compulsory jurisdiction, including those involving maritime delimitation and military activities—precisely the issues most likely to cause serious conflicts.

Third, the United States' non-ratification of UNCLOS means that the world's most powerful maritime nation is not legally bound by the Convention, even though it generally follows its provisions as customary international law. China's rejection of the 2016 arbitral award regarding the South China Sea demonstrates that even UNCLOS parties do not always comply with legal decisions. Without enforcement mechanisms beyond diplomatic pressure and potential economic or military consequences, international law depends heavily on voluntary compliance.



❑ Governance gaps persist beyond national jurisdiction

Fourth, governance of areas beyond national jurisdiction remains inadequate. The high seas and deep seabed constitute 64% of ocean space but lack effective conservation and management regimes. Fish stocks on the high seas are exploited unsustainably. Marine biodiversity in international waters is threatened, pollution accumulates, and seabed mining could proceed with potentially severe environmental consequences that are not yet fully understood. Negotiations for a new treaty on Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) aim to address some gaps, but progress has been slow.

Fifth, capacity limitations mean that many states cannot fulfil their responsibilities under international law. Most coastal states in the Indian Ocean, West Africa, and parts of Southeast Asia lack the naval and coast guard capabilities to monitor their EEZs, conduct search and rescue operations, interdict smugglers, or prevent illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. This creates security vacuums that transnational criminals exploit. Building capacity requires sustained international investment and political commitment, which is often lacking.

2.3.6.3 The Question of Maritime Security Governance

❑ Global maritime governance remains embryonic

Scholars debate whether current arrangements constitute an effective system of "maritime security governance." Governance implies dense networks of rules, institutions, and practices that manage behaviour through both formal legal requirements and informal norms. Such systems typically involve some pooling of sovereignty, shared decision-making, and collective enforcement. They require states to accept that security is a shared concern requiring cooperative action, not just individual national defence.

European maritime governance approaches this ideal, with dense legal frameworks, strong regional institutions like the European Union and NATO, effective information sharing, and relatively high levels of trust among states. However, globally, these conditions do not exist. Most states remain focused on traditional sovereignty rather than pooling authority. Major powers disagree fundamentally about the core content of maritime security—for instance, whether freedom of navigation includes the right of military vessels to operate in others' EEZs without permission. Collective action is hindered by "weakest link" problems, where the least capable state in a chain of enforcement determines overall effectiveness, and by "summation" problems, where powerful states like China

❑ Political prerequisites for governance are largely absent

and Russia contribute to insecurity rather than security through their actions.

A more accurate assessment is that global maritime security governance is, at best, in an embryonic state. Regional governance arrangements in some areas may be more effective, but globally, coordination is weak and compliance is uneven. The result is a fragmented system where some maritime spaces are well governed while others remain effectively anarchical. Constructing robust maritime security governance would require: agreement on core principles and threats; a willingness to transfer or pool some sovereignty with international institutions; an intrinsic rather than merely instrumental commitment to legal rules; dispute settlement mechanisms that states genuinely accept as binding; and the attenuation of security dilemmas and enmity among major maritime powers. These conditions are largely absent, particularly in the strategically crucial Indo-Pacific region.

Summarised Overview

Maritime security and ocean governance represent critical dimensions of contemporary International Relations. The oceans connect the world economically, socially, and environmentally while simultaneously creating challenges that transcend borders and exceed the capacity of any single state to address. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea stands as a monumental achievement in creating legal order at sea, balancing the competing interests of coastal state sovereignty and maritime freedom, and establishing institutional mechanisms for cooperation and dispute resolution.

However, the maritime domain remains contested and imperfectly governed. Traditional threats of state-on-state conflict coexist with transnational challenges, including piracy, terrorism, illegal fishing, and smuggling. Interpretations of international law vary, and powerful states sometimes reject legal decisions they find inconvenient. Climate change is altering the physical and legal geography of the oceans. Technological advances create new vulnerabilities, such as threats to submarine infrastructure, while also providing new capabilities for monitoring and enforcement.

Moving forward, effective maritime governance will require renewed commitment to multilateralism, strengthened institutional capacities, bridging gaps in legal frameworks, particularly for areas beyond national jurisdiction, and enhanced cooperation among states with different interests and perspectives. The Blue Economy concept offers a vision of sustainable ocean development, but realising it demands collective action to protect shared resources against individual incentives for exploitation. For countries like India, with vast coastlines and vital interests in maritime security, active engagement



The oceans are neither purely free nor entirely subject to sovereign control. They exist in a space of overlapping jurisdictions, competing claims, and shared interests. Understanding maritime security and ocean governance means grappling with this complexity, recognising that law provides frameworks but cannot resolve all disputes, and appreciating that the seas will remain arenas where cooperation and contestation continue to coexist. As burgeoning populations turn increasingly to the oceans for sustenance and development, the need for effective, equitable, and sustainable maritime governance will only grow more urgent.

1. What is the difference between *mare liberum* and *mare clausum*, and which principle largely prevailed in international law?
2. How many nautical miles does a state's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) extend from its baseline, and what rights does the coastal state have in this zone?
3. Name three major institutions created or empowered by UNCLOS to manage different aspects of ocean governance.
4. What are "grey zone tactics" and how do they challenge traditional concepts of maritime security?
5. What is IUU fishing and why is it particularly harmful to small, poor coastal states?
6. What is the legal status of military vessels in another country's territorial sea according to UNCLOS?
7. Explain what a "Freedom of Navigation Operation" (FONOP) is and why some countries conduct them.
8. What percentage of global trade travels by sea, and why are Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) strategically important?
9. How is climate change affecting maritime boundaries and ocean governance frameworks?
10. What was the significance of the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling regarding the South China Sea, and how did China respond?

Assignment

1. Analyse the historical evolution from the *mare liberum* versus *mare clausum* debate to the establishment of UNCLOS. How did decolonisation influence the final provisions of UNCLOS?
2. Compare and contrast the legal regimes governing territorial waters, the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), and the high seas under UNCLOS. What are the rights and responsibilities of coastal states and flag states in each zone?
3. "UNCLOS has successfully reduced inter-state maritime conflicts but has been less effective at addressing non-state threats." Critically evaluate this statement with examples.
4. Examine the tensions between freedom of navigation and coastal state sovereignty. How do Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) reflect these tensions?
5. Assess the challenges posed by illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing to both maritime security and sustainable ocean governance. What solutions have been proposed or implemented?
6. Discuss the concept of maritime security as a "hyperobject." How does this conceptualisation help us understand the complexity of contemporary maritime challenges?
7. Evaluate the effectiveness of international legal and institutional frameworks in addressing maritime terrorism and piracy. What gaps remain in the current system?
8. How is climate change reshaping maritime security and ocean governance? Consider impacts on maritime boundaries, small island states, and resource distribution.

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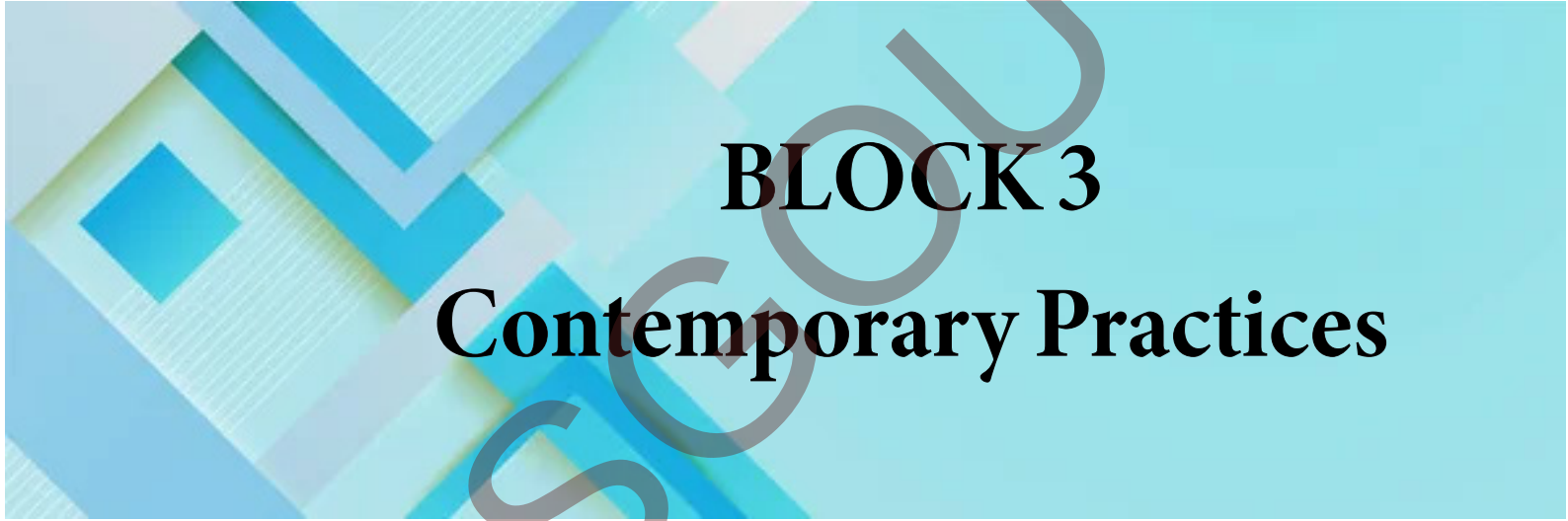
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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

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BLOCK 3

Contemporary Practices

UNIT 1

Neo Colonialism and Neo Imperialism

Learning Outcomes

Upon completing this unit, learners will be able to:

- define and distinguish neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism from classical colonialism, and apply dependency theory, world-systems theory, and Marxist analysis to explain contemporary global inequality
- analyse the overlapping mechanisms of neo-colonial and neo-imperial control
- evaluate resistance strategies employed by the Global South, and assess the structural obstacles that limit their effectiveness

Background

Imagine a newly independent country celebrating its freedom with its own flag, national anthem, and elected government. The country appears sovereign on paper, holding a seat at the United Nations and maintaining diplomatic relations with other nations. Yet, when its leaders try to change economic policies, they face pressure from international banks. When they attempt to develop local industries, foreign corporations control the technology and markets. When they seek to chart an independent foreign policy, powerful nations threaten to withdraw aid or investment. This country is formally free but remains economically and politically dependent — a condition that scholars call neo-colonialism.

In the decades following World War II, European colonial empires collapsed, and dozens of new nations emerged in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Political independence, however, did not always bring genuine freedom. Former colonial powers, along with new dominant states like the United States, developed sophisticated methods to maintain control without direct political rule. Through economic pressure, conditional aid, trade agreements, financial institutions, and military influence, powerful nations continued to extract wealth and shape policies in weaker states. This system, operating through seemingly neutral market mechanisms and international institutions, represents what scholars identify as neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism.



For students of international relations and global politics, these concepts are not merely historical curiosities. They explain patterns of persistent global inequality, recurring financial crises in developing countries, the conditions attached to international loans, and the difficulties many nations face in charting genuinely independent development paths. For India and other postcolonial societies, understanding how formal independence can coexist with structural dependency is both intellectually essential and practically urgent. This unit examines how relationships of domination, exploitation, and dependency persisted after formal decolonisation, the mechanisms by which contemporary imperial control operates, and the strategies by which countries and movements in the Global South have sought to resist.

Keywords

Economic Dependency, Structural Adjustment, Dollar Hegemony, Core-Periphery Relations, Comprador Bourgeoisie, Accumulation by Dispossession, Intellectual Property Rights, South-South Cooperation

Discussion

3.1.1 Definitions and Conceptual Scope

- ❑ Nkrumah defined neo-colonial economic control

Neo-colonialism refers to the practice by which former colonial powers or other dominant nations continue to exercise control and influence over less developed countries primarily through economic, political, and cultural means rather than through direct military occupation or formal political rule. The term gained currency in scholarship during the 1960s through the wave of African independence movements. It became most influential through the writings of Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, who used the concept to examine how formal political independence often masked continued economic and political subordination.

- ❑ Sovereignty as facade for external control

Nkrumah described neo-colonialism as imperialism in its final and perhaps most dangerous stage. Under neo-colonialism, a state is theoretically independent. It possesses all the outward symbols of international sovereignty — a flag, a national anthem, a seat at the United Nations, and diplomatic relations. Yet in practice, its economic system and political policy are directed from outside, revealing that formal sovereignty is largely a facade maintained for the benefit of external powers. The key distinction from classical colonialism is that the

imperial power no longer openly governs the territory; neo-colonial control operates indirectly through economic pressure, conditional aid, debt mechanisms, and influence over local elites who serve external interests.

- ❑ Neo-imperialism uses institutional, not colonial, mechanisms

Neo-imperialism is a broader concept referring to the contemporary phase of imperialism that emerged particularly after the collapse of the Bretton Woods system in the early 1970s. While classical imperialism involved the direct export of capital from developed countries to colonized regions for investment in production, neo-imperialism operates through more sophisticated financial and institutional mechanisms suited to an era of formal decolonization and economic globalization. Neo-imperialism involves the domination of weaker states through a hierarchical system in which economic power, military force, institutional control, and ideological influence work together to maintain asymmetric relationships between core and peripheral countries.

- ❑ Comprador elites mediate neo-colonial control

Though the terms neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism are often used interchangeably, they carry distinct emphases. Neo-colonialism typically focuses on the specific relationship between a dominant power and a formerly colonized state, highlighting continuity with colonial patterns and the role of local comprador elites — that is, local merchants, administrators, and politicians whose economic interests align more closely with foreign capital than with developing their own countries. Neo-imperialism has a broader scope, referring to the contemporary system of global economic and political domination, encompassing phenomena such as financial hegemony, intellectual property control, and strategic military positioning that affect even countries never formally colonised.

3.1.2 Historical Context: From Colonialism to - Neo-Imperial Structures

- ❑ Colonialism structured underdevelopment deliberately

European colonialism, which reached its peak in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, involved the direct political control of territories in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. Colonial governments administered these territories, extracted resources, controlled trade, and organized economies to serve imperial interests. Colonial administrations built infrastructure primarily to facilitate resource extraction rather than local development. Education systems, where they existed, prepared a small elite to serve colonial administration while keeping the majority of the population without advanced



- ❑ Colonial economic structures outlasted political independence

- ❑ IFIs replaced direct rule with policy control

- ❑ Dollar hegemony: unprecedented value extraction

170

❑ Structural adjustment transferred wealth outward

The 1980s and 1990s saw the consolidation of neo-liberal economic policies as the dominant framework for global economic relations, packaged as the Washington Consensus. These policies emphasised free markets, the privatisation of state enterprises, reductions in government spending on social services, and the removal of barriers to foreign investment. When debt crises hit Latin America, Africa, and parts of Asia in the 1980s, the IMF and World Bank used structural adjustment programs to impose neo-liberal reforms as conditions for loans and debt relief. These programs typically required countries to cut government spending on education, health, and food subsidies; privatize state-owned enterprises; remove protections for local industries; devalue their currencies; and prioritize debt repayment over domestic development. The results were often devastating, with increased poverty, unemployment, and social inequality. David Harvey terms this process accumulation by dispossession — the transfer of public assets and resources to private, often foreign, ownership through policy coercion.

3.1.3 Economic Mechanisms of Neo-Colonial Control

❑ Commodity prices structurally disadvantage the South

One of the most fundamental mechanisms maintaining neo-colonial dependency involves unequal trade relationships. Former colonies and developing countries typically export primary commodities — agricultural products, minerals, and oil — while importing manufactured goods, technology, and processed products from developed countries. The terms of trade tend to favour developed countries because primary commodity prices are volatile and often decline relative to manufactured goods over time, representing a continuous transfer of value from poor to rich countries. Economist Raúl Prebisch and the structuralist school identified this secular deterioration in commodity prices relative to manufactured goods as early as the 1950s, arguing that it was a structural feature of the global economy rather than a temporary aberration.

❑ Trade rules entrench Northern agriculture advantage

Trade agreements often reinforce these patterns through asymmetrical terms: developed countries negotiate agreements requiring developing countries to open their markets to foreign goods and remove protections for local industries, while maintaining subsidies for their own agriculture and restrictions in sectors where developing countries might be competitive. The European Union and United States, for example, heavily subsidize their agricultural sectors, making it impossible for farmers in developing countries to compete on price, yet these same powers demand that developing countries remove



their own subsidies and tariffs on agricultural imports. These trade relationships also limit industrialisation in developing countries, as local markets flooded with cheap manufactured imports prevent the development of domestic industries, keeping them locked into roles as suppliers of raw materials rather than producers of value-added products.

❑ Debt converts crisis into structural leverage

Debt represents one of the most powerful mechanisms of neo-colonial control. Many developing countries accumulated massive debts during the 1970s when international banks, flush with oil money from petroleum-exporting countries, actively encouraged borrowing. When interest rates rose sharply in the early 1980s, many countries found themselves unable to service their debts, triggering a debt crisis that opened the door to structural adjustment. The debt burden creates multiple forms of control: countries must prioritize debt repayment over investment in education, healthcare, and infrastructure; debt service payments represent a continuous transfer of wealth from poor countries to wealthy creditors; and when countries need to reschedule or refinance debt, they must accept conditions imposed by creditors and international financial institutions.

❑ IFIs enforce conditions on crisis-hit economies

Some scholars argue that financial crises are at times deliberately engineered by currency speculators to facilitate wealth transfer from peripheral to core countries, citing the 1997 Asian financial crisis as an example where deliberate currency attacks created economic chaos, forced countries to accept IMF conditions, and allowed foreign corporations to acquire valuable assets at deeply discounted prices. The International Monetary Fund and World Bank play central roles in maintaining neo-colonial economic relationships. Though formally international organizations, these institutions have been dominated by wealthy Western countries since their creation, with voting power based on financial contributions giving the United States and European countries controlling influence. Countries that refuse their conditions find themselves cut off not only from IMF and World Bank lending but also from private international credit markets.

Foreign aid and conditional lending represent additional mechanisms of neo-colonial control. Much bilateral aid comes with conditions requiring recipients to adopt specific policies, purchase goods from donor countries, or support donor foreign policy objectives. Tied aid — where recipient countries must spend aid money purchasing goods from the donor country — effectively turns development assistance into

- ❑ Aid can deepen rather than reduce dependency

a subsidy for exporters in the donor country while providing reduced development value to recipients. Technical assistance programs, which provide experts from donor countries to advise developing country governments, often impose donor-country models rather than solutions appropriate to local conditions and can undermine local capacity building by creating a dependency on foreign expertise. Long-term food aid programs, while essential in genuine emergencies, can destroy local agriculture by flooding markets with cheap imported food, making it impossible for local farmers to sell their produce and ultimately deepening rather than reducing food dependency.

- ❑ Corporations extract profits, not develop nations

Multinational corporations play crucial roles in neo-colonial resource extraction. Foreign direct investment by multinationals appears to bring benefits through capital, technology transfer, and employment, but multinationals often repatriate most profits to their home countries rather than reinvesting locally. Transfer pricing practices allow multinationals to shift profits to low-tax jurisdictions, depriving host countries of tax revenue. In mining and extractive industries, foreign corporations typically negotiate favourable terms with host governments, paying minimal royalties or taxes while extracting valuable resources, sometimes through corruption. Agricultural sectors increasingly depend on seeds and inputs controlled by multinational corporations: genetically modified crop technologies and associated intellectual property rights create dependencies where farmers must purchase seeds annually from foreign corporations rather than saving seeds from their own harvests, transforming food production into a new domain of external control with serious implications for food security and sovereignty.

3.1.4 Financial, Military, and Environmental Dimensions

- ❑ Military force backs dollar hegemony

Dollar hegemony creates a unique and historically unprecedented position for the United States in the global economy. The United States can purchase goods, services, and assets from other countries by issuing dollars, which function essentially as promissory notes from the US government. Other countries must hold these dollars as reserves to conduct international trade. The dollar has lost significant value since 1971, yet countries continue to hold dollars because the international trade system requires them, particularly given that oil is priced and traded in dollars. When countries have attempted to escape dollar dominance — as Iraq did under Saddam Hussein when it began selling oil for euros, or as



Libya did under Muammar Gaddafi when it sought to create a gold-backed African currency — they faced severe geopolitical consequences, suggesting that maintaining dollar hegemony involves the willingness to use military force alongside economic mechanisms.

- ❑ Arms sales create permanent military dependencies

The strategy of maintaining military preponderance creates conditions favourable to neo-imperial control. By maintaining multiple military commitments and threatening potential interventions globally, dominant powers create an atmosphere discouraging independent policy choices by weaker states. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, officially framed around terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, served multiple functions: demonstrating willingness to use military force, controlling strategic regions, and signaling to potential adversaries the costs of challenging American dominance. Arms sales create additional long-term dependencies, as modern weapons systems require ongoing maintenance, spare parts, training, and upgrades that only suppliers can provide. Countries that purchase advanced weapons become dependent on those suppliers for their military effectiveness, limiting their foreign policy autonomy. Military aid compounds this dependency, often consisting of credits to purchase weapons from the donor country, effectively subsidizing the donor's arms industry while making recipients technically and logistically dependent.

- ❑ Climate governance entrenches historical inequality

Environmental concerns, particularly climate change, have become an arena in which neo-imperial dynamics play out in contemporary global governance. While climate change represents a genuine threat requiring coordinated global action, the specific policies promoted by developed countries often serve to constrain development in the Global South while protecting Northern advantages. Developed countries are overwhelmingly responsible for the accumulated greenhouse gases that cause climate change, having industrialised over the past two centuries. Yet climate agreements often ignore this historical responsibility, focusing instead on current and future emissions, effectively placing restrictions on developing countries attempting to industrialize while allowing developed countries to maintain the wealth built on past emissions.

- ❑ Carbon ceilings permanently constrain Southern development

Proposals for carbon limits in bodies like the Copenhagen Climate Conference codified inequality by setting lower per capita emission ceilings for developing countries than for developed ones, essentially declaring that citizens of poor countries must permanently accept lower living standards. Climate monitoring

systems also require countries to report detailed information on energy use and industrial production, creating opportunities for international inspection of development plans that critics compare to colonial-era arrangements in which imperial powers claimed oversight rights over subordinate territories.

3.1.5 Resistance and Alternative Systems

Historical examples demonstrate that neo-imperial powers can be resisted despite enormous advantages in military and economic power. The Korean War saw China and North Korea fight the United States to a stalemate despite massive American advantages in technology and firepower, demonstrating that military supremacy has limits when facing determined popular resistance. The Vietnam War provided an even clearer example: despite continuous bombing, chemical warfare, massive ground forces, and overwhelming technological superiority, the United States could not defeat Vietnamese resistance, which drew on deep popular mobilization, external support from socialist countries, and strategies adapted to the specific conditions of the struggle. Cuba has sustained independence for more than six decades despite being located in what the US considers its sphere of influence, surviving military invasion, a comprehensive economic embargo, and assassination attempts, while developing its own model with notable achievements in healthcare and education under severe economic constraints. These historical examples share common features: united populations willing to sacrifice for genuine independence, support from other countries or movements, effective strategies adapted to specific conditions, and ideological commitment to independence rather than narrow elite interests.

❑ Popular unity enables resistance to empire

Developing countries have also attempted to build cooperative mechanisms and institutions that reduce dependence on neo-imperial powers. The Non-Aligned Movement, established during the 1960s, sought to create space for countries to avoid alignment with either Cold War superpower. The BRICS bloc represents a more recent attempt to create alternative financial and development institutions. The BRICS New Development Bank provides an alternative source of development finance potentially free from the conditions imposed by the World Bank. The Contingent Reserve Arrangement offers potential protection against currency crises without requiring countries to submit to IMF structural adjustment programs. Regional development banks, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, offer alternative options to Western-dominated

❑ Alternative institutions create policy manoeuvre space



institutions. Trade relationships among developing countries have expanded significantly, with China becoming the largest trading partner for many African, Asian, and Latin American countries, potentially allowing countries to play competing powers against each other for greater manoeuvre space.

❑ China replicates neo-imperial patterns in South

The rise of China and other emerging powers, however, complicates any simple North-South dichotomy of neo-imperialism. China's Belt and Road Initiative builds transportation links, ports, and energy infrastructure across Asia, Africa, and Europe, framed as mutually beneficial development. Critics, however, note patterns resembling neo-colonial relationships: infrastructure designed primarily to facilitate Chinese access to resources and markets, debt creating dependencies similar to those imposed by Western institutions, and labour practices that sometimes favour Chinese workers over local employment. Chinese investments in Africa have been particularly controversial, with some African leaders appreciating Chinese engagement as an alternative to Western conditionality, while others criticise debt levels, environmental destruction, and the political influence China gains through economic ties. The BRICS face internal contradictions as well: China's economic dominance within the bloc creates risks of Chinese hegemony, India and China have border disputes and competing regional ambitions, and Russia's economy remains heavily dependent on energy exports.

❑ Structural obstacles constrain genuine alternatives

These alternative arrangements face broader structural obstacles. They operate within a global system still dominated by neo-imperial powers. The dollar remains the primary reserve currency and medium for international trade. Western-controlled institutions still hold substantial influence over developing country policies through debt, aid, and international economic rules. Alternative institutions remain much smaller and less influential than traditional institutions, limiting their ability to protect countries from neo-imperial pressure. The integration of the global economy makes isolation strategies difficult. Local elites in developing countries often benefit materially from neo-colonial relationships and actively perpetuate them. Nationalist and racial divisions prevent solidarity across borders. The complexity of contemporary imperialism, operating through seemingly neutral market mechanisms and international institutions, makes it less visible and harder to combat than overt colonial rule.

Summarised Overview

Neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism describe how relationships of domination and exploitation persist after formal decolonization. Unlike classical colonialism, which involved direct political control of territories, neo-colonial relationships operate primarily through economic, financial, and institutional mechanisms that allow dominant powers to shape policies and extract wealth while weaker states maintain the outward forms of sovereignty. The mechanisms of neo-colonial control are multiple and mutually reinforcing: unequal trade relationships, debt leverage, conditional lending by international financial institutions, multinational corporate extraction, intellectual property monopolies, dollar hegemony, and military backing for economic imperialism.

Resistance to neo-colonialism takes multiple forms. Historical cases including Vietnam, Korea, and Cuba demonstrate that imperial military and economic power has real limits when confronted with determined popular mobilization and strategic ingenuity. South-South cooperation through bodies such as the Non-Aligned Movement and the BRICS institutions, along with alternative development banks and expanded trade among developing countries, offers potential alternatives to exclusive reliance on Western-dominated institutions. Yet resistance faces significant structural obstacles: integration into a dollar-dominated global economy, the interests of local elites aligned with external powers, and the competition among emerging powers that can reproduce hierarchical relationships within alternative blocs. Understanding both the mechanisms of neo-imperialism and the possibilities and limits of resistance remains essential for grasping why global inequality persists decades after formal decolonization.

Self-Assessment Questions

1. What is the key difference between classical colonialism and neo-colonialism? How does Kwame Nkrumah's definition illuminate this distinction?
2. How did the collapse of the Bretton Woods system in 1973 change global economic relationships, and what is meant by dollar hegemony?
3. What are structural adjustment programs, how do they work, and what have been their typical consequences for developing countries?
4. Explain the concept of accumulation by dispossession. In what ways does privatization under neo-liberal conditionality exemplify this process?
5. How does debt function as a mechanism of political and economic control over developing countries? What leverage does it provide to creditors and international financial institutions?



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UNIT 2

International Non-Governmental Organizations

| Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of this unit, learners will be able to:

- critically analyse the defining characteristics, typologies, and organisational diversity of INGOs, distinguishing them from state and market actors
- assess the multifaceted roles of INGOs in global governance, including service delivery, advocacy, norm promotion, and humanitarian action, while evaluating their impact through landmark campaigns and recognising the limitations of that impact
- examine major critiques of INGOs concerning legitimacy, accountability, donor dependency, Northern dominance, and co-optation

| Background

The rise of International Non-Governmental Organizations as significant actors in world politics represents one of the most consequential transformations in global governance over the past half-century. For much of the twentieth century, international relations was understood primarily as the domain of sovereign states, intergovernmental institutions, and, later, multinational corporations. Civil society organizations existed at the margins of this system, providing charitable assistance or occasional commentary on international affairs. That understanding has been fundamentally disrupted. Today, INGOs participate in drafting international treaties, monitor state compliance with human rights standards, deliver humanitarian assistance in active conflict zones, mobilize millions of citizens across borders simultaneously, and hold powerful corporations and governments to account on issues ranging from environmental protection to access to essential medicines.

The sheer scale of the transformation is striking. In the early post-World War II decades, only a handful of internationally operating non-governmental organizations commanded significant resources or visibility. By the mid-2000s, INGOs received approximately one-third of global official development assistance, employed hundreds



For students of international relations and global politics, understanding INGOs is no longer optional. They are actors in virtually every dimension of contemporary global governance. India itself has one of the largest and most diverse NGO landscapes in the world, with organizations rooted in Gandhian traditions of self-reliance, faith-based service, grassroots mobilization, and increasingly professionalized development practice. This unit provides a systematic analysis of INGOs: what they are, how they evolved, what they do, what they have achieved, and what serious criticisms they face. It approaches INGOs neither as uncritical champions of global justice nor as mere instruments of Northern power, but as complex organizations whose contributions and limitations must be understood together.

Global Governance, Civil Society, Transnational Advocacy Networks, North-South Divide, Accountability, Donor Dependency, Humanitarian Action, Norm Diffusion

3.2.1 Definitions, Scope, and Typologies

International Non-Governmental Organizations occupy a conceptual space that distinguishes them from both governmental entities and commercial enterprises. According to the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), INGOs are international organisations not established by inter-state treaties, thereby distinguishing them from intergovernmental bodies that derive their authority from formal agreements between sovereign states. This institutional separation from governmental control constitutes a foundational characteristic of the INGO form, though it does not preclude governmental funding or collaborative relationships with state actors. Many of the world's largest INGOs receive substantial proportions of their budgets from governments and multilateral donors while maintaining operational independence.



- ❑ Five defining features characterise INGOs

Several core features define the INGO organizational form. These entities maintain formal organizational structures with defined roles, procedures, and institutional continuity. They operate as private institutions, maintaining separation from government even when receiving public funding. The not-for-profit principle distinguishes INGOs from commercial enterprises; any organizational surplus must be reinvested in mission-related activities. Self-governance ensures that INGOs control their internal decision-making processes independently. Finally, voluntary participation characterizes INGO operations, whether through volunteer board governance, volunteer labor, or voluntary financial contributions. Scholar Nidhi Vakil offers a development-oriented definition that emphasizes purpose alongside organizational characteristics, describing NGOs as self-governing, private, not-for-profit organizations dedicated to improving quality of life for disadvantaged populations.

- ❑ INGO diversity defies simple categorisation

Within these broad definitional parameters lies extraordinary organisational diversity. Scale and scope differentiate INGOs dramatically. Some operate as massive international entities with budgets rivaling those of small nation-states, employing tens of thousands of staff and implementing programs across dozens of countries. BRAC, based in Bangladesh, exemplifies this scale, with over 100,000 employees and programs serving millions of beneficiaries across multiple countries in South Asia and Africa. Conversely, countless small organizations operate with minimal budgets, volunteer labor, and programming focused on single communities. The degree of formality, religious affiliation, and financial resource base create further dimensions of variation. Faith-based INGOs such as Catholic Relief Services, Islamic Relief, and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee operate from explicit religious identities and values. Several analytical distinctions also help clarify the diverse INGO landscape: operational versus advocacy typologies, the North-South divide, and membership-based versus intermediary organizational forms.

- ❑ Inauthentic forms undermine INGO legitimacy

Problematic organizational forms complicate efforts to understand and regulate the sector. Government-organized non-governmental organizations, known as GONGOs, are created and controlled by state authorities to simulate civil society participation while advancing governmental agendas. Briefcase NGOs exist primarily on paper, established by individuals seeking access to donor funding without genuine programming capacity or community engagement. Donor-organised NGOs, or DONGOs, are created primarily to channel external funding



rather than to emerge organically from community needs. These inauthentic forms undermine the legitimacy of genuine INGOs. Research by Beckfield in 2003 documented that only 251 of formally documented INGOs were based in developing countries, underscoring the depth of geographic inequality that characterises the sector and shapes which voices dominate international civil society spaces.

3.2.2 Historical Evolution and Regional Trajectories

While INGOs have achieved prominence in recent decades, their historical roots extend much further. Save the Children, founded in 1919 in response to humanitarian suffering following World War I, demonstrated how private organizations could mobilize resources for international relief and advocate for vulnerable populations across borders. Oxfam, founded in 1942 to provide food assistance to civilians in Nazi-occupied Greece, evolved from emergency relief operations to long-term development programming. CARE, established in 1946 to send food parcels to war-ravaged Europe, similarly expanded from post-war relief to comprehensive development interventions. The UN Charter, adopted in 1945, formally recognized the role of non-governmental organizations through Article 71, explicitly empowering ECOSOC to consult with NGOs on matters within its competence, creating important political space for INGO engagement with global governance structures.

❑ INGO roots predate contemporary governance role

The period from the 1980s through the 1990s witnessed unprecedented INGO proliferation. Research indicates that approximately 43 per cent of all INGOs emerged during the decade between 1992 and 2002. This explosive growth resulted from converging factors. Increased donor support represented a crucial enabling factor: bilateral and multilateral donors, influenced by neoliberal ideology sceptical of state capacity, channelled growing proportions of development assistance through INGOs, which received approximately one-third of global official development assistance by 2004. Changing development paradigms shifted attention toward participation, empowerment, and the strengthening of civil society. The good governance agenda emphasised democratic accountability, positioning INGOs as ideal vehicles. Democratization waves across Latin America, Africa, Eastern Europe, and parts of Asia created political openings. Globalization and technological change dramatically enhanced INGO operational capacity, with the internet revolutionizing networking and reducing coordination costs.

❑ Four converging factors drove INGO proliferation

❑ Regional trajectories reflect distinct histories

INGO development followed distinct regional trajectories. Latin American INGOs emerged profoundly influenced by peasant movements fighting for land rights, resistance to authoritarian military regimes, and liberation theology — the progressive Catholic movement arguing that the Church should prioritise the poor and struggle against oppression. Asian INGO development drew inspiration from diverse sources: Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of self-reliance and service to the poor influenced numerous Indian organisations, while microcredit emerged as a transformative Asian INGO innovation, with Muhammad Yunus's Grameen Bank in Bangladesh demonstrating that poor people could be reliable borrowers when provided appropriately structured credit. African INGO development built upon communal associations and indigenous traditions of mutual aid, exemplified by Kenya's harambee movement. Eastern European INGO development followed a distinctive trajectory shaped by the communist legacy, with rapid NGO proliferation driven substantially by Western democracy promotion efforts after the collapse of Soviet control.

3.2.3 Roles, Functions, and Impact

❑ INGOs fill governance gaps with agenda power

INGOs gained political foothold and influence by identifying and politicizing issues that fell through cracks in traditional state-centric international relations. While governments focused on security, trade, and diplomatic relations, numerous critical issues received insufficient attention: environmental degradation, human rights abuses in distant countries, gender inequality, indigenous rights, and humanitarian crises in marginalised regions often went unnoticed or were deliberately obscured by states uncomfortable with scrutiny. INGOs recognised these governance gaps and mobilised to address them, effectively creating new political agendas where none had existed before. By leveraging global connectivity, particularly the internet and mass media, they transformed local grievances into global concerns. This capacity to set agendas and shape public discourse across borders constitutes a unique form of power, independent of military force, economic resources, or formal legal authority.

Perhaps the most visible INGO role involves direct service delivery to communities and individuals, filling gaps left by inadequate or absent governmental services. Healthcare delivery forms a major component, particularly in areas where government health systems are weak or nonexistent.



- ❑ Service delivery fills state capacity gaps

Microfinance programs provide small loans to poor individuals, particularly women, who lack access to traditional banking services, enabling millions to start small businesses and build productive assets. Emergency relief constitutes a critical function, with INGOs often among the first responders to natural disasters, conflicts, and humanitarian crises. Human rights assistance includes legal aid, documentation of abuses, and protection services for vulnerable populations. This implementation role has expanded significantly as neoliberal economic reforms reduced state provision of services in many countries.

- ❑ Advocacy and monitoring check state power

Beyond service provision, INGOs serve as catalysts for broader social change through advocacy and norm promotion. Grassroots organizing helps communities identify shared concerns and develop collective voice. INGOs have established a particularly strong influence in human rights, where organisations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have become authoritative voices on violations, contributing to the development of international human rights law and accountability mechanisms. Environmental INGOs have been instrumental in shaping global environmental governance. Women's rights organizations have successfully advocated for gender equality integration into international development agendas, trade agreements, and conflict resolution processes. INGOs play crucial roles in monitoring and accountability that states and intergovernmental organisations cannot effectively perform regarding their own actions, providing crucial checks on power and creating reputational costs for violations.

- ❑ Six campaigns demonstrate concrete INGO impact

Six notable INGO campaigns demonstrate tangible impact in reshaping international agreements and global governance. The Jubilee 2000 debt relief coalition successfully pressured wealthy nations and international financial institutions to cancel billions of dollars in debt owed by the world's poorest countries. Advocacy for access to HIV/AIDS drugs challenged pharmaceutical industry resistance to generic medications, making life-saving treatments accessible to millions in developing countries and establishing precedents for prioritizing public health over intellectual property protections. Civil society organizations played crucial roles in advocating for and shaping the International Criminal Court, with the Coalition for the International Criminal Court comprising hundreds of INGOs sustaining advocacy through complex multilateral negotiations. Environmental and human rights INGOs successfully challenged large dam projects, forcing development institutions to adopt

more rigorous social and environmental safeguards. Poverty-reduction advocacy helped place development at the centre of international agendas, contributing to frameworks such as the Millennium Development Goals. Corporate accountability campaigns pushed for greater business responsibility, leading to new reporting requirements including the UN Global Compact.

- ❑ INGOs can veto as well as shape agreements

The Climate Action Network provides an instructive example of strategic influence in international negotiations. During Kyoto Protocol negotiations, this coalition successfully aligned environmental concerns with broader global agendas, provided technical analyses informing negotiating positions, organized delegations from vulnerable nations, and generated public pressure on reluctant governments. INGOs have proven equally effective at blocking policies they oppose. The Multilateral Agreement on Investment, negotiated through the OECD in the late 1990s, was derailed entirely through coordinated INGO campaigns that exposed negotiating texts to public scrutiny, demonstrating genuine veto power over controversial international agreements. Similarly, INGOs contributed to stalling multiple World Trade Organisation trade rounds by reframing negotiations as favouring wealthy nations and corporations over developing countries and public health. The World Social Forum represents perhaps the most ambitious INGO-supported initiative to create alternative global governance structures centered on social justice and environmental sustainability.

3.2.4 Structure, Funding, and Accountability

- ❑ Organizational structures involve fundamental trade-offs

INGO organizational structures reflect diverse operational models, scales, and governance philosophies. Centralised international NGOs maintain strong headquarters that control strategy, resource allocation, and program design, while operating through country offices and field staff who implement programs. This model enables coordination and quality control but can limit responsiveness to local contexts. Federated structures, as practiced by organizations like Oxfam International and Friends of the Earth, bring together national member organizations under international umbrellas where national entities maintain substantial autonomy. Network forms emphasize horizontal coordination among autonomous organizations rather than hierarchical control, enabling flexibility while presenting coordination challenges. The tension between professional effectiveness and democratic

accountability is one of the most persistent governance challenges in the INGO sector.

- ❑ Funding diversity requires substantial organisational capacity

INGO funding comes from multiple sources, each with implications for organisational autonomy and accountability. Government funding provides scale and stability but creates dependencies and potential constraints on autonomy. Private donations from individuals provide relatively flexible resources but require substantial investment in marketing. Foundation grants offer opportunities for innovation but impose their own priorities. Earned income provides some independence but can create mission drift toward revenue generation. The diversification of funding sources represents a risk-management strategy, but managing multiple donor relationships and reporting requirements demands significant organisational capacity.

- ❑ Downward accountability remains imperfectly realised

Accountability represents a persistent challenge for INGOs that lack the electoral accountability mechanisms governments face or market accountability that disciplines businesses. Upward accountability to donors who provide resources creates pressures to satisfy donor priorities and reporting requirements. Downward accountability to beneficiaries and affected communities represents an ideal that is often imperfectly realised. Several mechanisms have emerged to address accountability gaps. Voluntary codes of conduct establish standards for ethical behavior. The Sphere Standards for humanitarian response define minimum requirements for humanitarian assistance. Certification and accreditation schemes provide external validation of organizational quality. Participatory approaches that involve beneficiaries in program design and evaluation can operationalise downward accountability, though participation can become performative when resource and power asymmetries limit authentic community voice.

3.2.5 Criticisms, Challenges, and Institutional - Navigation

- ❑ Self-appointed status creates legitimacy deficit

INGOs face fundamental legitimacy questions stemming from their self-appointed status and lack of electoral mandates. Unlike governments accountable to citizens through democratic processes, INGOs typically lack direct mechanisms of accountability to the populations they claim to represent or serve. Questions arise about whom INGOs truly represent and whether their advocacy reflects broader public

interests or narrower organizational agendas shaped by founder preferences, staff ideologies, or donor priorities. Legitimacy contests have intensified as some governments, particularly authoritarian regimes, push back against INGO influence by portraying organizations as foreign agents or instruments of Western imperialism. While such criticism often reflects governmental hostility to accountability and human rights monitoring, it resonates with genuine concerns about INGO accountability and democratic representation.

- ❑ Northern dominance reproduces global inequalities

The heavy concentration of INGOs, resources, and influence in high-income countries creates persistent power asymmetries within global civil society. Northern INGOs typically command greater financial resources, stronger connections to major donors and media outlets, more sophisticated technical capacity, and better access to international policy forums. These advantages enable Northern organizations to shape agendas and dominate discourse in ways that may marginalize Southern perspectives. The North-South divide extends to internal organizational dynamics, where funding from Northern donors can create dependencies that constrain autonomy. Partnership rhetoric often masks hierarchical relationships where Northern organizations control resources and Southern organizations implement programs designed elsewhere. Scholars have critically noted that INGOs may inadvertently represent and reinforce interstate hegemony over global civil society, with organizations based in powerful Northern countries potentially dominating discourse in ways that reflect the interests of wealthy states rather than genuinely representing global civil society in its diversity.

- ❑ INGOs may substitute for rather than support states

A fundamental critique argues that INGO growth contributes to the privatisation of development and governance functions, shifting responsibility from publicly accountable governments to private organisations not directly answerable to citizens. This perspective suggests that emphasising INGO service delivery allows governments to abdicate responsibilities they should fulfil, reducing state capacity and democratic accountability. When citizens receive services from NGOs rather than governments, accountability relationships shift away from democratic processes toward charitable relationships characterized by dependency rather than rights. The argument continues that resources directed to INGOs might be better spent strengthening government systems that serve all citizens, rather than supporting INGO projects that reach only select populations in limited geographic areas.



- ❑ Donor dependency distorts organisational missions

Critics argue that many INGOs pursue donor-driven agendas rather than responding to priorities identified by communities they claim to serve. When organisational survival depends on donor funding, INGOs face powerful incentives to shape programs that match donor interests rather than community needs, creating upward accountability dynamics. This manifests in programming fashionable areas where funding is available rather than addressing genuine priority needs, in emphasizing measurable outputs satisfying donor reporting requirements over transformative but harder-to-quantify impacts, and in avoiding controversial advocacy that could jeopardize donor relationships. Project cycles reflecting donor timeframes rather than the extended periods required for sustainable change result in short-term projects that may prove unsustainable when funding ends.

- ❑ Co-optation risks balance against informal influence

As INGOs become more integrated into official governance structures through partnership arrangements, consultative status, and funding relationships, they may lose their critical edge and become defenders of the status quo rather than agents of change. Co-optation can occur subtly as organizations internalize institutional norms, moderate demands to maintain access, and avoid confrontation that could jeopardize relationships and funding. Despite formal limitations in intergovernmental forums, INGOs have found ways to exert significant influence through informal channels. They provide technical expertise informing negotiating positions, organize side events that shape debate, mobilize public pressure constraining government options, and support delegations from resource-constrained countries. INGOs have also created shadow structures — alternative channels and networks that parallel official intergovernmental institutions — providing spaces for excluded voices, alternative expertise, and critical perspectives on mainstream governance approaches.

Summarised Overview

This unit has examined International Non-Governmental Organizations as pivotal actors in contemporary global politics and governance. INGOs perform multiple functions: filling service delivery gaps in health, humanitarian response, and economic inclusion; catalyzing social change through advocacy and community organizing; monitoring state and corporate accountability; building local organizational capacity; and participating in norm promotion across human rights, environmental governance,

and gender equality. Landmark campaigns demonstrate genuine capacity to shape international agreements and global institutions. Their strategic influence in blocking the Multilateral Agreement on Investment and shaping climate negotiations illustrates that well-organised civil society can wield meaningful power even without formal decision-making authority.

Yet significant criticisms temper celebratory assessments. Legitimacy questions arise from INGOs' self-appointed status and lack of electoral mandates. Northern dominance within the sector reproduces global inequalities. INGO growth may contribute to the privatization of development functions, eroding state accountability. Donor dependencies create powerful pressures toward upward accountability, distorting organisational missions away from community needs. Depoliticization risks mean that technical service delivery approaches may leave structural causes of poverty and injustice untouched. Co-optation risks increase as organizations become integrated into the governance systems they originally sought to reform. INGOs are neither magical solutions nor purely problematic actors; they are complex organizations with genuine capacities alongside real limitations, operating in contested political terrain where their contributions must always be assessed critically alongside their shortcomings.

Self-Assessment Questions

1. What are the core organizational features that define an INGO according to ECOSOC, and how does this definition distinguish INGOs from intergovernmental organizations and commercial enterprises? What additional criteria must organizations meet to obtain ECOSOC consultative status?
2. Explain the difference between operational and advocacy INGOs and the analytical distinction between membership-based and intermediary organizations. Why do these distinctions matter for assessing INGO accountability and legitimacy?
3. What factors drove the explosive proliferation of INGOs during the 1980s and 1990s? Identify at least four converging factors and explain how each contributed to the transformation of INGOs from marginal actors to central participants in global governance.
4. Describe the North-South divide within the INGO sector. What are its specific manifestations in terms of resources, agenda-setting power, and internal organizational dynamics?
5. Using specific examples from the unit, evaluate the impact INGOs have achieved through transnational advocacy campaigns. What common characteristics enabled successful campaigns?



6. Explain the concept of upward accountability in the INGO sector. Why does donor dependency create pressures toward upward rather than downward accountability, and what are the practical consequences for communities that INGOs claim to serve?
7. What is meant by the depoliticization critique of development INGOs? Illustrate your answer with reference to microfinance or health programming, and evaluate the response that technical service delivery can itself be deeply political.
8. How do INGOs navigate formal institutional spaces like the United Nations despite lacking formal negotiating rights equal to those of member states? Describe at least three informal mechanisms of influence that INGOs employ in intergovernmental forums.
9. What are co-optation risks for INGOs engaging with official governance structures, and under what conditions might integration into tripartite partnerships or consultative processes undermine rather than enhance INGO effectiveness as agents of change?

Assignment

1. Critically evaluate the claim that INGOs have democratized global governance. Drawing on evidence of their roles, influence, and accountability structures, assess whether INGOs genuinely represent diverse global voices or whether their participation in governance processes reinforces existing inequalities in world politics.
2. Analyze the North-South divide within the international NGO sector. Examine its historical origins, current manifestations, and the extent to which localization initiatives and more equitable partnership models have succeeded in addressing structural power asymmetries. What structural changes would be required for meaningful transformation?
3. Using one specific INGO campaign, provide a detailed analysis of the strategies employed, the actors mobilized, the obstacles overcome, and the extent and limitations of the achieved outcomes. What lessons does this campaign offer for understanding the conditions under which INGO advocacy succeeds?
4. Examine the tension between INGO service delivery and structural transformation. Using examples from development or humanitarian programming, assess whether INGOs can effectively address root causes of poverty and injustice or whether their focus on technical service delivery necessarily depoliticizes the issues they engage.

5. Assess the accountability deficit in the international NGO sector. Identify the key accountability relationships INGOs must manage; evaluate existing mechanisms designed to address accountability gaps, including the Sphere Standards, voluntary codes of conduct, and participatory evaluation; and propose reforms that would meaningfully strengthen downward accountability to beneficiary communities.

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU

UNIT 3

Conflict and Peace Resolutions

Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of this unit, learners will be able to:

- analyse and distinguish between types of modern conflicts and evaluate their root causes through grievance-based and greed-based theoretical perspectives
- critically evaluate peacebuilding approaches and assess their practical applications and limitations in post-conflict societies
- assess the roles and effectiveness of global and regional actors in conflict prevention, management, and resolution, recognising their respective advantages and complementary functions
- examine the evolution of peacekeeping from Cold War conflict management to contemporary multidimensional operations focused on statebuilding, civilian protection, and people-centred approaches

Background

Imagine a world map showing conflicts across continents: civil wars in Africa, ethnic tensions in South Asia, territorial disputes in the Middle East, and humanitarian crises requiring international intervention. Since the end of the Cold War in 1991, the nature of armed conflict has dramatically changed. While traditional wars between states have become rare, violent conflicts within states have proliferated. From the genocide in Rwanda to the ongoing crisis in Syria, from ethnic violence in Sri Lanka to insurgencies in Northeast India, contemporary conflicts are increasingly complex, involving multiple actors, crossing borders, and resisting simple solutions. These conflicts are no longer just about territory or ideology; they involve questions of identity, resources, governance, and basic human needs.

The international community's response to these conflicts has also evolved significantly. The United Nations, which was created primarily to prevent wars between states, now deploys peacekeepers to manage civil wars, protect civilians, and help rebuild societies.



Regional organizations like the African Union and ASEAN have become important players in managing conflicts in their neighbourhoods. New powers like Brazil, India, and China are asserting their roles in global peace and security, challenging Western dominance in conflict resolution. Meanwhile, debates rage about the best approaches to peacebuilding: Should the international community impose liberal democratic models on conflict-affected societies? How can local communities and civil society be genuinely empowered in peace processes? What is the proper balance between state sovereignty and international intervention to protect populations from mass atrocities? This unit explores these critical questions by examining the types and causes of modern conflicts, the frameworks and approaches used to build peace, and the roles of various global and regional actors in conflict resolution.

Keywords

Conflict Transformation, Protracted Social Conflict, Liberal Peacebuilding, Regional Organizations, United Nations Peacekeeping, Rising Powers, People-Centered Approaches, Structural Violence, Conflict Management, Humanitarian Intervention

Discussion

3.3.1 Understanding Conflict: Core Components and Types

At its most fundamental level, conflict is a situation in which two or more parties perceive their goals, values, or interests as incompatible. Norwegian peace researcher Johan Galtung developed an influential framework for understanding conflict through what he termed the 'conflict triangle,' which identifies three interconnected components that must all be addressed for genuine conflict resolution. The first component is contradiction, which refers to the underlying conditions of actual or perceived incompatibility of goals or clashes of interest between parties. The second component is attitude, encompassing the parties' perceptions and misperceptions of each other, often including deep-rooted stereotypes, prejudices, and psychological factors. The third component is behaviour, which in violent conflicts manifests as threats, coercion, and destructive attacks, though it can also include cooperative actions. True conflict resolution, according to Galtung, must involve all three components: de-escalation of violent behaviour, transformation of hostile attitudes, and addressing the underlying contradictions in relationships and interests.

- ❑ Conflict triangle: contradiction, attitude, behaviour

- ❑ Holsti's typology captures post-Cold War reality

Conflicts can be classified in various ways depending on the analytical focus. Scholar Kalevi Holsti proposed a nuanced typology based on the actors involved and their objectives: standard state-versus-state wars and armed interventions; decolonising wars of national liberation; internal wars driven by ideological goals; and state-nation wars involving armed resistance by ethnic, linguistic, or religious groups, often seeking secession or autonomy. In the post-Cold War era, the fourth category has become particularly prominent, as ethnic and identity-based conflicts have proliferated in regions from the Balkans to Africa to South Asia.

- ❑ Positive peace addresses structural, not just direct, violence

Galtung's analysis extends beyond the immediate manifestations of conflict to examine different forms of violence embedded in social structures and cultures. He identified three types of violence. Direct violence is the most visible form, linked to the behavior component, and includes physical harm, killing, and destruction. Cultural violence connects to the attitude component and refers to aspects of culture that legitimize or normalize direct and structural violence. Structural violence relates to the contradiction component and describes systematic ways in which social structures harm people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs, including poverty, inequality, discrimination, and denial of human rights. This typology leads to an important distinction between negative peace — simply the absence of direct violence — and positive peace, which involves overcoming not only direct violence but also cultural and structural violence by building just social structures, equitable economic systems, and inclusive political institutions.

3.3.2 Distinguishing Conflict Management, Resolution, and Transformation

- ❑ Management controls violence without resolving causes

Conflict management refers to interventions designed to control conflict and prevent its escalation or recurrence. It represents the art of appropriate intervention, usually by powerful external actors, to achieve political settlements or at least contain violence. Conflict management is considered successful if violence is contained and symptoms are suppressed, even if underlying causes remain unaddressed. This approach dominated international practice during the Cold War when superpower rivalries limited more ambitious interventions.

Conflict resolution goes further by seeking to address the underlying contradictions or incompatibilities of interest that



❑ Resolution transforms zero-sum into positive-sum

❑ Transformation requires structural and cultural change

❑ Multiple lenses are needed for conflict analysis

generate conflict. While conflict management emphasizes intervention by powerful actors wielding coercive capabilities, conflict resolution traditionally emphasizes the role of skilled but relatively powerless third parties working through unofficial channels — often called Track II diplomacy. Conflict resolution aims to move parties from zero-sum destructive patterns, where one side's gain is the other's loss, to positive-sum constructive outcomes where mutual gains are possible.

Peacebuilding represents the most comprehensive approach, encompassing activities that go beyond crisis intervention or immediate conflict management. As defined by UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali in his landmark 1992 'Agenda for Peace,' peacebuilding involves the construction of a new environment to avoid the recurrence of violence. It addresses economic, social, cultural, and humanitarian problems to create foundations for durable peace. The term conflict transformation represents perhaps the most ambitious vision, emphasizing long-term processes that validate and build on people and resources within the conflict setting. This comprehensive approach addresses issues at the micro to macro levels, the local to global scales, grassroots to elite actors, and short-term to long-term timescales. Conflict transformation aims not just to resolve specific disputes but to fundamentally change the ways individuals and communities perceive and accommodate differences.

3.3.3 Typologies and Causes of Modern Conflicts

3.3.3.1 Theoretical Perspectives on Conflict Causation

Understanding why conflicts occur requires examining them through multiple theoretical lenses. Internal theories locate the sources of conflict within the nature of the protagonists themselves, examining factors like regime type, economic systems, or cultural characteristics. Relational theories look for sources in the relationships between the conflict parties, focusing on issues such as power imbalances, miscommunication, and historical grievances. Contextual theories examine the broader conditioning contexts that structure conflicts, including global economic systems, regional power dynamics, or colonial legacies. Peter Wallensteen proposes three complementary modes of conflict analysis: rational calculations, conflict dynamics, and needs-based approaches. Each perspective offers insights but none alone provides a complete explanation.

Effective conflict analysis typically requires combining insights from multiple perspectives, a practice known as analytical eclecticism.

- ❑ Mobilising and structural causes both require attention

The debate between actor-oriented and structural models remains central to conflict studies. Actor-oriented models focus on the behavior, objectives, and attitudes of conflict parties, emphasizing their choices and strategies. Structural models, in contrast, focus on underlying causes and conditions that create grievances and opportunities for violence. Similarly, analysts distinguish between mobilizing causes, the immediate triggers and factors that spark violence, and structural causes, the deep-rooted systemic factors that create the conditions for conflict to emerge and persist. Both levels of causation require attention for comprehensive understanding and effective intervention.

3.3.3.2 Edward Azar's Protracted Social Conflict Theory

- ❑ Protracted conflicts emerge from need deprivation

One of the most influential frameworks for understanding contemporary conflicts comes from Edward Azar's theory of protracted social conflict. Azar defined such conflicts as prolonged and often violent struggles by communal groups for basic needs including security, recognition, acceptance, fair access to political institutions, and economic participation. These conflicts are most likely to arise in multi-communal societies where different ethnic, religious, linguistic, or cultural groups compete for resources and recognition, with divisions that were often created or deepened through colonization and divide-and-rule policies.

- ❑ Communal identity becomes politicised under exclusion

Azar identified four sources or preconditions for protracted social conflict. The first is the communal content of society itself. In multi-communal societies, identity groups become politicized when they organize around ethnic, religious, or linguistic characteristics to compete for resources and power. These societies are typically characterised by disarticulation between the state and society, meaning the state apparatus is dominated by a single communal group or coalition that is unresponsive to other groups' needs and aspirations.

The second source involves human needs and their systematic denial. Grievances result from the deprivation of basic needs expressed collectively by identity groups. When these grievances go unaddressed over time, they cultivate the conditions for protracted social conflict. Azar emphasized that

❑ State exclusion translates needs into grievances

❑ International linkages shape internal conflict dynamics

❑ Grievance theory: structural injustice drives conflict

❑ Greed-grievance debate requires integrative analysis

material deprivation alone does not directly cause conflict. Rather, it is the lack of access to social institutions that is the crucial determinant for need satisfaction. The third source is the role of the state and its governance practices. Conflict-prone states typically exhibit characteristics including incompetent, fragile, and authoritarian governments; monopoly of political authority by one or more identity groups; limited access to social institutions for excluded groups; and policy capacity limited by rigid or fragile authority structures.

The fourth source involves international linkages that shape state capacity and behavior. Economic dependency limits state autonomy and can distort development patterns by realigning international, domestic, and state coalitions in ways that neglect broad-based development. Political and military client relationships with external powers can induce states to pursue policies that are disconnected from or contradictory to public needs, as client loyalty often involves the sacrifice of autonomy and independence. These international dimensions help explain why internal conflicts are rarely purely internal but are shaped by regional and global dynamics.

3.3.3.3 The Greed Versus Grievance Debate

A major debate in conflict studies concerns whether conflicts are primarily driven by grievances related to injustice and need deprivation or by greed and economic opportunities for profit. The grievance-based view, represented by Azar and his followers, emphasizes the denial of basic human needs as the underlying source of destructive conflict. This perspective focuses on structural causes such as political oppression, economic inequality, social marginalisation, and the denial of recognition and participation. Conflicts erupt when groups mobilize around these grievances to demand change.

In sharp contrast, economists Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler argued that economic factors and profit opportunities, rather than grievances, are the primary determinants of civil war. Their quantitative analysis found little evidence that grievances like inequality or political oppression increase the risk of conflict. Instead, they highlighted economic factors such as dependence on primary commodity exports, which creates opportunities for rebel groups to finance operations through resource predation. This perspective emphasises mobilising around economic opportunities through violence rather than as movements seeking to address legitimate grievances. The

greed-based analysis has been subject to substantial criticism, however: critics note the lack of attention to the state's role in creating conditions for conflict, the dubious selection of proxy variables, and the problematic distinction between objective and subjective grievances. Most contemporary analysts recognize that both grievance and greed factors play roles in different conflicts and at different stages.

3.3.3.4 Ethnic Conflict and Identity Politics

The post-Cold War period saw a surge of academic and policy interest in ethnic and nationalist conflicts, particularly separatist movements. Early approaches that treated ethnicity as a fixed, primordial characteristic have given way to constructivist approaches that examine how ethnic identities are politically constructed and mobilized. Constructivist scholars explore how colonial legacies of ethnic classification impact contemporary divisions, how ethnic politics draws on and reproduces notions of legitimacy, and how ethnicity serves as a political tool to distinguish between 'us and them.'

❑ Ethnicity is politically constructed, not primordial

A key insight from conflict research is that the primary source of ethnic conflict is not inherent differences between social groups but rather the absence of effective institutional mechanisms to regulate relationships and moderate contestations between groups. The role of the state is crucial in either preventing or perpetuating ethnic conflict. For example, the Sri Lankan state played a central role in the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict through policies that systematically favoured the Sinhalese majority while marginalizing the Tamil minority. Resolution of ethnic conflicts requires new institutional mechanisms and frameworks that protect minority rights, promote inclusive political participation, facilitate consensus-building processes, and support reconciliation efforts.

❑ Institutions, not ethnicity, drive ethnic conflict

3.3.3.5 The Post-Cold War Conflict Landscape

The end of the Cold War marked a watershed moment in the evolution of global conflicts. When the bipolar world order collapsed in 1990, the number of active armed conflicts reached 38 — the highest level since World War II. Today, more than two-thirds of violent conflicts occur within nations rather than between them. Multiple factors drive contemporary conflicts: democratization plays a paradoxical role, as political change can trigger violence in divided societies lacking adequate institutional safeguards; the collapse of authoritarian regimes

❑ Post-Cold War conflicts are diverse and complex



can release dormant identity conflicts; conflict morphology transforms original causes into new justifications as conflicts evolve; and the proliferation of cheap light weaponry enables non-state actors to sustain prolonged insurgencies with modest means. Modern conflicts defy simple categorization or universal solutions; their diverse typologies demand differentiated analytical frameworks and resolution strategies.

3.3.4 Peacebuilding Approaches and Frameworks

3.3.4.1 The Hourglass Model of Conflict Resolution

Understanding the full range of conflict-resolution techniques requires frameworks that map interventions to the different stages of conflict. The hourglass model provides such a framework, illustrating how conflicts typically escalate through stages from initial differences to polarization to violence and war, then de-escalate through ceasefire, agreement, normalization, and hopefully reconciliation. In the pre-violence stage, appropriate responses include cultural peacebuilding activities such as conflict-resolution training, problem-solving workshops, and support for indigenous dispute-resolution mechanisms. As polarization deepens, structural peacebuilding becomes important, including development assistance, civil society development, governance training, and informal Track II mediation. Once violence erupts, peacekeeping operations become necessary for crisis management and containment. As conflicts de-escalate, the same stages occur in reverse with different specific interventions: disarmament and security sector reform at the ceasefire stage; electoral and constitutional reform at the agreement stage; economic cooperation and development at the normalization stage; and truth and justice commissions, peace education, and cultural exchanges at the reconciliation stage.

❑ Hourglass maps interventions to conflict stages

❑ Real conflicts rarely follow neat sequences

Important caveats apply to this model. Real-life conflicts are rarely resolved through neatly sequenced stages. In protracted conflicts, it may not be possible to distinguish escalation from de-escalation, given the complex dynamics that have evolved over long histories of recurring violence. Nevertheless, the model provides a valuable, comprehensive toolbox from which practitioners can select appropriate interventions based on careful analysis of specific conflict contexts.

3.3.4.2 The Liberal Peacebuilding Template

- ❑ Liberal template applies standard remedies universally

The post-Cold War period witnessed increasing international involvement in conflict resolution in what were termed failed states. This led to the development of a relatively standardized peacebuilding toolbox based on the premise that fundamental re-engineering of conflict-prone societies was essential for sustainable peace. The standard components and procedures of this approach include power-sharing arrangements, constitution-drafting processes, new or revised election systems, judiciary reform, security sector reform, demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants, post-conflict reconstruction schemes, repatriation programs for refugees, truth commissions, transitional justice mechanisms, and war crimes tribunals. This peacebuilding template reflects the liberal peace ideology, which holds that democratic institutions and market economics prevent conflict. The approach involves a package of standard remedies applied across different contexts with relatively little adaptation to local circumstances, consistently promoted by the United Nations, international financial institutions, and Western donor countries from Bosnia to East Timor, and from Afghanistan to Liberia.

3.3.4.3 Critiques of Liberal Peacebuilding

- ❑ Liberal peacebuilding may deepen inequality

The liberal peacebuilding approach has generated substantial criticism from multiple perspectives. Structural and systemic critiques focus on inefficiency and incoherence in practice. Critics point to strategic deficits in planning and coordination. The output-based approach designed to favour efficiency focuses on measurable gains like per-capita GDP growth or crop yields, but these positive statistics often mask negative consequences at local levels. Liberal peacebuilding interventions may increase inequality or reinforce oppression through funding elites or already advantaged groups while marginalizing vulnerable populations. The fundamental ideological critiques challenge core assumptions of the liberal peacebuilding agenda: the process of democratization can be destabilizing in fragile societies; economic liberalisation may worsen conditions by increasing inequality and unemployment; and donor-driven preferences for market-oriented reforms often ignore local economic traditions and capacities.

The securitization or militarization of peacebuilding represents another major concern. After the September 11, 2001 attacks, peacebuilding became increasingly conflated with the



- ❑ Securitisation converts peacebuilding into pacification

security concerns of dominant Western powers. Concepts such as nation-building, regime change, and stabilisation became intertwined with counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations. Development has been co-opted by the global security field, leading some critics to describe peacebuilding as a form of riot control or pacification serving the interests of global powers rather than local populations. Scholar Mark Duffield has argued that contemporary internal wars should not be understood as local symptoms of local failures but as products of late capitalist expansionism and globalization, and that conflict resolution can become a tool of pacification that facilitates continued dominance over what Duffield terms the unruly periphery.

3.3.4.4 People-Centered Approaches and the Shift from State-Building

- ❑ Sustainable peace requires inclusive, people-centred ownership

Growing recognition of the limitations of state-centric approaches has led to calls for people-centered peacebuilding that places communities and civil society at the center rather than focusing primarily on state institutions. The dominant state-centric paradigm has assumed that fixing weak states, securing their juridical legitimacy through elections, and extending their administrative reach would automatically yield peace dividends. People-centered approaches are necessary because contemporary conflicts are largely intrastate and driven by non-state actors and citizens with unaddressed grievances. The G7+ Group of fragile and conflict-affected states advocates prioritising legitimate politics over narrow state-building, stressing that no state authority is viable without inclusive, participatory governance and equitable delivery of basic services to all population segments. The UN's sustaining peace framework defines sustaining peace as both a goal and a process, understood as a shared task and responsibility fulfilled not only by government but by all national stakeholders including civil society, women's groups, and youth organizations.

- ❑ HIPPO called for genuine people-centred engagement

The High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) advocated in 2015 for a people-centered approach as one of the essential shifts needed in the design and delivery of UN peace operations. The panel called for renewed resolve from UN personnel to engage with, serve, and protect the people they are mandated to assist. HIPPO emphasized that countries emerging from conflict are not blank pages and their people are not projects; they possess knowledge, expertise, and resilient mechanisms that must be understood and supported. The report

recommended conducting differentiated, gender-sensitive conflict analysis to understand the specific experiences, rights, needs, and roles of women and girls in conflict situations. HIPPO's practical recommendations included shifting from merely consulting people to actively engaging to hear perspectives, monitor impact, and ensure missions do no harm. The joint Security Council and General Assembly resolution on sustaining peace in 2016 was hailed as a significant conceptual and policy shift, emphasizing inclusive ownership and the central role of civil society and national stakeholders.

3.3.4.5 Implementation Challenges and the Local Turn

Despite growing consensus on the importance of people-centred approaches, implementation remains challenging. A central dilemma is how peacekeeping, which remains fundamentally a state-centric instrument, can engage directly with populations without governments feeling their prerogatives have been usurped. Host governments may capture UN-devised people-focused processes for narrow political gains. It is difficult to identify credible civil society representatives who genuinely speak on behalf of local people outside elite circles. Missions often lack the capacity for rigorous analysis of local realities, leading to ad-hoc interventions based on incomplete understanding. The UN tends to value thematic expertise over local knowledge, leading to the deployment of staff who lack local language skills or an understanding of customs and norms. This results in supply-driven rather than context-driven interventions.

❑ State-centric peacekeeping limits people-centred implementation

The going local discourse has become increasingly prominent, with growing promotion of bottom-up conflict transformation and support for local actors and structures. However, critics identify a fundamental disconnect between the rationale for going local and the implementation frameworks actually employed. The going local approach can reinforce problematic views that localize the root causes of conflict to the cultural, social, or psychological environments of conflict-prone societies or failed states, ignoring structural sources located in global centers of power and risking a rerun of civilizing missions. The Nepal case illustrates these concerns, where heavy multilateral involvement raised questions about top-down social engineering and whether interventions genuinely empower local populations or perpetuate the conditions that justify continued foreign presence.

❑ Going local risks reproducing civilising mission logic



3.3.5 Role of Global and Regional Actors in Conflict Resolution

3.3.5.1 The United Nations: Evolution and - Contemporary Challenges

- ❑ UN peacekeeping expanded from monitoring to governance

The United Nations holds a unique position as the primary global actor for international peace and security. The role of UN peacekeeping has evolved dramatically across three distinct periods. During the Cold War era, early missions like the UN Truce Supervision Organization in the Arab-Israeli War and the UN Military Observer Group in the Indo-Pakistani War were primarily tasked with monitoring ceasefires and creating buffer zones. The bedrock principles developed during this period were the consent of the host state, the use of force only for self-defence, and non-interference in the internal affairs of host states. The post-Cold War era brought a dramatic transformation: 58 out of 71 total missions were established after 1988. Missions became multidimensional and more complex, increasingly addressing internal matters of sovereign states. Tasks expanded to monitoring non-military activities including elections, human rights, and rule of law. In extreme cases such as Kosovo and Timor-Leste, UN peacekeepers were given temporary executive law-enforcement and administrative authority over territories.

- ❑ Contemporary enforcement peacekeeping faces multipolar pressures

The contemporary era has witnessed another shift, with current missions in places like the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, and the Central African Republic increasingly deployed amid open conflicts without comprehensive peace agreements. A new era of enforcement peacekeeping is emerging, involving the offensive use of force against non-state actors. The failures in Rwanda and Srebrenica highlighted the danger of interpreting peacekeeping principles too narrowly when facing genocidal violence. The Capstone doctrine of 2008 clarified that impartiality should not be confused with neutrality or inactivity, allowing peacekeepers to act against parties violating peace process undertakings. The UN faces significant contemporary challenges including the United States significantly cutting financial contributions and pressuring for budget reductions, and the UN security architecture facing deep repercussions from the reconfiguration of the multipolar system.

3.3.5.2 Regional Organizations: Advantages and Disadvantages

- ❑ Proximity gives regional organisations comparative advantage

The UN Charter's Chapter VIII anticipated regional organisations but established UN supremacy over them. However, the proliferation of regional organisations has created viable alternatives to the UN for states seeking to resolve conflicts. Thirty-one regional organizations have been identified with peace and security on their agendas. Regional organizations possess several distinct advantages in conflict resolution. Their closeness to situations provides access to personal and organizational networks based on non-conflictual interactions that can facilitate dialogue. They possess expertise and insights from parallel experiences that can be drawn upon in different phases of peace initiatives. Regional organizations cannot withdraw from situations because they have vested interests in successful peace-making, as instability directly affects neighbouring states. Their regional understanding includes cultural comprehension and personal networks that enhance credibility with local actors.

- ❑ Regional disadvantages complement UN's global strengths

However, regional organizations also face significant disadvantages. Partisan involvement may cause them to appear as instruments favouring one party due to existing relationships. Their networks may not include revolutionary actors or previously unrepresented social groups, creating blind spots. Regional organizations are often dominated by one or few regionally influential states, such as India in SAARC or Nigeria in ECOWAS, which can undermine their neutrality. Many face weak organisational capacity and financial constraints. Regional rivalries can paralyze organizational effectiveness. The UN maintains several advantages relative to regional organizations, including greater resources, extensive experience across diverse conflict situations, neutrality from local situations, strong legal standing, global legitimacy, and the ability to provide swift binding action when permanent members agree. Finding appropriate cooperation forms between global and regional levels remains the preferred approach.

3.3.5.3 Regional Organizations: Specific Cases and Effectiveness Factors

The effectiveness of regional organizations in conflict resolution varies dramatically across regions and cases. Several factors linked to member states and regional contexts shape this effectiveness. State capacity and cohesion are



- ❑ State capacity and normative cohesion determine effectiveness

- ❑ ECOWAS legitimacy comes from African ownership

- ❑ Great power competition limits regional agency

- ❑ Conflict roots lie in global structures, not local failures

critical, as regional organisations inherit both the strengths of the European Union and the institutional weaknesses evident in SADC, IGAD, and SAARC. Sovereignty pooling poses a major challenge, as high levels of regional cooperation require pooling and partial sovereignty loss. Common values, or normative congruence, are required to forge close cooperation. The relationship between the two most powerful states in a region is particularly significant: France and Germany's cooperation facilitated European integration, while India and Pakistan's rivalry hampers South Asian cooperation.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has played mixed roles as mediator, peace enforcer, and peacekeeper in West African conflicts. ECOWAS successfully intervened militarily in The Gambia in 2017 after President Yahya Jammeh refused to step down following an election loss. ECOWAS is argued to be particularly effective because it is seen as legitimate by local actors and upholds common norms of anti-imperialism and a commitment to African solutions to African problems. The organization uses two primary categories of rapidly deployable tools: rhetorical action — statements targeting the behavior of disputants that signal that more costly action may follow, and is strongly associated with lower levels of violence — and diplomatic action, including the appointment of envoys, fact-finding missions, shuttle diplomacy, and mediation.

The African Union, reformed from the Organization of African Unity, developed more efficient administration and enlarged peace and security mandates. However, the 2011 Libyan crisis illustrated the complex dynamics affecting regional organisations. The AU's initiative to lead crisis management was dismissed, partly due to a lack of internal cohesion and partly because outside powers obstructed its mediation plan. The politics of crisis management depended more on geopolitics and economic realism than on the Responsibility to Protect principle that was invoked to justify intervention, revealing the limits of regional agency when major powers pursue competing interests.

3.3.6 Contemporary Challenges and Future Directions

A critical imperative for rethinking conflict resolution is redirecting attention to local and indigenous perspectives without localising the roots of conflict to the periphery. Structural sources of conflict often lie in global centers of

power rather than simply in the societies experiencing violence. Contemporary civil wars should not be viewed as aberrations to be redressed with technical tools but as natural products of aggressive globalization that creates wealth and stability for some while producing instability and violence for others.

The interlinking of development and security, particularly after September 11, 2001, has raised concerns about the securitization or militarization of peacebuilding. Development has been co-opted by the global security field, transforming peacebuilding into a form of pacification serving the interests of global powers rather than genuinely addressing the needs and aspirations of local populations. Whether peacebuilding and conflict resolution serve emancipatory purposes or function as tools of global governance and control remains a matter of ongoing critical examination.

❑ Securitisation subordinates development to security

Environmental problems and resource scarcity pose immense human security challenges that are likely to intensify with climate change. Contestations over land and natural resources, including water, are common sources of violent conflict. Climate change will exacerbate these dynamics through increased droughts, floods, sea level rise, and displacement. Conflict resolution and peacebuilding must increasingly address environmental security, integrating sustainable resource management, climate adaptation, and equitable access to natural resources into comprehensive approaches.

❑ Climate change amplifies resource-based conflict

Cultural dimensions of conflict and peacebuilding also require greater attention. Violence becomes not only a resource for resolving material conflicts but also a means of world-making, asserting a group's claim to truth and history against rivals. Effective reconciliation requires acute awareness of cultural models and understanding of processes that construct violence as legitimate. Truth commissions, transitional justice mechanisms, peace education, and arts-based peacebuilding can create spaces for encounter and dialogue across divided communities, provided they are sensitive to power dynamics and avoid imposing external models of reconciliation that do not fit local cultural contexts.

❑ Reconciliation must respect local cultural contexts



Summarised Overview

This unit has examined the multifaceted landscape of contemporary conflict and peacebuilding. Modern conflicts are predominantly intrastate, involving complex interactions between identity politics, resource competition, governance failures, and global economic structures. Understanding these conflicts requires multiple theoretical perspectives that examine grievances and opportunities, as well as local dynamics and global contexts. Edward Azar's protracted social conflict theory provides a valuable framework highlighting the roles of human needs, communal identity, state governance, and international linkages in generating and sustaining conflicts.

Peacebuilding approaches have evolved from simple ceasefire monitoring to comprehensive multidimensional operations addressing political, economic, social, and security dimensions. The liberal peacebuilding template, while bringing resources and attention to conflict-affected societies, has faced substantial criticism for inefficiency, cultural insensitivity, and potential complicity in reproducing global inequalities. The shift toward people-centered approaches recognizes that sustainable peace requires genuine participation, local ownership, and attention to the needs and aspirations of populations rather than focusing exclusively on state institutions. The roles of global and regional actors continue to evolve amid multipolarization and shifting power dynamics.

Critical questions persist about the purposes and effects of international peacebuilding. Is it primarily a technical exercise in institutional development, a political process reproducing global hierarchies, or a genuine effort at emancipatory transformation? How can the international community support sustainable peace without imposing external models or serving the security interests of dominant powers primarily? How can structural causes rooted in global economic and political systems be addressed rather than simply treating local symptoms? These questions require ongoing critical reflection, empirical research, and a willingness to challenge assumptions and adapt practices based on evidence and local voices.

Self-Assessment Questions

1. What are the three components of Galtung's conflict triangle, and why must all three be addressed for genuine conflict resolution?
2. Explain the difference between negative peace and positive peace, providing examples of each.
3. What are the four sources or preconditions for protracted social conflict according to Edward Azar's theory?
4. Compare and contrast the grievance-based and greed-based explanations for civil war, including key criticisms of each approach.

5. What are the main components of the liberal peacebuilding template, and what are the two major categories of critique against this approach?
6. Describe three advantages and three disadvantages of regional organizations compared to the United Nations in conflict resolution.
7. How did UN peacekeeping evolve from the Cold War era through the post-Cold War period to the contemporary era?
8. Explain the concept of people-centered peacebuilding and identify three challenges to implementing this approach.
9. What is the hourglass model of conflict resolution, and what types of interventions are appropriate at different stages of conflict?

Assignment

1. Analyze a specific protracted social conflict (such as Kashmir, Sri Lanka's civil war, or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) using Edward Azar's framework. Identify how each of the four sources or preconditions applies to your chosen case and assess which factors are most significant in sustaining the conflict.
2. Compare the roles of a regional organization and the United Nations in managing a specific conflict. Evaluate their respective effectiveness and explain how their approaches complemented or conflicted with each other.
3. Critically evaluate the liberal peacebuilding approach in a post-conflict country. Discuss specific interventions implemented, assess their outcomes, and analyze whether criticisms of liberal peacebuilding apply to your case.
4. Examine the role of a rising power (Brazil, India, China, or Turkey) in conflict management in its region. Analyze its motivations, strategies, and effectiveness.
5. Design a people-centered peacebuilding strategy for a specific conflict-affected community. Address how your approach would overcome the implementation challenges identified in the unit while genuinely empowering local actors.
6. Analyze how environmental factors and resource scarcity contribute to conflict in a specific region. Propose interventions that address both environmental and conflict dimensions.
7. Compare conflict management and conflict resolution approaches to a specific conflict. Explain which approach you believe is more appropriate for the current stage of the conflict and justify your reasoning with reference to the hourglass model.



8. Examine the relationship between the United Nations and a regional organization in the post-Cold War era. Analyze factors that facilitate or hinder effective cooperation and propose mechanisms to improve coordination.

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Suggested Reading

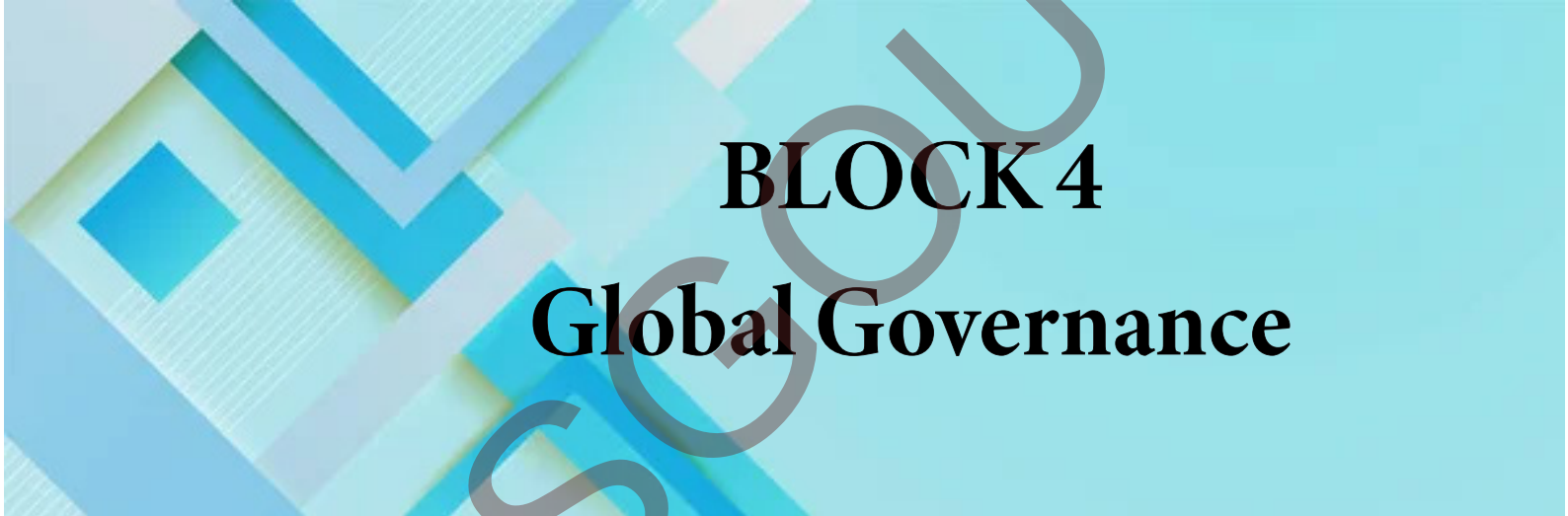
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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU





BLOCK 4

Global Governance

UNIT 1

International Institutions

Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of this unit, learners will be able to:

- define and distinguish IGOs, INGOs, and hybrid organizations by their core characteristics and structural differences
- trace the historical evolution of international institutions from Bretton Woods to contemporary global governance, explaining how major crises have driven reform
- evaluate the roles, decision-making processes, and power structures of major institutions such as the IMF, World Bank, WTO, and UN
- critically examine debates on the legitimacy, accountability, democratic deficit, and effectiveness of international institutions in global governance

Background

Imagine waking up in the morning and checking the weather forecast on your mobile phone. You board a flight to another country, your luggage passes through customs smoothly, and you withdraw money from an ATM using your bank card. Later, you read news about climate negotiations, global health emergencies, or trade disputes between nations. What connects all these everyday experiences? The answer is international institutions. These organisations work quietly in the background, setting standards for aviation safety, telecommunications, currency exchange, customs procedures, environmental protection, and countless other aspects of our interconnected lives. Without them, the globalised world we take for granted would simply not function.

Yet international institutions are far more than technical conveniences. They stand at the heart of some of the most pressing debates in world politics today. When the global financial crisis struck in 2008, who should coordinate the response? When a deadly disease like Ebola breaks out, who mobilises international help? When countries disagree over trade rules or military interventions, who decides what is fair and legal? International institutions like the International Monetary Fund, World Health



Organization, and United Nations are supposed to answer these questions. But critics ask: whose interests do these institutions really serve? Are they tools of powerful nations, or do they genuinely promote cooperation and justice? Can organisations created seventy years ago still address twenty-first-century challenges? As India plays an increasingly important role in global affairs, understanding how these institutions work, who controls them, and how they can be reformed becomes essential for every informed citizen and future policymaker.

Keywords

Intergovernmental organisations (IGOs), International non-governmental organisations (INGOs), Global governance, Bretton Woods system, International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, World Trade Organization (WTO), United Nations (UN), Sovereignty, Legitimacy and accountability, Constitutive and regulative norms

Discussion

- Institutions as central governance actors

International institutions have become central actors in contemporary world politics. These formal organisations and rule systems shape how states cooperate, how global problems are managed, and even how we understand concepts like development, security, and human rights. From the International Monetary Fund managing financial crises to the World Health Organization coordinating responses to pandemics, from the World Trade Organization settling trade disputes to the United Nations authorising peacekeeping missions, international institutions touch nearly every dimension of international relations. This unit provides a comprehensive introduction to international institutions by examining their definitions and types, historical origins, theoretical perspectives, major examples, and ongoing debates about their legitimacy and effectiveness. Understanding international institutions is essential for anyone seeking to make sense of global governance in an age of interdependence and globalisation.

4.1.1 Definitions and Scope of International Institutions

4.1.1.1 What Are International Institutions?

International institutions can be understood in several ways, but a comprehensive definition views them as relatively stable sets of related norms and rules that pertain to the international system, the actors within that system, and their activities. This

❑ Institutions as rule-and-norm systems

❑ Forums, information, enforcement

❑ IGOs, INGOs, hybrids; universal vs regional scope

definition includes both formal written rules found in treaties and organisational charters, as well as informal shared norms or expectations about appropriate behaviour. International institutions are not simply patterns of behaviour themselves; rather, they are the rules and norms that shape and explain behaviour. This distinction is important because it allows us to analyse how institutions influence what states and other actors do, without falling into circular reasoning.

International institutions serve several key purposes in world politics. They provide forums where states can harmonise their policies through common rules and standards. They collect and supply specialised information and expertise that individual states cannot easily produce alone. They act as mechanisms of enforcement, most often through naming and shaming states that violate agreed rules, using reputational pressure rather than military coercion. The growth in the number and scope of international institutions over the past century reflects how central they have become to managing interdependence and addressing problems that cross national borders.

4.1.1.2 Types of International Institutions

International institutions come in many forms, and scholars have developed various ways to classify them. One important distinction is based on membership. Intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) have only states or government agencies as members. Examples include the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization. International non-governmental organisations (INGOs) consist of non-state actors such as civil society groups, advocacy networks, and professional associations. Examples include the International Red Cross, Greenpeace, and Amnesty International. Hybrid organisations have mixed membership that includes both states and non-state actors, such as the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

Another way to classify international institutions is by their scope and membership reach. Some institutions are universal in membership and general in purpose, such as the United Nations, which is open to all states and addresses a wide range of issues. Others are universal but limited to specific issues, such as the World Trade Organization, which focuses solely on trade. Still others are regional and general, such as the African Union or the European Union. Finally, some are regional and issue-specific, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization,



❑ Institutions, organisations, and regimes distinguished

4.1.2 Historical Origins and Evolution of International Institutions

- ❑ League of Nations failure; economic lessons of the 1930s

218



4.1.2.2 The Bretton Woods System

- ❑ Bretton Woods:
IMF, World Bank,
GATT origins

In July 1944, representatives from forty-four Allied nations gathered at Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, to design the postwar international economic order. This conference produced two landmark institutions: the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), later known as the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). A third pillar for international trade was also envisioned. The International Trade Organization was negotiated but never ratified by the United States. Instead, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), originally intended as a temporary arrangement, became the main framework for trade liberalisation until it was replaced by the World Trade Organization in 1995.

- ❑ Embedded liberalism:
balancing
openness
with national
autonomy

The Bretton Woods institutions reflected three main motivations. First, the lessons of the Great Depression and the war convinced leaders that international economic stability was a precondition for peace. Second, there was a practical need for institutions to reconstruct war-devastated economies and establish a stable monetary system to support open trade. Third, there was a desire to balance national policy autonomy with international cooperation. This compromise was embodied in the concept of embedded liberalism, which sought to combine liberal international economic principles — such as open trade and currency convertibility — with domestic policy space for governments to protect their societies through social welfare programs and macroeconomic management. The Bretton Woods system aimed to allow states to pursue full employment and social protection at home while participating in a cooperative, relatively open international economy.

4.1.2.3 Expansion and Transformation Since 1945

- ❑ Post-1945
institutional
expansion and
adaptive reform

The number and scope of international institutions expanded dramatically after World War II. The United Nations, established in 1945, became the central global political institution with nearly universal membership. Alongside the UN, dozens of specialised agencies were created or incorporated into the UN system to address issues such as health, education, labour standards, civil aviation, and telecommunications. Regional organisations also proliferated, including the European Economic Community (which later became the European Union), the Organization of American States, the African Union, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Over

time, many institutions adapted their missions significantly: the IMF reinvented itself after the fixed exchange rate system collapsed in the early 1970s, shifting to crisis lending and economic policy advice; the World Bank moved from European reconstruction to development lending through multiple waves of reform; and the GATT evolved into the WTO with a much stronger institutional and legal foundation. The end of the Cold War brought new challenges as former communist countries sought integration into global institutions, and new issues such as human rights, environmental protection, and humanitarian intervention gained prominence on the international agenda.

4.1.3 Theoretical Perspectives on International - Institutions

4.1.3.1 Why Do International Institutions Matter?

- ❑ Theory as a lens on institutional purpose

A central question in the study of international relations is whether international institutions matter at all, and if so, for whom. Different theoretical traditions offer sharply contrasting answers. Understanding these debates helps us see that institutions are not neutral technical arrangements but are deeply embedded in broader questions about power, interests, norms, and justice in world politics.

4.1.3.2 The Liberal Perspective

- ❑ Institutions reduce barriers to cooperation

Liberals view international institutions as essential responses to the problems of interdependence and cooperation among states. In this view, states are rational actors that recognise they cannot achieve their economic and security goals alone in an interconnected world. International institutions help states overcome barriers to cooperation, such as a lack of information, fears of cheating, and coordination problems. By providing rules, monitoring mechanisms, and dispute settlement procedures, institutions reduce uncertainty and transaction costs, making cooperation more likely and more stable. Institutions can also facilitate issue linkage, allowing states to make trade-offs across different areas and reach mutually beneficial agreements. Liberals tend to see institutions as serving the common interests of their members and promoting efficiency, stability, and welfare gains in the international system, though not necessarily equally.

4.1.3.3 The Realist Perspective

- ❑ Institutions as instruments of powerful states

Realists are sceptical of claims that international institutions significantly constrain or transform state behaviour. They view international politics as a struggle for power and security in an anarchic system without overarching authority. In this view, international institutions are merely instruments through which powerful states pursue their interests and project their power. The rules, voting structures, and agendas of institutions are shaped by the most powerful members, and when institutions cease to serve the interests of those powerful states, they are ignored, bypassed, or reformed. Realists point to the dominance of the United States and other major powers in institutions like the IMF, World Bank, and UN Security Council as evidence that institutions are vehicles for power politics rather than independent forces for cooperation.

4.1.3.4 The Constructivist Perspective

- ❑ Institutions as norm-setters that shape state identities

Constructivists focus on the role of ideas, norms, identities, and social processes in shaping international politics. They view international institutions not simply as constraints on pre-existing state interests, but as constitutive forces that help define what states are, what they want, and what actions are considered appropriate or legitimate. Institutions embody and diffuse norms such as sovereignty, human rights, democracy, and market-oriented economic policies. Through socialisation, persuasion, and the authority of expertise, institutions can change how states understand their interests and identities over time. Constructivists see institutions as both reflecting and shaping the intersubjective meanings, shared understandings, and collective identities that underpin international order, and note that as global norms and power distributions change, institutions themselves may change or their legitimacy may be contested.

4.1.3.5 Critical Approaches

- ❑ Institutions as sites of power, inequality, and potential contestation

Critical scholars, including Marxists, neo-Gramscians, feminists, and post-colonial theorists, question whether international institutions reproduce or challenge existing structures of inequality, domination, and injustice. These approaches emphasise that institutions are embedded in global power structures and often serve the interests of dominant states, classes, and groups. Critical political economists argue that the IMF and World Bank have promoted neoliberal



4.1.4 Major International Institutions: Roles and - Functions

The United Nations, founded in 1945, is the most comprehensive and visible international organisation. With 193 member states, it has near-universal membership and addresses a wide range of issues including peace and security, human rights, development, humanitarian assistance, and international law. The UN is often conceptualised as three overlapping entities: the intergovernmental arena where states negotiate and make decisions, the bureaucratic machinery of secretariats and agencies, and a broader network of non-governmental organisations, experts, and civil society actors that interact with and influence the UN.

- UN: universal membership, three overlapping entities

- General Assembly: deliberative; Security Council: binding but veto-constrained

- ❑ Secretary-General and specialised agencies extend UN reach

The UN Secretariat, headed by the Secretary-General, provides administrative support and implements UN programmes. The Secretary-General can play an important diplomatic and moral role, bringing issues to the attention of the Security Council and using the prestige of the office to promote peace and human rights, albeit without independent enforcement power. Other principal organs include the Economic and Social Council, which coordinates the UN's work on economic, social, and environmental issues and grants consultative status to many NGOs, and the International Court of Justice, which settles legal disputes between states. Beyond these main organs, the UN system includes numerous specialised agencies such as the World Health Organization, UNESCO, and UNICEF.

4.1.4.2 The International Monetary Fund

- ❑ IMF: from exchange rates to crisis lender and policy advisor

The International Monetary Fund was created at Bretton Woods to promote international monetary cooperation and exchange rate stability. Under the original Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates, the IMF provided short-term loans to countries experiencing balance of payments difficulties. When the fixed exchange rate system collapsed in the early 1970s, the IMF adapted by focusing on crisis management and economic policy advice. It played a central role in managing the debt crises of the 1980s in Latin America and Africa, the financial crises of the 1990s in Mexico, East Asia, Russia, and Argentina, and the global financial crisis of 2008 to 2009. In response to the global financial crisis, the G20 called for a significant expansion of IMF resources, tripling its lending capacity. The IMF also provides surveillance of the global economy, publishes influential reports and forecasts, and advocates for policy coordination among major economies.

- ❑ Structural adjustment: contested conditions with distributional costs

However, the IMF has been heavily criticised for the conditions it attaches to its loans. Structural adjustment programmes typically require borrowing countries to implement policies such as currency devaluation, cuts in government spending, reductions in the state's role in the economy, trade liberalisation, deregulation, and privatisation. Critics argue that these policies, often associated with the Washington Consensus, have harmed growth, worsened income distribution, undermined social services, and contributed to political instability in many developing countries. The IMF defends its approach by arguing that adjustment is necessary to correct unsustainable policies and has claimed that its conditionality has become more flexible over time, with greater attention to poverty reduction and social protection.

- ❑ Weighted voting privileges wealthy states; reform remains incomplete

Another major debate concerns the IMF's governance structure. Voting power is based on quota subscriptions roughly linked to economic size, giving the United States, Japan, China, and major European countries the largest shares of votes. The United States holds enough votes to effectively veto major decisions requiring supermajorities. Critics from developing countries argue that this weighted voting system underrepresents their voices and interests. Some reforms were agreed in 2008 and implemented later, but many observers see the changes as insufficient.

4.1.4.3 The World Bank

- ❑ World Bank Group: from reconstruction to global development finance

The World Bank began as a single institution, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, focused on financing the reconstruction of Europe after World War II. When the Marshall Plan took over European reconstruction, the Bank shifted its focus to development lending in poorer countries. Over time, the World Bank Group expanded to include several institutions: the International Development Association provides concessional loans and grants to the poorest countries; the International Finance Corporation supports private sector development; and the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency offers political risk insurance to investors. Today, the World Bank is the largest multilateral development institution, providing tens of billions of dollars annually in loans, grants, and technical assistance.

- ❑ Evolving development paradigms; persistent criticism of conditionality

The World Bank's approach to development has evolved significantly through distinct phases. In its early decades, it emphasised large infrastructure projects such as dams, roads, and power plants, assuming that economic growth would trickle down to reduce poverty. In the 1970s, under President Robert McNamara, the Bank adopted a basic needs strategy prioritising direct interventions to improve health, education, and rural livelihoods. In the 1980s, the Bank embraced structural adjustment lending aligned with the Washington Consensus agenda of liberalisation, privatisation, deregulation, and fiscal austerity. Since the late 1990s, the Bank has renewed its focus on poverty reduction, governance, the rule of law, and sustainable development. Critics argue that the Bank's projects and policies have often prioritised the interests of creditors, multinational corporations, and donors over the needs of local communities, and that conditionality has been too rigid and has distorted development priorities.

4.1.4.4 The World Trade Organization

- ❑ WTO: stronger successor to GATT with expanded legal reach

The World Trade Organization, established in 1995, is the successor to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. GATT, created in 1947, organised successive rounds of multilateral negotiations to reduce tariffs and other trade barriers. The WTO transformed the trade regime by creating a more formal organisation with a stronger legal foundation, expanding coverage to services and intellectual property, and establishing a more robust dispute settlement mechanism.

- ❑ Trade rules, Doha stalemate, and binding dispute settlement

The WTO performs several key functions. It provides a legal framework governing international trade based on principles such as non-discrimination, reciprocity, and transparency. It serves as a forum for multilateral trade negotiations; since its creation, the WTO has overseen the Doha Development Round, launched in 2001, though this round has stalled amid disagreements between developed and developing countries over agricultural subsidies and market access. The WTO also operates a dispute settlement system that allows member states to challenge each other's trade policies. Panels of experts examine disputes and issue rulings, which can authorise retaliatory tariffs if the losing party does not comply. This system is considered one of the WTO's major achievements because it provides a rule-based, relatively depoliticised mechanism for resolving trade conflicts.

- Consensus as nominal equality; informal power and regulatory chill

The WTO's decision-making formally operates by consensus. The consensus principle is sometimes praised as democratic because it gives each member, regardless of size, the ability to block decisions. However, critics argue that, in practice, powerful countries and blocs dominate negotiations through informal processes, coalition-building, and behind-the-scenes pressure, while smaller and poorer countries often lack the resources and expertise to fully participate. Critics also worry that WTO rules can constrain governments' ability to regulate in the public interest — for example, on environmental protection, labour standards, or food safety — if such regulations are challenged as trade barriers.

4.1.5 Power, Autonomy, and Pathologies of International Institutions

4.1.5.1 Power Within and Through Institutions

International institutions are not politically neutral arenas. Power operates within institutions in multiple ways.



must follow. By defining concepts and problems, institutions shape how actors understand and respond to issues.

4.1.5.3 Bureaucratic Pathologies

❑ Bureaucratic pathologies: rigidity, universalism, insulation, and internal conflict

International institutions are bureaucracies, and like all bureaucracies, they can develop pathologies that arise from internal culture, routines, and incentive structures. One common pathology is the irrationality of rationalisation, in which rules and procedures that were designed as means to achieve goals become ends in themselves, and organisations begin to reshape their missions to fit existing routines rather than adapting routines to fit the mission. Another pathology is bureaucratic universalism — the tendency to apply standardised rules and models across very different contexts without adequately considering local conditions, as seen in critiques of one-size-fits-all policy packages imposed by international financial institutions. Normalisation of deviance occurs when small exceptions to rules gradually become routine. Organisational insulation refers to the tendency of bureaucracies to become disconnected from feedback and resistant to learning. Finally, cultural contestation arises when different subunits hold conflicting norms and understandings of the mission, leading to incoherent policies and internal struggles.

4.1.6 Legitimacy, Democracy, and Accountability in Global Governance

4.1.6.1 The Democracy and Legitimacy Debate

❑ Democratic deficit: decisions without adequate accountability

A major ongoing debate concerns whether international institutions are legitimate and democratic. Legitimacy refers to the acceptance of an institution's authority as rightful and proper. Democracy involves meaningful participation, representation, accountability, and transparency. Critics argue that many international institutions suffer from a democratic deficit, meaning they make decisions that affect people's lives without adequate democratic accountability or participation.

4.1.6.2 The Statist Defence

Defenders of current institutional arrangements start from the principle that international institutions are accountable to member states, not directly to citizens. Legitimacy is derived from state consent: if sovereign states voluntarily join an institution and accept its authority, the institution is legitimate.



❑ Legitimacy through state consent, inclusive membership, and fair rules

Citizens exercise democratic control indirectly through their national governments. Supporters assess institutional democracy using three main criteria. First, representation as inclusiveness: an institution is democratic if membership is open to all states with a legitimate interest. By this measure, the IMF, World Bank, and WTO are broadly democratic because they have near-universal membership. Second, fair decision-making rules: weighted voting in financial institutions is defended as necessary because those who contribute the most capital bear the most risk and should have proportionate influence; consensus decision-making in the WTO is portrayed as highly democratic because every member can block decisions. Third, transparency: supporters point to reforms that have increased access to information and allowed for more public engagement, while acknowledging that some secrecy is necessary in negotiations.

4.1.6.3 Critical Challenges

❑ Conditionality, biased rules, and opacity undermine democratic legitimacy

Critics argue that the statist defence is inadequate in a globalised world where national autonomy is increasingly constrained by international rules and where many people are directly affected by decisions made in distant institutions. Several critical challenges are raised. First, erosion of sovereignty and imposed conditionality: IMF and World Bank loan conditions and WTO rules can severely limit domestic policy space in areas such as fiscal policy, social spending, industrial strategy, and regulation, undermining citizens' ability to shape their own economic policies through democratic processes. Second, biased representation and decision rules: weighted voting underrepresents poorer and smaller countries relative to their populations and the impact of decisions on them. Critics argue that those most affected by policies should have the strongest voice, and that restricting decision-making to governments ignores the interests of workers, communities, indigenous peoples, women's groups, and environmental organisations. Third, transparency and accountability deficits: many negotiations occur behind closed doors, with limited access to information and minimal public scrutiny, while ordinary citizens have little practical capacity to influence decisions made in international forums.

4.1.6.4 Reform and Persistent Tensions

Recognition has grown that legitimacy, effectiveness, and accountability are interconnected. Institutions perceived as

- ❑ Reform: incremental progress, structural resistance, G20 legitimacy gap

unfair or unresponsive may struggle to secure cooperation and compliance, especially when they ask countries to make difficult or costly adjustments. Some reforms have been implemented, such as the IMF quota and voice reforms that slightly increased the share of votes for emerging economies and developing countries, and G20 calls for greater representation of developing countries in Bretton Woods governance. However, critics argue that reforms have been slow, incremental, and insufficient, and that powerful countries resist meaningful changes that would dilute their influence. The G20 itself raises legitimacy questions because its membership is selective and self-appointed, not universal or based on a formal treaty, leaving most countries without a seat at the table.

4.1.7 Impact, Criticisms, and Contemporary Challenges

4.1.7.1 Shaping Norms and International Law

- ❑ Institutions codify and diffuse norms: humanitarian law, human rights, accountability, environment

International institutions have played crucial roles in creating and diffusing international norms and legal standards. The International Red Cross helped establish humanitarian law through its advocacy leading to the Geneva Conventions, which set binding rules for the treatment of wounded soldiers, prisoners of war, and civilians in armed conflict. The United Nations and associated bodies have been central in promoting human rights norms, beginning with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and continuing through numerous treaties on civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, as well as conventions against torture, genocide, and discrimination. The International Criminal Court represents a significant normative shift from the historical principle of leader immunity to the idea that individuals, including heads of state, can be held accountable for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. International environmental institutions have codified principles such as the precautionary principle, common but differentiated responsibilities, and sustainable development, which now shape global environmental governance.

4.1.7.2 Development, Crisis Management, and Stabilising Effects

International institutions directly influence development strategies and crisis responses. The World Bank and regional development banks provide financing, technical assistance, and policy advice that shape how governments approach poverty reduction, infrastructure investment, and economic reform. The



❑ Institutions manage crises, enable coordination, and stabilise the system

❑ Structural adjustment, atrocity failures, and policy rigidity as destabilising

❑ Historical design bias; slow adaptation to shifting global power

IMF provides emergency financing during balance-of-payments and financial crises, allowing governments to avoid disruptive adjustments or defaults. The World Health Organization coordinates international responses to disease outbreaks, as seen during the Ebola epidemic in West Africa, where WHO declared a public health emergency and mobilised international resources, expertise, and coordination mechanisms. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees provides protection and assistance to millions of displaced people. Supporters argue that these institutions stabilise the international system by providing predictability, managing conflicts, and facilitating cooperation. The WTO dispute settlement system, for instance, channels trade conflicts into legal procedures rather than unilateral retaliation, reducing the risk of trade wars.

Critics, however, argue that institutions can also be destabilising and harmful. Structural adjustment policies have been blamed for worsening poverty, inequality, and social unrest in many countries. Institutional failures, such as the inability of the UN Security Council to prevent or stop atrocities in Rwanda, Bosnia, and Syria, highlight the limits of institutions and the costs of inaction. The dominance of certain policy ideas within institutions can lock in approaches that are inappropriate or damaging, as when the IMF's initial response to the Asian financial crisis was criticised for deepening the downturn by imposing pro-cyclical austerity measures.

4.1.7.3 Representation, Neoliberalism, and the Sovereignty Paradox

One of the most persistent criticisms of international institutions is that they reflect and reinforce existing global inequalities. The Bretton Woods institutions and the UN Security Council were designed by and for the victorious Allied powers after World War II, with governance structures that privileged the United States, Western Europe, and the Soviet Union. Despite shifts in global economic power towards emerging economies such as China, India, Brazil, and others, institutional governance has been slow to adapt. The veto power in the Security Council, weighted voting in financial institutions, and unwritten rules about who leads major organisations continue to favour established powers. Developing countries and civil society groups have long demanded more equitable representation, but reforms face resistance from those who benefit from the status quo.

- ❑ Neoliberal policy lock-in constrains Southern development choices

A major line of criticism, especially from the Global South and critical scholars, is that international economic institutions have promoted a neoliberal model of development that prioritises free markets, privatisation, deregulation, and fiscal austerity over social protection, equity, and democratic choice. Even as the rhetoric of these institutions has shifted towards poverty reduction and sustainable development, critics argue that the underlying policy frameworks remain heavily market-oriented and constrain governments' ability to pursue alternative development strategies. WTO rules on intellectual property, investment, and services are criticised for locking in advantages for multinational corporations and limiting policy space for industrial development and public services.

- ❑ Sovereignty paradox: states create institutions that then constrain them

International institutions embody a fundamental tension: they are created by sovereign states and depend on state cooperation and consent, yet effective institutions must constrain state behaviour and enforce rules, which inevitably limits state sovereignty. This sovereignty paradox is at the heart of debates about supranationalism, global governance, and the future of the state system. The European Union represents the most advanced experiment in pooling sovereignty, though even within the EU tensions have led to crises including Brexit. At the global level, most institutions remain firmly intergovernmental, with states retaining ultimate authority, yet the growing density of international rules, expanding institutional mandates, and challenges that require collective action all push towards stronger and more autonomous institutions, creating ongoing political and intellectual controversies.

Summarised Overview

International institutions have become indispensable features of contemporary world politics. They provide forums for cooperation, mechanisms for managing conflicts, frameworks for trade and finance, standards for behaviour, and the capacity to address transnational problems, from pandemics to climate change. The major institutions examined in this unit — including the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization — shape the daily lives of billions of people and structure the choices available to governments.

Yet international institutions are also deeply contested. Debates rage over whether they primarily serve the interests of powerful states and global capital or genuinely promote cooperation and development for all. Questions about legitimacy, democracy, and accountability remain unresolved within the current state-centric international system.



International institutions suffer from internal pathologies and external constraints that limit their effectiveness and sometimes lead them to act in ways that contradict their stated missions. At the same time, the challenges of the twenty-first century — from global health emergencies to financial crises to climate change — make it difficult to imagine a world without institutionalised international cooperation.

Understanding international institutions requires recognising their complexity. They are at once arenas for state power politics, instruments through which norms and rules are created and diffused, bureaucratic organisations with their own dynamics and pathologies, and potential sites of resistance and reform. Different theoretical perspectives highlight different dimensions of institutions, and no single theory can capture their full significance. As global power shifts, new challenges emerge, and demands for greater equity and democracy grow, international institutions will continue to evolve. Whether they can adapt sufficiently to meet the needs of a diverse and interconnected world remains one of the central questions of international relations in our time.

Self-Assessment Questions

1. What is the difference between an intergovernmental organization (IGO) and an international non-governmental organization (INGO)? Give one example of each.
2. Why were the Bretton Woods institutions created in 1944, and what concept of “embedded liberalism” underpinned their design?
3. What are the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, and what special power do they hold? How does this power affect the Council’s ability to act?
4. According to the liberal perspective, why do states create international institutions? How does this differ from the realist explanation?
5. What is structural adjustment, and why has it been criticized by scholars and developing country governments?
6. What does the World Trade Organization do, and what is the significance of its dispute settlement mechanism?
7. What is meant by the term “democratic deficit” in relation to international institutions? Identify two specific criticisms that support this claim.
8. Name two ways international institutions can exercise independent power apart from direct state control.
9. What is a bureaucratic pathology? Define the concept and give one example from international institutions.

Assignment

1. Compare and contrast the roles and governance structures of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. How do their missions differ, and what criticisms do they share?
2. “International institutions are merely tools of powerful states.” Discuss this statement using examples from the UN Security Council, IMF, or WTO, and evaluate whether institutions have any autonomy from the states that created them.
3. Analyze the concept of “embedded liberalism” that shaped the Bretton Woods system. How did this compromise between national autonomy and international cooperation influence the design of postwar institutions, and to what extent does it survive today?
4. Examine the legitimacy and democracy debates surrounding international economic institutions. What are the main arguments for and against the claim that institutions like the IMF and WTO suffer from a democratic deficit?
5. Using the example of the 2014–2016 Ebola outbreak or another global crisis, explain how international institutions coordinate responses to transnational problems and what structural challenges they face in doing so effectively.
6. Evaluate the claim that international institutions have successfully promoted global norms in areas such as human rights, humanitarian law, or environmental protection. What factors contribute to the success or failure of norm diffusion through international organizations?

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

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creates winners and losers in complex ways, and requires unprecedented transformation over a very short time period. As traditional treaty-making has struggled, a bewildering variety of new governance arrangements has emerged. Cities are forming networks to share best practices. Corporations are setting their own climate standards. Regional governments are creating their own carbon trading systems. Civil society organisations are certifying which projects genuinely reduce emissions. This proliferation of actors and initiatives beyond the traditional state-centric model raises profound questions: Can this complex patchwork of initiatives really address a global problem? How do local experiments spread to create broader change? Why do some countries develop strong climate institutions while others do not?

Keywords

Transnational climate governance, Carbon markets, Climate institutions, Polycentric governance, Climate experiments, Nationally determined contributions, Paris Agreement, Emissions trading, Climate policy integration, Varieties of decarbonisation, Embedding mechanisms

Discussion

❑ Climate change as a governance challenge

Climate change represents one of the most significant challenges facing humanity today. The scientific evidence is clear that human activities, particularly the burning of fossil fuels, are warming the planet at an alarming rate. However, addressing this problem is not simply a technical or scientific challenge; it is fundamentally a governance challenge. Governance refers to the various ways that societies organise themselves to make collective decisions and take collective action. Climate governance encompasses all the rules, institutions, actors, and processes through which societies attempt to address climate change. This unit explores the complex and evolving landscape of climate governance, examining how governance arrangements have shifted from traditional top-down international treaties toward more diverse, multi-level, and experimental approaches, and investigating why different countries develop different types of climate institutions and why these institutions sometimes succeed and sometimes fail.



4.2.1 Definitions and Scope of Climate Governance

4.2.1.1 What Is Climate Governance?

❑ Climate governance beyond state and treaty

Climate governance can be understood as the sum total of all the mechanisms, processes, and institutions through which actors attempt to steer human behaviour toward addressing some aspect of the problem of climate change. This definition is intentionally broad because climate governance today involves far more than just government action or international treaties. It includes the actions of corporations setting emissions targets, cities developing climate action plans, banks deciding which projects to finance, and civil society organisations certifying which activities genuinely reduce greenhouse gases. Traditional approaches to global environmental problems focused primarily on international regimes — sets of principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actor expectations converge in a particular issue area. For climate change, the primary international regime has been built around the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, adopted in 1992, and the Kyoto Protocol of 1997. However, climate governance has evolved far beyond this traditional regime-centred approach to operate across multiple levels and involve multiple types of actors.

4.2.1.2 Transnational Climate Governance

❑ Transnational governance: non-state actors crossing borders

A particularly important development has been the rise of transnational climate governance. This term refers to governance arrangements where non-state or sub-state actors located in at least two states adhere to a common set of rules aimed at steering their behaviour toward shared public goals related to climate change. Unlike traditional international governance, which primarily involves nation-states negotiating with each other, transnational governance is created and operated by networks of cities, corporations, non-governmental organisations, and sub-national governments. The key distinguishing feature is that it crosses national boundaries but does not necessarily involve national governments as the primary actors. For example, when cities from different countries join a network to share best practices for improving building energy efficiency, or when corporations from multiple countries agree to report emissions according to a common standard, this represents transnational governance. By 2012, there were at least fourteen thousand instances of participation in transnational climate governance by sub-state and non-state actors across one hundred ninety-two

states, representing a massive expansion of climate governance beyond traditional state-to-state diplomacy.

4.2.1.3 Types of Climate Governance Initiatives

❑ Governance by information, standards, finance, and mixed actors

Climate governance initiatives can be categorised by the type of activity they perform. Information and networking schemes are designed to share knowledge and reduce information asymmetries. Standards and commitment schemes set and enforce specific rules about emissions reductions or climate-friendly practices. Operational schemes provide collective goods and build infrastructure that allows other governance schemes to function. Finance schemes aim to facilitate and shape flows of capital towards climate-friendly investments. Governance initiatives can also be classified by the types of actors involved: public or transgovernmental schemes comprised entirely of public actors, such as cities and regional governments; private or entrepreneurial schemes mainly involving non-state actors; and hybrid schemes with varying mixes of public and private actors. Significantly, entrepreneurial schemes now constitute roughly forty-six percent of all transnational climate governance initiatives, while hybrid schemes constitute forty percent and transgovernmental schemes only fourteen percent, meaning that eighty-six percent of all transnational climate governance schemes involve at least one non-state actor.

4.2.1.4 Climate Institutions Distinguished from Climate Policies

❑ Purpose-built, layered, and latent institutions; path dependence

It is important to distinguish between climate institutions and climate policies. Policies refer to specific decisions and actions taken to address climate change, such as a carbon tax or a renewable energy mandate. Institutions refer to the formal or informal procedures, routines, norms, and conventions embedded in the organisational structure of the polity or economy that shape how policies are made and implemented over time. Climate institutions can take several forms. Some are purpose-built, primarily and intentionally created to address climate change, such as a dedicated Climate Change Committee. Others emerge through layering, where climate objectives are added onto institutions established for other purposes, such as an energy ministry taking on new responsibilities for reducing emissions. Finally, some institutions are latent, affecting climate outcomes even when not intentionally focused on climate change, such as existing institutions governing forests or fossil fuel extraction. The process through which climate objectives



- UNFCCC to Kyoto: rise and limits of binding commitments

Climate governance emerged as a distinct field in the early 1990s with the adoption of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. This treaty established the basic framework for international cooperation, recognising climate change as a common concern of humankind and establishing the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, meaning that while all countries should act, developed countries bear greater historical responsibility and have greater capacity. The regime approach reached its peak with the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, which set legally binding emissions reduction targets for industrialised countries and introduced three market-based flexibility mechanisms: emissions trading, joint implementation (allowing countries to invest in emissions reductions in other industrialised countries), and the Clean Development Mechanism (allowing investment in reduction projects in developing countries). However, the United States never ratified Kyoto, the Protocol excluded major developing emitters like China and India, and even ratifying countries often struggled to meet commitments. The Copenhagen climate conference in 2009 was widely seen as a failure when negotiators could not agree on a binding successor agreement.

- ❑ Paris Agreement: bottom-up NDCs and proliferating transnational action

240

transnational governance schemes appeared in the early 1990s and grew slowly through the 1990s, but shortly after Kyoto was signed in 1997, transnational climate governance grew exponentially throughout the 2000s. This proliferation has been described as a "Cambrian explosion" in climate institutions, creating what scholars call a global climate governance complex characterised by fragmentation and institutional multiplicity.

4.2.2.3 The Rise of Experimental Governance

An important dimension of this evolution has been the embrace of experimentation as a mode of climate governance. After the failure of Copenhagen and given the slow pace of traditional treaty-making, attention shifted towards innovative local and transnational initiatives. Over six hundred empirical examples of urban climate change experiments have been documented, ranging from zero-carbon housing projects on the outskirts of Bangalore to neighbourhood energy efficiency programmes in Philadelphia to climate awareness hubs in Hong Kong. Experimentation is increasingly advocated as an approach better suited to the complex, uncertain, and contested nature of climate change: rather than designing perfect policies from the centre, experimental governance emphasises learning by doing, with local initiatives trying out new approaches that can potentially spread to other contexts. The Paris Agreement explicitly embraced this polycentric approach by giving unprecedented prominence to sub- and non-state actors, creating a web portal to record and track their actions, and appointing High-Level Champions to promote transnational governance initiatives. This represents a fundamental transformation from the governance model of the 1990s, though whether this diverse, decentralised approach can generate the scale and speed of emissions reductions needed remains an open and pressing question.

❑ Experimentation and polycentrism after Copenhagen

4.2.3 The Interplay Between Domestic and Transnational Climate Governance

A crucial question in climate governance is how domestic and transnational governance relate to each other. Are they substitutes or complements? The evidence suggests that, more often than not, these two realms are complementary. When domestic climate legislation is more developed and supportive, it actually encourages more active participation in transnational climate governance because it frees up resources and creates opportunities for international cooperation. Rather than a

❑ Domestic and transnational governance as complements



simple hydraulic model where actors divide fixed resources between domestic lobbying and transnational action, domestic policy success creates positive feedback loops: when policies are adopted domestically, they create new constituencies and capacities that can then pursue transnational strategies. For example, when a country develops a strong renewable energy industry through domestic support policies, companies in that industry gain both motivation and capacity to engage in transnational networks to export their expertise and expand their markets.

- ❑ Civil society, legislation, and corporate culture drive participation

Several domestic factors significantly influence how actively actors from a country participate in transnational climate governance. Empirical analysis shows that domestic climate legislation and the presence of environmental non-governmental organisations are significant positive predictors of transnational participation. Interestingly, geographic distance between countries and bilateral trade volumes do not substantially affect the formation of transnational climate governance ties, suggesting that transaction costs related to geography and trade are less important than domestic policy conditions. The strength of domestic civil society is particularly important: cities engage in transnational climate initiatives primarily because they are responsive to their local communities and advocacy groups. For businesses, corporate culture and sensitivity to domestic regulations matter more than market incentives alone, with the most important determinant of corporate participation being the presence of internal champions of sustainable business practices within organisations.

4.2.4 Varieties of Climate Governance: Why Countries Differ

4.2.4.1 The Path-Dependent Emergence of Climate Institutions

Climate institutions do not emerge in a vacuum. They are shaped by the specific political, economic, and cultural contexts of each country in a path-dependent process, meaning that decisions and institutional arrangements established in the past constrain and shape current possibilities. This results in national climate institutions often appearing quite different from one country to another, even when countries face similar challenges or make similar international commitments. Understanding these differences requires analysing how three sets of factors interact: domestic political institutions, international processes

- ❑ Path dependence shapes diverse national institutions

and drivers, and bureaucratic patterns and practices. The Paris Agreement's emphasis on nationally determined contributions reflects an acceptance of this diversity, allowing countries to develop governance approaches suited to their circumstances. However, this raises important questions about whether certain institutional forms work better than others and under what conditions different approaches succeed.

4.2.4.2 Domestic Political Institutions as Mediating Factors

The structure of domestic political institutions significantly shapes climate policy outcomes. Proportional representation electoral systems may provide more favourable conditions for climate policy than majoritarian systems because they decrease electoral competitiveness and allow for better representation of voters who prioritise environmental issues. Corporatist political arrangements, where major economic interests are formally organised and consulted in policymaking, are more likely to yield stable climate policy than pluralist arrangements because corporatism opens the door to negotiating compensation for potential losers from climate policies. The number of veto points in a political system also matters: systems with more veto points tend to produce weaker and later climate policies because any policy must satisfy more actors with potentially divergent interests. However, once policies do emerge, they tend to be more durable because they are harder to unwind. This helps explain patterns in the United States, where omnibus climate legislation has repeatedly failed because proponents must effectively control multiple branches of government simultaneously.

❑ Electoral systems, corporatism, and veto points shape policy

The relationship between regime type and climate action is complex. Earlier research suggested that democratic regimes implement more climate policies and emit fewer emissions than authoritarian ones. However, more recent research suggests the driving factor may be the level of corruption, which tends to be lower in democracies, rather than democracy per se. Some authoritarian countries like China have developed relatively strong climate institutions despite lacking democratic accountability, suggesting that state capacity and political will may be as important as regime type.

❑ Democracy, corruption, and state capacity interact

4.2.4.3 International Processes as Drivers

International factors influence domestic climate institutions through three main pathways. First, climate negotiation processes can influence domestic contexts through a two-level



❑ Two-level games, obligation-driven institutions, and model diffusion

game: national leaders must simultaneously seek international agreement while ensuring that any agreement falls within domestically acceptable bounds. This creates opportunities for international commitments to shift domestic politics, as leaders use external pressures to justify domestic action that might otherwise face resistance. Second, international forces operate through the creation of domestic institutions to meet international obligations, such as monitoring and reporting systems required by international agreements, which can provide political openings for domestic climate advocates. Third, international factors operate through the diffusion of ideas and institutional models: the United Kingdom's Climate Change Act has been particularly influential, inspiring legislation in Ireland, Finland, and Mexico, though such diffusion raises questions about whether institutions effective in one context will be effective when transplanted elsewhere. Crucially, however, international pressures only translate into domestic institutional change when they align with domestic political conditions, as seen in both China and India, where international pressure contributed to institutional development only when it resonated with existing domestic agendas.

4.2.4.4 Bureaucratic Patterns and State Capacity

❑ Capacity, autonomy, and inter-ministerial coordination matter

The structure and capacity of bureaucracies significantly shape how climate institutions emerge and function. Countries with robust professional bureaucracies are better positioned to bring about transformation, but strong bureaucracies are not sufficient on their own. If there is too much cohesiveness within bureaucratic units but poor coordination across them, this can actually undermine transformation by creating silos. State capacity, at the most basic level, means the technical expertise to design and implement effective policies, a constraint particularly acute in many developing countries. Deeper dimensions relate to bureaucratic autonomy and the ability of the state to pursue long-term goals even in the face of opposition from powerful interests such as fossil fuel industries. The United Kingdom's Climate Change Committee illustrates how bureaucratic design can matter: established as an independent body, it survived bureaucratic politics while maintaining strong linkages with business and environmental constituencies, allowing it to operate as a missionary institution actively promoting its agenda. In contrast, India demonstrates how inter-ministerial hierarchies and low capacity can limit institutional effectiveness, with the environment ministry having limited ability to engage more powerful sectoral ministries.

4.2.4.5 Four Varieties of Climate Governance

Countries can be mapped along two key dimensions to create a typology of climate governance varieties. The first dimension is the dominant climate politics narrative: mitigation-centric narratives frame policy around targets and emissions reductions, while embedded climate narratives understand climate change as tied to other objectives such as job creation, energy security, or sustainable development. The second dimension is the extent of political polarization around climate change, ranging from low polarization (broad consensus or low salience) to high polarization (intense political conflict). These two dimensions create four varieties of climate governance.

❑ Four varieties: opportunistic, sectoral, unstable, and strategic

Opportunistic institutions emerge where climate politics are embedded in other concerns and polarization is low. International pressures are important drivers, and institutions tend to layer climate objectives onto existing structures, guided by opportunities to deploy climate change in service of other domestic agendas. India exemplifies this pattern. Unstable sectoral institutions develop where climate politics are embedded but polarization is high, typically arising from contentious sectoral politics surrounding high-emitting sectors; Brazil and South Africa exemplify this pattern. Unstable climate institutions arise where mitigation-centric framings have taken hold but politics are partisan and contested, as seen in the United States and Australia, where climate institutions have repeatedly been created, dismantled, and recreated as political control has shifted. Strategic climate institutions develop where there is broad political consensus and low conflict, enabling strategic, long-term thinking about economy-wide emissions reductions, as observed in the United Kingdom, Germany, and China.

❑ Context-specific design over universal templates

These varieties have important implications for both understanding and supporting climate action. There is no one-size-fits-all approach: institutions that work well in climate consensus countries may be inappropriate or ineffective in high-polarization or embedded-narrative contexts. In countries with favourable consensus, institutions explicitly framed around mitigation targets and carbon budgets are viable and useful. In non-consensus countries, attempting to build mitigation-centric institutions may be counterproductive; focusing on embedded institutions that support sectoral transitions — framed around energy security, air quality, or economic development — may advance climate goals more effectively. International support for climate governance should therefore be tailored to national



contexts rather than promoting a universal institutional template.

4.2.5 Climate Governance Experiments and Embedding

4.2.5.1 The Experimental Turn in Climate - Governance

- ❑ Experiments as trial-and-error responses to wicked problem

Following the disappointments of Copenhagen and the slow pace of traditional treaty-making, attention in climate governance has increasingly turned toward experimentation. Climate governance experiments are purposive interventions that try out new ideas and methods in contexts of uncertainty, aiming to respond to the imperatives of mitigating and adapting to climate change by testing approaches on a smaller scale before potential wider adoption. The rationale is compelling: climate change is a wicked problem resisting uniform, predetermined solutions because it is characterised by shifting problem interpretations, technical uncertainty, and political contestation. Over six hundred urban climate change experiments have been documented, from innovative zero-carbon housing projects in Bangalore to neighbourhood energy efficiency programmes in Philadelphia to hubs for public responses to climate change in Hong Kong. These experiments share common features: they involve trial-and-error testing, often operate outside the bounds of the traditional international climate regime, cross jurisdictional boundaries bringing together diverse actors, and vary in levels of formality and deliberate control. Polycentric governance — systems with multiple governing authorities at different scales acting independently to craft rules without central coordination — provides the theoretical framework within which experimental governance is most explicitly advocated.

4.2.5.2 The Challenge: What Lies Beyond - Experiments?

- ❑ Temporal, spatial, and structural embedding undertheorised

While there is growing enthusiasm about climate experiments, a critical question remains largely unanswered: what happens beyond the experiment? How do experimental initiatives generate influence beyond their immediate boundaries? Most experiments are time-bound projects. When funding ends, political priorities change, or actor networks disperse, experiments may simply fade away. For the experimental turn to contribute meaningfully to addressing climate change, there must be processes through which experimental outcomes

become embedded in broader systems. This question has three dimensions. Temporally, the question is what happens after an experiment ends — do practices, knowledge, or networks persist and influence subsequent behaviour? Spatially, the question is whether innovations spread to other cities, regions, or countries. Structurally, the question is how multiple experiments add up — do they collectively contribute to transforming systems and governance regimes, or do they remain isolated initiatives? It is often assumed that proliferating local initiatives will naturally expand or add up to broader systemic change. However, the processes through which this might occur are undertheorised, and most experiments will not achieve significant wider impact.

4.2.5.3 Governance Architecture: Polycentric vs Coordinated

❑ Polycentrism: flexibility vs fragmentation and accountability

The current landscape of climate governance is highly polycentric, with authority dispersed across international organisations, national governments, subnational jurisdictions, cities, corporations, non-governmental organisations, and hybrid partnerships. Advocates of polycentric climate governance argue it enables experimentation and learning across multiple sites, accommodates diverse contexts and priorities, allows action to proceed where there is political will even without comprehensive agreement, and may be more resilient than monocentric systems because failure at one site does not cascade to the whole. Critics, however, raise concerns about fragmentation, coordination failures, and accountability gaps: without central coordination, there may be duplication of effort in some areas while other needs go unaddressed; polycentric systems make it difficult to ensure the sum of decentralised actions will be adequate to achieve collective goals; and accountability becomes diffuse when multiple actors share responsibility but none can be held singularly responsible for outcomes. The Paris Agreement represents a hybrid attempt to harness polycentric dynamics within a multilateral framework, creating nationally determined contributions and a global stocktake while attempting to ratchet up ambition over time through transparency and periodic review. Vertical coordination across scales from local to global and horizontal coordination among actors at similar scales both remain persistently challenging in practice.



4.2.6.1 Legitimacy and Democratic Accountability Deficits

One fundamental criticism of contemporary climate governance concerns legitimacy and democratic accountability. When non-state actors and transnational networks make and enforce rules about climate action, by what authority do they act, and how can they be held accountable? Traditional democratic accountability operates through electoral mechanisms where citizens choose representatives who make laws and can be removed from office if citizens disapprove. This model does not readily apply to non-state climate governance: corporate-led initiatives are accountable to shareholders, non-governmental organisation-led initiatives may claim to represent broader publics but lack electoral legitimacy, and transnational networks often lack clear decision-making procedures and transparency. Different governance arrangements claim legitimacy through different mechanisms — some through inclusive participation (input legitimacy), others through effective achievement of outcomes (output legitimacy), and still others through technical knowledge and credibility (expert legitimacy). These different legitimacy bases can conflict: inclusive participation may slow decision-making; expert-driven processes may lack political legitimacy; and effectiveness claims are often difficult to verify.

Climate governance arrangements often reproduce and sometimes exacerbate existing inequalities. Transnational climate governance networks are densest among wealthy actors from developed countries, meaning governance may reflect the priorities and interests of wealthy actors more than those of vulnerable populations most affected by climate change. Actors from developing countries often lack the resources to participate meaningfully. Carbon markets raise particularly acute justice concerns: offset markets allow wealthy countries and entities to continue emitting by purchasing credits from projects in developing countries, which critics describe as a new form of colonialism where wealthy actors appropriate environmental space in poorer countries rather than changing their own behaviours. Projects generating offsets sometimes displace local communities, restrict access to resources, or concentrate benefits among elites rather than broader populations. Climate governance initiatives focused on mitigation may also give

248



insufficient attention to adaptation and loss and damage, which are more pressing concerns for many vulnerable countries. Contentious distributional questions also remain unresolved regarding how to allocate responsibility between historical and current emissions and between nations and individuals at different income levels.

4.2.6.3 Fragmentation, Coordination Failures, and Power Asymmetries

The fragmented nature of contemporary climate governance creates coordination challenges. With thousands of initiatives operating independently, there is potential for duplication, gaps, and conflicts. Resources may flow toward visible or funder-attractive activities rather than those most needed. Incompatible standards and approaches may impede the scaling of solutions. Fragmentation also makes it nearly impossible to determine who is responsible for insufficient aggregate progress, as responsibility is diffused across many actors and initiatives: countries may point to subnational initiatives as evidence of action while failing to adopt ambitious national policies, and corporations may highlight voluntary commitments while lobbying against mandatory regulations. Climate governance arrangements additionally reflect and may reproduce existing power asymmetries: corporations with resources and expertise often play disproportionate roles in setting standards and shaping governance arrangements, creating risks of corporate capture where governance serves corporate interests more than public interests. Industry-led initiatives may establish weak standards that provide public relations benefits without requiring significant change. However, power dynamics are complex and contestable: some corporations genuinely advance climate action, civil society organisations exercise power through moral authority and mobilisation, and states retain ultimate authority to establish binding regulations. Transparency about who influences governance decisions and on what basis is essential but often lacking.

❑ Fragmentation, diffuse responsibility, and corporate capture risks



Summarised Overview

Climate governance has undergone remarkable transformation in recent decades. From an initial focus on top-down international treaties with binding emissions targets, the field has evolved toward more diverse, multilevel, experimental approaches involving myriad actors and initiatives. This evolution reflects both the persistent difficulties of achieving comprehensive international agreements and a growing recognition that addressing climate change requires transforming complex economic and social systems in context-specific ways.

Understanding contemporary climate governance requires moving beyond state-centric frameworks that assume governance occurs primarily through treaties and national policies. Transnational networks of cities, corporations, and civil society organisations now play crucial roles in setting standards, mobilising resources, building capacity, and demonstrating alternatives. The Paris Agreement's bottom-up architecture of nationally determined contributions reflects a fundamental shift from the Kyoto model, embracing diversity while attempting to ratchet up ambition through transparency and periodic review.

However, this decentralised, polycentric approach faces significant challenges. Coordination is difficult when authority is fragmented across numerous independent initiatives. Accountability mechanisms are often weak when responsibility is diffused. Inequalities persist when participation requires resources that many actors lack. Legitimate concerns exist about corporate capture and the concentration of governance influence among wealthy actors and institutions. Fundamental questions remain about whether voluntary, experimental approaches can generate transformation at the pace and scale the climate crisis demands.

The emergence and effectiveness of climate institutions depend heavily on domestic context. Different countries develop varying forms of climate governance based on their political institutions, climate political narratives, and degrees of polarization. Recognising this diversity is essential for understanding why global climate governance appears as it does and for designing effective support for climate action across different contexts. International support must be tailored to national circumstances rather than promoting universal institutional templates that may succeed in one context but fail in another.

Self-Assessment Questions

1. What is transnational climate governance, and how does it differ from traditional international climate governance through treaties and agreements?

2. Explain why domestic climate policies and transnational climate governance tend to be complementary rather than substitutes for each other. What domestic factors most strongly predict transnational participation?
3. What are the four varieties of climate governance identified in the framework, and what two dimensions determine which variety emerges in a particular country?
4. What is the difference between purpose-built, layered, and latent climate institutions? Why does this distinction matter for understanding how climate governance develops?
5. What does it mean for climate governance experiments to generate broader influence beyond their immediate boundaries? Identify the three dimensions along which this challenge arises.
6. Why have attempts to create new coordinating bodies for climate governance across sectors and scales generally had limited success? What structural factors explain this pattern?
7. What are the main criticisms regarding legitimacy and democratic accountability in transnational climate governance arrangements? How do different governance arrangements claim legitimacy?
8. How do proportional representation electoral systems and corporatist political arrangements potentially affect climate policy outcomes compared to majoritarian and pluralist systems?
9. What is polycentric governance, and what are the main arguments both for and against it as an approach to addressing the global climate crisis?

Assignment

1. Analyze how domestic political institutions in your own country (or a country you select) have shaped the emergence and character of climate institutions. Which of the four varieties of climate governance best describes your chosen country, and why?
2. Compare and contrast the climate governance approaches of two countries that represent different varieties of climate governance. What explains the differences in their institutional arrangements, political narratives, and degrees of polarization?
3. Evaluate the role of carbon markets in global climate governance. Do the benefits of market-based mechanisms outweigh the concerns about legitimacy, accountability, justice, and environmental effectiveness? Defend your position with evidence.



4. Critically examine the claim that polycentric climate governance is better suited to addressing climate change than traditional top-down international agreements. What evidence supports or challenges this claim, and what coordination mechanisms might bridge the gap between the two?
5. Assess the relationship between the Paris Agreement's bottom-up, nationally determined contribution approach and the proliferation of transnational climate governance initiatives. Are these mutually reinforcing or potentially in tension?
6. Discuss the equity and justice dimensions of current climate governance arrangements. How might climate governance be restructured to better address concerns about inequality, participation, historical responsibility, and the needs of the most climate-vulnerable countries?

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.



SGOU

UNIT 3

Regional Organization and Governance

Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of this unit, learners will be able to:

- explain the key concepts of regional organisations, regional governance, and regionalism, and distinguish between different types of regional arrangements
- analyse the historical evolution of regional organisations from post-World War II security alliances to contemporary governance structures
- evaluate the roles and functions of major regional organisations such as the EU, ASEAN, African Union, and SAARC in promoting integration, cooperation, and conflict management
- critically examine the challenges facing regional organisations

Background

Imagine a world where neighbouring countries that once fought bitter wars now share a common currency, allow free movement of people across borders, and jointly make decisions about their future. This is not a utopian dream but the reality of regional integration in today's world. Regional organisations have become powerful actors that shape how countries interact, trade, and resolve conflicts within their geographical neighbourhoods.

Consider the journey of Southeast Asian nations. In the 1960s, the region was torn by ideological conflicts, territorial disputes, and mutual suspicion. Countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia were engaged in armed confrontation. Yet today, these same nations work together through ASEAN, promoting economic cooperation and maintaining peace. Similarly, in Europe, countries that fought two devastating world wars now form the European Union, sharing political institutions and economic policies. In Africa, the African Union works to address conflicts and promote development across the continent. These transformations did not happen by accident but through deliberate efforts at regional cooperation and governance.



Regional organisations represent one of the most significant developments in international relations since World War II. They demonstrate that countries can overcome historical animosities and work together for common goals. Understanding how these organisations function, what they achieve, and the challenges they face is essential for anyone studying international relations today. This unit explores the fascinating world of regional organisations and governance, examining how groups of countries come together to address shared challenges and pursue collective interests in an increasingly interconnected world.

Keywords

Regional Governance, Regionalism, Regional Integration, Security Community, ASEAN Way, Sovereignty, Non-interference, Economic Integration, Conflict Management, Supranationalism, Intergovernmentalism

Discussion

❑ Regional vs. global organisations

Regional organisations have emerged as important actors in the international system. These organisations bring together countries from specific geographical areas to address common challenges and pursue shared objectives. While global organisations like the United Nations include countries from around the world, regional organisations focus on specific regions such as Europe, Southeast Asia, Africa, or Latin America.

❑ Regional level fills governance gap

The study of regional organisations has grown significantly since the end of the Cold War. Scholars and policymakers increasingly recognise that many problems are best addressed at the regional level—between the purely national and the truly global. Issues such as trade, security threats, environmental challenges, and migration often affect clusters of neighbouring countries more intensely than they affect distant nations. Regional organisations provide frameworks for cooperation that can be more flexible and responsive than global institutions while offering advantages that individual countries cannot achieve alone.

❑ Formal institutions for regional cooperation

4.3.1 Definitions and Scope

4.3.1.1 Understanding Regional Organisations

A regional organisation is a formal institution that brings together countries from a specific geographical area to pursue

common goals. These organisations are established through treaties or agreements among member states. They create rules, procedures, and sometimes permanent institutions to facilitate cooperation among their members.

- ❑ Geography defines membership and focus

Regional organisations differ from global organisations in their membership and focus. While global organisations like the United Nations or World Trade Organisation include countries from all regions, regional organisations limit membership to countries within a defined geographical area. This geographical focus allows regional organisations to address issues that are particularly relevant to their specific region.

- ❑ Regions are contested, not self-evident

The term 'region' itself requires careful definition. A region is not simply any collection of neighbouring countries. Rather, a region consists of countries that share geographical proximity and are linked by common historical experiences, cultural connections, or patterns of interaction that are more intense within the region than with outside countries. The boundaries of regions are not always clear-cut and can be contested. For example, is Turkey part of Europe or the Middle East? Does Afghanistan belong to South Asia or Central Asia?

4.3.1.2 Types of Regional Organisations

- ❑ Security, economic, or multi-purpose focus

Regional organisations can be classified by their primary focus. Security organisations, such as NATO, focus on defence and collective security. Economic organisations, such as the European Free Trade Association, promote trade and economic integration. However, many regional organisations pursue multiple objectives simultaneously: the European Union addresses both economic integration and political cooperation, while ASEAN works on economic development alongside security and political issues.

- ❑ Supranational vs. intergovernmental structures

Another way to classify regional organisations is by their institutional structure. Some organisations have strong supranational institutions with the power to make binding decisions on member states. The European Union represents the strongest example of this model. Other organisations operate on a strictly intergovernmental basis, where all decisions require agreement among member governments, and the organisation has no independent authority. ASEAN follows this intergovernmental model, with decisions made by consensus among member states.



4.3.1.3 Regional Governance and Regionalism

- ❑ Governance: formal and informal processes

The concept of regional governance refers to the processes and institutions through which regional issues are managed and collective decisions are made. Regional governance involves not just formal organisations but also informal practices, norms, and networks that shape regional cooperation. It encompasses the rules, procedures, and institutions that guide interaction among states in a region.

- ❑ Old vs. new regionalism distinguished

Regionalism refers to the broader process through which regions are constructed and regional cooperation is promoted. Scholars distinguish between 'old regionalism' and 'new regionalism.' Old regionalism, characteristic of the Cold War period, was primarily driven by security concerns and often involved outside powers. New regionalism, emerging after the Cold War, is more diverse in its objectives and involves a wider range of actors beyond governments.

- ❑ Integration ranges from trade to sovereignty

Regional integration refers specifically to processes that bring countries in a region into closer economic, political, or social relationships. Economic integration can range from free trade areas—where countries remove tariffs on trade with each other—to customs unions, common markets, and ultimately economic unions where countries harmonise their economic policies. Political integration involves creating common political institutions and potentially sharing sovereignty in certain areas.

4.3.2 History and Evolution

4.3.2.1 Post-World War II Foundations

- ❑ ECSC made war economically impossible

The development of regional organisations accelerated after World War II. The devastation caused by two world wars led many European leaders to conclude that a new approach to international relations was necessary. The European Coal and Steel Community, established in 1951, brought together France, Germany, Italy, and the Benelux countries to jointly manage their coal and steel industries. This organisation aimed to make war between France and Germany—historic enemies—economically and politically impossible.

The ECSC represented a revolutionary approach to international cooperation. Member states agreed to pool sovereignty in specific economic sectors and created

- ❑ ECSC model inspired global regionalism

- ❑ Cold War drove security-focused regionalism

- ❑ EU expanded and deepened post-Cold War

- ❑ ASEAN deepened and widened cooperation

- ❑ AU moved beyond non-interference

supranational institutions with independent authority. This model would eventually evolve into the European Economic Community and later the European Union. The success of European integration inspired regionalism in other parts of the world, although other regions developed their own distinct models of cooperation.

During the Cold War, many regional organisations emerged as part of the broader East-West rivalry. The United States promoted regional organisations in various parts of the world as part of its containment strategy against Soviet communism, including military alliances like NATO and SEATO. The Soviet Union similarly encouraged regional cooperation among socialist countries through organisations like the Warsaw Pact and COMECON.

4.3.2.2 Post-Cold War Expansion

The end of the Cold War brought a new wave of regionalism. With ideological rivalry no longer dominating international politics, countries had greater freedom to pursue regional cooperation based on their own interests. In Europe, the European Community transformed into the European Union and expanded to eventually include twenty-seven countries. This expansion incorporated formerly communist countries from Central and Eastern Europe, uniting most of the continent in a single regional organisation. The EU also deepened its integration, creating a single currency and expanding its authority over areas such as justice and home affairs.

In Southeast Asia, ASEAN expanded from its original five members to include all ten countries of the region. The organisation began pursuing economic integration through the ASEAN Free Trade Area and later the ASEAN Economic Community. ASEAN also became the hub for wider regional cooperation in East Asia through frameworks like ASEAN Plus Three and the East Asia Summit.

4.3.2.3 Contemporary Developments

In the twenty-first century, regional organisations continue to evolve. Africa saw the transformation of the Organisation of African Unity into the African Union in 2002. The AU has a more ambitious mandate than its predecessor, including the authority to intervene in member states in cases of genocide, war crimes, or crimes against humanity—a significant departure



- Regional proliferation across continents

❑ Forums build political relationships

- EU coordinates foreign policy positions

❑ Democracy and human rights promoted regionally

Regional organisations can also promote common political values among their members. Many regional organisations now include commitments to democracy and human rights in their founding documents. The African Union's Constitutive Act includes provisions allowing the organisation to intervene in member states in cases of genocide or crimes against humanity. The Organisation of American States has mechanisms for responding to threats to democracy in member states. These provisions represent attempts to move beyond the strict principle of non-interference that has traditionally governed relations between states.

- ❑ Rhetoric often exceeds actual enforcement

The promotion of democracy and human rights through regional organisations raises complex questions. Critics argue that regional organisations dominated by non-democratic governments may use the rhetoric of democracy without genuine commitment. The principle of non-interference remains strong in many regions, limiting what regional organisations can actually do when member states violate democratic norms or human rights. Nevertheless, the inclusion of these norms in regional charters represents a significant normative development.

4.3.3.2 Economic Integration and Development

- ❑ Economic cooperation is core function

Economic cooperation forms a central function of most regional organisations. At the most basic level, regional organisations facilitate dialogue on economic issues and provide information that helps member states coordinate their economic policies. More ambitiously, many regional organisations promote economic integration through the reduction or elimination of barriers to trade and investment among member states.

- ❑ Integration deepens through staged progression

Economic integration typically proceeds through several stages. A free trade area eliminates tariffs and quotas on trade among member countries while allowing each country to maintain its own trade policies toward non-members. A customs union goes further by establishing a common external tariff. A common market allows for the free movement of workers and capital. An economic union involves the harmonisation of economic policies and potentially a common currency.

- ❑ EU leads; others achieve partial integration

The European Union represents the most advanced example of economic integration, with a single market allowing the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people. Many EU countries also share the euro, which is managed by the European Central Bank. Most other regional organisations have achieved less extensive economic integration. ASEAN has made progress toward a free trade area and aspires to an ASEAN Economic Community, but significant barriers remain. MERCOSUR has created a customs union among its core members, although implementation has been incomplete.

- ❑ Development cooperation supplements economic integration

Regional organisations also engage in development cooperation, particularly in regions where many member states are developing countries. This can involve coordinating development strategies, promoting regional infrastructure



- ❑ Dialogue prevents conflict escalation

- Mechanisms range from diplomacy to deployment

- Security communities eliminate intra-regional war

Regional-UN security roles remain contested

262

4.3.4 Relationship Between Regional and Global Governance

4.3.4.1 Complementary Functions

Regional governance and global governance can complement each other in addressing international challenges. Regional organisations may be better positioned than global institutions to deal with certain issues that primarily affect a specific region. Countries in a region often have a more direct interest in resolving regional problems and may be more willing to commit resources to regional solutions. The principle of subsidiarity suggests that issues should be addressed at the most appropriate level of governance—local, national, regional, or global.

- ❑ Subsidiarity justifies regional governance

- ❑ Regional cooperation precedes global cooperation

Regional organisations can serve as building blocks for global governance. Countries may find it easier to cooperate first at the regional level before engaging in broader global cooperation. Regional agreements can serve as testing grounds for policies that might later be adopted globally. Regional organisations also provide additional forums for countries to coordinate their positions before engaging in global negotiations.

4.3.4.2 Tensions and Competition

The relationship between regional and global governance is not always harmonious. Tensions can arise when regional approaches conflict with global norms or when regional organisations compete with global institutions for authority. Regional trade agreements, for example, may discriminate against countries outside the region, potentially undermining the multilateral trading system based on non-discrimination. The proliferation of overlapping regional trade agreements has created a complex web of rules sometimes described as a 'spaghetti bowl.'

- ❑ Regional rules can fragment global governance

- ❑ Power dynamics complicate governance relationships

Regional organisations may serve as vehicles for regional powers to assert influence in their neighbourhoods, potentially challenging global governance institutions. Critics argue that powerful states may use regional organisations to control weaker neighbours while claiming to respect sovereignty and non-interference. The relationship between regional and global governance thus involves questions of power and legitimacy as well as functional effectiveness.



4.3.4.3 Division of Labour

- ❑ Capacity shapes the division of labour

An important question concerns the appropriate division of labour between regional and global institutions. What issues should regional organisations handle, and what issues require global cooperation? The answer depends partly on the nature of the problem and partly on institutional capacity. Regional organisations in some regions have greater capacity to address certain issues than global institutions. In other regions, however, regional organisations have limited capacity and depend heavily on global institutions for support.

- ❑ Partnership, not competition, is the ideal

Coordination between regional and global institutions is essential for effective governance. Regional organisations should keep global institutions informed of their activities, particularly in areas like peace and security, where the UN Security Council has primary responsibility. The relationship should be one of partnership rather than hierarchy or competition.

4.3.5 Case Studies: Major Regional Organisations

4.3.5.1 The European Union

- ❑ EU is the most developed regional organisation

The European Union stands as the most developed and institutionalised regional organisation in the world. It has evolved from a coal and steel community among six countries to a complex political and economic union of twenty-seven member states. The EU has created supranational institutions with significant authority over member states, including the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Court of Justice, and the European Central Bank.

- ❑ Single market and euro anchor integration

The EU has achieved deep economic integration through its single market, which allows the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people. Nineteen member states share the euro and are subject to a common monetary policy. The EU also has extensive regulatory authority, setting standards that apply across all member states in areas ranging from environmental protection to consumer safety.

- ❑ Crises reveal integration's fragility

Despite its achievements, the EU faces significant challenges. The sovereign debt crisis beginning in 2010 exposed weaknesses in the eurozone's institutional architecture. The refugee crisis of 2015 revealed deep divisions over migration policy. The United Kingdom's exit from the EU, formalised in 2020, raised questions about the future of European integration. These

challenges reveal that regional integration remains contested and fragile, as deepening integration requires member states to give up some national autonomy.

4.3.5.2 ASEAN

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations brings together ten Southeast Asian countries with diverse political systems, levels of development, and historical experiences. ASEAN was established in 1967 amidst Cold War tensions, including the confrontation between Indonesia and Malaysia. The organisation initially focused on promoting dialogue among members and limiting great power influence in the region.

- ❑ ASEAN born from regional tensions

- ❑ ASEAN Way prioritises consensus over authority

- ❑ Non-interference limits collective effectiveness

ASEAN operates according to principles often called the 'ASEAN Way,' which emphasises informality, consultation, consensus, and non-interference in the internal affairs of member states. Decision-making proceeds through extensive consultation aimed at achieving consensus rather than through voting. The organisation has a small secretariat with limited authority, reflecting members' commitment to maintaining national sovereignty. The ASEAN Way helped the organisation survive and grow, gradually moving toward greater institutionalisation through initiatives like the ASEAN Free Trade Area and the ASEAN Economic Community.

ASEAN faces ongoing challenges in balancing sovereignty concerns with the need for more effective collective action. The organisation's commitment to non-interference has limited its ability to address human rights violations in Myanmar or environmental crises like forest fires in Indonesia. Economic integration remains incomplete. ASEAN must also navigate relations with major powers, particularly China and the United States, whose competition for regional influence creates pressures on the organisation.

4.3.5.3 African Union

The African Union succeeded the Organisation of African Unity in 2002, with a more ambitious mandate to promote integration, peace, and development across Africa's fifty-five member states. The AU created extensive institutional structures, including an Assembly of Heads of State, a Pan-African Parliament, and an African Court of Justice and Human Rights. Importantly, the AU established a Peace and Security Council with the authority to authorise peacekeeping operations

- ❑ AU institutionalised intervention authority



- ❑ Ambitions exceed institutional capacity

India-Pakistan tensions paralyse SAARC

- ❑ Political conflict defeats economic potential

Economic cooperation through SAARC has been minimal. Intra-regional trade in South Asia remains among the lowest of any region, accounting for less than five percent of total trade. The South Asian Free Trade Area, launched in 2006, has not significantly increased economic integration due to extensive exemption lists and continued barriers. SAARC illustrates how political conflicts among members can severely limit regional cooperation, demonstrating that geographical proximity and potential economic benefits are not sufficient to ensure successful regionalism when deep political divisions exist.

4.3.6.1 Economic Interdependence and Regionalism

266

❑ Globalisation stimulates, not replaces, regionalism

❑ Production networks drive regional integration

❑ Regions both build and fragment global governance

❑ Globalisation challenges regional boundaries and relevance

organisations less necessary as connections span the entire world. On the other hand, globalisation has actually stimulated new forms of regionalism as countries seek regional frameworks to manage the challenges of increased openness and interdependence. The proliferation of regional trade agreements represents one such response: countries have pursued preferential trade agreements with regional partners even while participating in the multilateral trading system under the World Trade Organisation.

Regional production networks have become increasingly important in the global economy, with companies organising production across multiple countries within a region, as proximity facilitates coordination and reduces transport costs. Regional economic integration supports these production networks by reducing barriers to trade in components and intermediate goods, making regionalism economically functional even in an age of globalisation.

4.3.6.2 Regionalism and Global Governance

Regional organisations participate in global governance in various ways. They can represent their members in global forums, giving regional concerns greater weight in global decision-making. The European Union, for example, represents its members in World Trade Organisation negotiations. Regional organisations can also serve as testing grounds for governance approaches that might later be adopted globally. Some scholars see regional organisations as potential building blocks for a more effective system of global governance, while others worry that regionalism might fragment global governance, creating competing regional blocs with different rules and standards.

4.3.6.3 Challenges in a Globalised World

Regional organisations face several challenges in the contemporary globalised world. One challenge is defining the boundaries of regions when economic and social connections increasingly transcend traditional regional boundaries. Another is maintaining relevance when many important issues—climate change, pandemics, financial crises, terrorism—require global rather than regional solutions. Regional organisations must also adapt to changing power distributions. The rise of China and India is reshaping regional dynamics in Asia; these powerful countries may prefer bilateral relationships or global forums where they have greater influence rather than



regional organisations where they must negotiate with weaker neighbours.

4.3.7 Challenges Facing Regional Organisations

4.3.7.1 Sovereignty and Non-Interference

One major criticism of regional organisations, particularly in the developing world, concerns their commitment to sovereignty and non-interference. Critics argue that strict adherence to non-interference prevents regional organisations from addressing serious problems like human rights abuses, genocide, or democratic breakdowns. ASEAN's hesitant response to repression in Myanmar and the AU's limited action on various conflicts illustrate the constraints imposed by non-interference norms.

❑ Non-interference shields abusive governments

❑ Sovereignty norms protect smaller states

Defenders of strong sovereignty norms argue that respecting sovereignty is essential for maintaining cooperation among states with different political systems and interests. They contend that external interference, even by regional organisations, often makes conflicts worse rather than resolving them. They also point out that powerful states may use humanitarian justifications to pursue their own interests rather than genuinely protecting human rights.

4.3.7.2 Institutional Capacity

Many regional organisations, particularly in developing regions, suffer from severe institutional capacity limitations. They have small secretariats with limited budgets and depend heavily on member states for resources and expertise. The African Union exemplifies this: it has authorised peacekeeping operations but has struggled to generate sufficient troops and resources from member states and relies heavily on external funding from the EU and other donors, raising questions about its autonomy and sustainability. Without the capacity to monitor compliance, investigate problems, or provide technical assistance, regional organisations cannot effectively promote the norms and rules they adopt.

❑ Capacity gaps undermine ambitious mandates

4.3.7.3 Democratic Deficits

Regional organisations face criticism regarding their democratic accountability. Most are dominated by member state governments, with limited direct participation from citizens or

- ❑ Accountability gaps undermine legitimacy

- ❑ Rhetoric-reality gap undermines credibility

- ❑ Proliferation fragments scarce regional resources

civil society. The European Union faces particularly intense scrutiny on this dimension given its extensive authority: critics argue that unelected officials in the European Commission make important decisions that should be subject to democratic control. Some organisations have attempted to address this by creating parliamentary assemblies or mechanisms for civil society participation, such as the Pan-African Parliament and the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly, though these bodies primarily possess consultative powers.

4.3.7.4 Effectiveness and Relevance

Perhaps the most fundamental criticism is that many regional organisations are ineffective and irrelevant in addressing the real problems facing their regions. Critics point to the gap between ambitious rhetoric and limited practical achievements. SAARC exemplifies this: despite nearly four decades of existence, intra-regional trade remains very low, disputes among members remain unresolved, and the organisation holds regular summits that produce declarations with little impact on the ground. Defenders argue that critics underestimate difficult-to-measure contributions to peace and stability, noting that even organisations with limited formal achievements may facilitate dialogue and build relationships that prevent conflicts.

4.3.7.5 Competing and Overlapping Organisations

In many regions, multiple regional organisations exist with overlapping memberships and sometimes conflicting mandates. Latin America has numerous regional organisations, including MERCOSUR, the Andean Community, ALBA, and UNASUR. Africa has the continental AU alongside multiple sub-regional organisations like ECOWAS, SADC, and EAC. This proliferation creates confusion and may dissipate scarce resources across too many organisations, leading to coordination problems when different rules or contradictory policies are adopted. Some scholars argue that multiple organisations might allow for useful experimentation, but there is little evidence that proliferation has improved regional governance in practice.

4.3.8 Institutional Design and Effectiveness

4.3.8.1 Sovereignty and Institutional Authority

A fundamental issue in regional organisation design concerns the relationship between member state sovereignty



❑ Supranational vs. intergovernmental trade-offs

and organisational authority. The European Union represents one end of the spectrum, with supranational institutions that can make binding decisions even over the objections of some member states. Most other regional organisations operate on strictly intergovernmental principles, where decisions require consensus among member states. The choice between these models has important implications for organisational effectiveness: supranational authority can enable more effective collective action but also faces legitimacy challenges, as it involves unelected officials making decisions that affect national populations.

4.3.8.2 Decision-Making Procedures

❑ Unanimity protects sovereignty; majority enables action

Decision-making procedures vary significantly across regional organisations. Unanimous decision-making protects national sovereignty and ensures no state is bound by rules it opposes but can lead to deadlock and lowest-common-denominator outcomes. Majority voting can enable more effective decision-making but raises concerns about protecting minority interests. The European Union has gradually expanded the use of qualified majority voting while retaining unanimity for particularly sensitive issues like foreign policy and taxation. Most other regional organisations continue to rely on consensus, though some have introduced flexibility mechanisms allowing willing subgroups to proceed with cooperation even when not all members participate.

4.3.8.3 Compliance and Enforcement

❑ Enforcement remains the weakest link

Even when regional organisations make decisions, ensuring compliance by member states remains a challenge. Most regional organisations lack strong enforcement mechanisms and depend on voluntary compliance. The European Union has developed relatively strong enforcement mechanisms, including the ability of the European Commission to bring legal action against non-complying member states before the European Court of Justice, which can impose financial penalties. Most other regional organisations rely instead on peer pressure, naming and shaming, and the self-interest of member states in maintaining cooperative relationships. Strengthening enforcement would require member states to accept greater constraints on their sovereignty—something most remain reluctant to do.

Summarised Overview

Regional organisations have become important features of contemporary international relations, providing frameworks for cooperation among neighbouring countries on economic, security, and political issues. While they vary enormously in their structures, functions, and effectiveness, they represent meaningful efforts by states to manage interdependence and pursue common interests at a regional level.

The European Union stands as the most developed example of regional integration, demonstrating the potential for regional organisations to transform relations among previously antagonistic countries and create new forms of governance beyond the nation-state. However, the EU's challenges also reveal the difficulties associated with regional integration, particularly regarding sovereignty, democratic accountability, and the distribution of costs and benefits. Most other regional organisations have achieved more modest results while developing their own distinctive approaches: ASEAN's informal consensus-based approach has maintained peace among diverse members; the African Union has developed ambitious institutions but struggles with limited capacity; SAARC faces fundamental obstacles rooted in unresolved political conflicts.

Regional governance has complex relationships with global governance, both complementing and sometimes competing with global institutions. The appropriate division of labour between regional and global governance remains contested and continues to evolve. Looking forward, regional organisations must demonstrate continued relevance in addressing the problems their members face, build institutional capacity while maintaining legitimacy and accountability, and navigate the tensions between deepening integration and managing diversity. Despite their limitations and challenges, regional organisations are likely to remain important components of international order, providing intermediate layers of governance between the national and the global.

Self-Assessment Questions

1. What is the main difference between a regional organisation and a global organisation?
2. Name three major regional organisations and the regions they serve.
3. What does the 'ASEAN Way' refer to?
4. What is a security community?
5. What are the main stages of economic integration?
6. What is the principle of non-interference and why is it important in many regional organisations?



3. Börzel, T. A., & Risse, T. (Eds.). (2016). The Oxford handbook of comparative regionalism. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
4. Fawcett, L. (2004). Exploring regional domains: A comparative history of regionalism. *International Affairs*, 80(3), 429-446.
5. Hurrell, A. (2007). One world? Many worlds? The place of regions in the study of international society. *International Affairs*, 83(1), 127-146.
6. Kacowicz, A. M. (2018). Regional governance and global governance: Links and explanations. New York: Routledge.

Suggested Reading

1. Mansfield, E. D., & Milner, H. V. (1999). The new wave of regionalism. *International Organisation*, 53(3), 589-627.
2. Söderbaum, F., & Shaw, T. M. (Eds.). (2003). *Theories of new regionalism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
3. Tavares, R. (2009). *Regional security: The capacity of international organisations*. London: Routledge.
4. Warleigh-Lack, A., Robinson, N., & Rosamond, B. (Eds.). (2011). *New regionalism and the European Union: Dialogues, comparisons and new research directions*. London: Routledge.



Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

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MODEL QUESTION PAPER SETS





SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

MODEL QUESTION PAPER - SET 1

QP CODE:

Reg. No:

Name:

THIRD SEMESTER MA POLITICAL SCIENCE EXAMINATION

DISCIPLINE CORE COURSE

M23PS11DC – Issues in International Relations

Time: 3 Hours

Max Marks: 70

SECTION A

*Answer any **ten** questions in a word or a sentence. Each question carries **one** mark.*

(10x1=10 Marks)

1. What is bipolarity in international relations?
2. Name the two superpowers whose rivalry defined the Cold War era.
3. Which theory argues that states with similar political systems are less likely to go to war?
4. What is 'soft power' as a concept in international relations?
5. Define 'state-sponsored terrorism'.
6. Name the UN body that coordinates international refugee protection.
7. What does 'climate security' mean?
8. Which strait is considered one of the world's most strategically important sea lanes?
9. What is neo-colonialism?
10. What does the term 'Global South' refer to?
11. Name the UN peacekeeping principle that prohibits intervening in the internal affairs of states.
12. Define Track II diplomacy in the context of conflict resolution.
13. What is the primary function of the International Monetary Fund (IMF)?
14. Name one climate governance mechanism established under the UNFCCC.
15. What is the main objective of ASEAN?



SECTION B

*Answer any **five** questions in two or three sentences. Each question carries **two** marks.*

(5X2 =10 Marks)

16. What is meant by 'strategic multipolarity'?
17. Name any two challenges to American hegemony in the 21st century.
18. What is the role of the UN General Assembly in global governance?
19. Define 'maritime security' in the context of international relations.
20. What is meant by the Refugee Crisis in global politics?
21. Briefly define 'peacebuilding' as used in conflict resolution.
22. What are economic groupings? Give one example.
23. What is the significance of UNCLOS in ocean governance?
24. Define 'global governance' as a concept in world politics.
25. What is meant by structural power in the context of neo-colonialism?

SECTION C

*Answer any **five** questions in one paragraph. Each question carries **four** marks.*

(5X4 = 20 Marks)

26. Examine the strategic implications of multipolarity for international security and diplomacy.
27. Discuss the debate on the future of American hegemony in a changing world order.
28. How have international institutions evolved to address challenges in a multipolar world? Discuss reform debates.
29. Explain the causes and global impact of the refugee and displacement crisis with reference to governance frameworks.
30. Examine the role of economic groupings such as BRICS, G20, and WTO in shaping global political alignments.
31. Discuss the concept of neo-colonialism and the forms of resistance adopted by the Global South.
32. What are security groupings and strategic alliances? How do they shape global order?
33. Examine the relationship between regionalism and globalization with reference to any major regional organization.



SECTION D

*Answer any **three** questions in two pages. Each question carries **ten** marks.*

(3X10 =30 Marks)

34. Trace the evolution of the world order from bipolarity to multipolarity. What are the strategic implications of this shift for developing nations?
35. Examine the structural challenges faced by the United Nations in a multipolar world. What reforms are needed to make it more effective?
36. Analyse the nature and evolution of contemporary terrorism. How effective are global legal and institutional mechanisms in combating it?
37. Examine climate change as a global security threat. Discuss the role of international climate governance frameworks in addressing this challenge.
38. Critically evaluate the role of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) in global governance. What are the concerns regarding their legitimacy and accountability?
39. Assess the significance of regional organizations in conflict management and political integration. Illustrate with examples from at least two regions.



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MODEL QUESTION PAPER - SET 2

QP CODE:

Reg. No:

Name:

THIRD SEMESTER MA POLITICAL SCIENCE EXAMINATION

DISCIPLINE CORE COURSE

M23PS11DC – Issues in International Relations

Time: 3 Hours

Max Marks: 70

SECTION A

*Answer any **ten** questions in a word or a sentence. Each question carries **one** mark.*

(10x1=10 Marks)

1. Who coined the term 'Unipolar Moment' to describe US dominance after the Cold War?
2. In which year did the Soviet Union officially dissolve, marking the end of the Cold War?
3. What term describes a world order in which power is distributed among several major states?
4. Which organisation replaced the GATT as the body regulating international trade in 1995?
5. What does the term 'cyber security' primarily refer to in international relations?
6. Name the UN convention that defines the legal status of refugees.
7. Which international agreement of 2015 aims to limit global temperature rise to 1.5°C?
8. What is UNCLOS?
9. Which term refers to the continued economic dependence of former colonies on powerful states?
10. Name one major international non-governmental organisation working in humanitarian aid.
11. What is 'peacebuilding' in the context of conflict resolution?
12. Which UN body is primarily responsible for the maintenance of international peace and security?
13. What does the abbreviation NATO stand for?
14. Which grouping brings together the world's twenty major economies?
15. Name one regional organisation in South Asia.



SECTION B

Answer any **five** questions in two or three sentences. Each question carries **two** marks.

(5X2 =10 Marks)

16. What is meant by the 'end of the Cold War'?
17. Define multipolarity in international relations.
18. What is the 'unipolar moment' as described by Charles Krauthammer?
19. Briefly explain what is meant by American hegemony.
20. What structural reforms have been proposed for the UN Security Council?
21. Define cybersecurity as a national security challenge.
22. What is neo-colonialism? Give one example.
23. Define the term 'refugee' as used in international law.
24. What is the mandate of the International Criminal Court (ICC)?
25. Name any two major global economic groupings.

SECTION C

Answer any **five** questions in one paragraph. Each question carries **four** marks.

(5X4 = 20 Marks)

26. Discuss the key factors that led to the decline of bipolarity and the end of the Cold War.
27. Analyse the challenges posed to American hegemony in the post-Cold War era.
28. Explain the role of the United Nations in managing conflicts in a multipolar world.
29. How does climate change function as a non-traditional security threat? Explain with examples.
30. What are the main legal and institutional frameworks governing maritime security?
31. Examine the concept of neo-imperialism and its manifestation in contemporary global politics.
32. What role do INGOs play in global governance? Discuss their accountability challenges.
33. Explain the key approaches used in peacebuilding and conflict resolution by regional actors.



SECTION D

*Answer any **three** questions in two pages. Each question carries **ten** marks.*

(3X10 =30 Marks)

34. Critically examine the transition from a bipolar to a multipolar world order and its strategic implications for global politics.
35. Analyse the rise and challenges to American hegemony in the post-Cold War era. Is the era of US dominance over?
36. Evaluate the effectiveness of the United Nations in addressing global security challenges in a multipolar world.
37. Discuss terrorism and cybersecurity as contemporary global security threats. How effective are international cooperation mechanisms in addressing them?
38. Examine neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism as forms of structural domination in the 21st century. How does the Global South resist these forces?
39. Assess the role of regional organizations in political integration, conflict management, and global governance.



സർവ്വകലാശാലാഗീതം

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ഗ്രഹപ്രസാദമായ് വിളങ്ങണം
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BE TOO LATE**

**SAY
NO
TO
DRUGS**

**LOVE YOURSELF
AND ALWAYS BE
HEALTHY**



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Issues in International Relations

COURSE CODE: M23PS11DC

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ISBN 978-81-998406-0-7



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