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A Critical Analysis of Systemic Rivalry and the Reconfiguration of the Global Order in the 21st Century

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Abstract

The 21st century international system is undergoing a profound transformation marked by intensifying systemic rivalry among major powers, particularly between the United States and China. This study critically analyzes how such rivalries are reshaping the structure, norms, and institutions of the global order. Drawing on major theoretical frameworks in International Relations including realism, liberalism, and constructivism the research examines the shift from a unipolar to an increasingly multipolar system. It explores key dimensions of competition, including economic statecraft, technological supremacy, military posturing, and ideological contestation. The study also evaluates the role of emerging powers, regional alliances, and non-state actors in influencing global governance. By synthesizing contemporary scholarly debates and policy developments, it highlights how systemic rivalry contributes to institutional fragmentation, strategic decoupling, and the evolution of new governance mechanisms. The findings suggest that while rivalry may destabilize existing structures, it simultaneously fosters adaptive transformations within the international system. The study concludes that the reconfiguration of the global order is not merely a consequence of power shifts but also a reflection of changing norms, interdependence patterns, and global challenges. This analysis provides critical insights into the future trajectory of international politics in an era defined by uncertainty and strategic competition.

Keywords: Systemic rivalry, global order, multipolarity, great power competition, economic statecraft, strategic decoupling, global governance

1. Introduction

The international system in the 21st century is undergoing a profound structural transformation characterized by the intensification of systemic rivalry among major powers. This transformation has become one of the most significant areas of inquiry in contemporary International Relations due to its far-reaching implications for global governance, security architecture, and economic interdependence. The growing strategic competition between the United States and China has emerged as the central axis of this transformation, shaping debates on global order, power transitions, and institutional stability (Ikenberry). The academic relevance of this topic lies in its capacity to explain how global power shifts influence not only material capabilities but also

normative frameworks and institutional arrangements. Unlike earlier historical periods, where power transitions often resulted in direct military confrontation, contemporary systemic rivalry unfolds within an interconnected global economy, making its dynamics more complex and multidimensional (Nye). This complexity demands a comprehensive analytical approach that integrates economic, technological, ideological, and security dimensions of global politics.

1.1 Context and Background

The post-Cold War era marked the emergence of a unipolar international system dominated by the United States, characterized by liberal economic globalization, institutional expansion, and the widespread diffusion of Western political norms. This period was widely described as the “liberal international order,” where institutions such as the World Trade Organization and the United Nations played a central role in maintaining global stability and cooperation (Keohane). However, the rapid rise of China has significantly altered this structure. China’s economic transformation, technological advancement, and growing military capabilities have enabled it to emerge as a systemic competitor to U.S. dominance. Its integration into global supply chains, expansion of infrastructure initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, and increasing influence in international institutions have contributed to shifting global power balances (Mearsheimer).

This transformation reflects a broader transition from unipolarity toward a more complex and contested multipolar system. In this evolving order, power is no longer concentrated in a single hegemon but distributed among multiple influential actors, including emerging economies and regional blocs. As Acharya notes, the contemporary world is increasingly characterized by a “multiplex order,” where multiple centers of authority coexist without a single dominant governing structure (Acharya).

1.2 Research Gap

Despite the extensive scholarly attention given to great power politics and global governance, significant gaps remain in existing literature. Most studies tend to focus narrowly on either material power transitions or institutional resilience, without adequately integrating the multidimensional nature of systemic rivalry.

First, there is limited holistic analysis that simultaneously examines economic competition, technological rivalry, military strategy, and ideological contestation as interconnected dimensions of global transformation. Second, existing research often prioritizes state-centric perspectives, overlooking the growing influence of non-state actors such as multinational corporations, digital platforms, and transnational networks in shaping global outcomes.

Third, while traditional theories of International Relations, particularly realism and liberalism provide valuable insights, they often fail to fully capture the hybrid nature of contemporary global order, where cooperation and competition coexist simultaneously. This study addresses these gaps by offering an integrated theoretical and analytical framework that explains systemic rivalry as a multidimensional and evolving structural condition of the international system.

1.3 Research Objectives and Questions

This study is guided by the following objectives:

- To critically examine the concept and evolution of systemic rivalry in the 21st century.
- To analyze how major power competition is reshaping the structure of the global order.
- To evaluate the role of international institutions and governance mechanisms in managing global tensions.
- To explore the influence of emerging powers and non-state actors in global politics.
- To integrate key theoretical perspectives in International Relations for a comprehensive understanding of systemic transformation.

The study is structured around the following research questions:

- How does systemic rivalry between major powers influence the reconfiguration of global order?
- What are the key dimensions (economic, military, technological, ideological) of this rivalry?
- To what extent do international institutions mitigate or intensify global tensions?
- How do emerging powers and non-state actors reshape global governance structures?

1.4 Scope and Significance of the Study

The scope of this study is global, focusing primarily on the systemic rivalry between the United States and China while also incorporating the roles of regional powers, international organizations, and non-state actors. It examines multiple dimensions of global politics, including security, economics, technology, and ideology, to provide a comprehensive understanding of contemporary international relations.

The study draws upon major theoretical frameworks in International Relations, including realism, liberalism, and constructivism, to interpret the complexities of global transformation. By integrating these perspectives, it offers a multidimensional explanation of how systemic rivalry shapes global order.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to understanding the evolving nature of global governance in an era of uncertainty and strategic competition. It highlights that the contemporary international system is neither purely conflictual nor fully cooperative but exists in a dynamic state of “competitive interdependence.” This makes the study highly relevant for policymakers, scholars, and analysts seeking to understand future trajectories of global stability, institutional reform, and geopolitical competition (Nye).

Ultimately, this research provides critical insights into how systemic rivalry is not only reshaping power distributions but also redefining the very architecture of international relations in the 21st century.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Overview of Literature on Global Order and Systemic Rivalry

The literature on systemic rivalry and global order is deeply rooted in classical and contemporary International Relations (IR) theory. Scholars have long debated how shifts in power distribution among states shape international stability. Early works focused on balance of power systems, while modern scholarship increasingly emphasizes globalization, interdependence, and institutional governance (Keohane). In the 21st century, attention has shifted toward understanding how the rise of China and renewed great power competition is transforming the liberal international order established after the Cold War.

Ikenberry argues that the post-1945 order was not only a power structure but also a rules-based system built on institutions that encouraged cooperation and constrained state behavior (Ikenberry). However, this order is now facing increasing pressure due to geopolitical competition and strategic fragmentation.

2.2 Realist Perspective on Systemic Rivalry

Realist scholars provide the most direct explanation of systemic rivalry through the lens of power politics. According to Mearsheimer, international politics is inherently competitive because the global system is anarchic, meaning there is no central authority to regulate state behavior (Mearsheimer). In this context, rising powers inevitably challenge dominant states, leading to structural tensions and conflict.

From a realist perspective, the rise of China represents a classic case of power transition. As China’s economic and military capabilities grow, it is expected to seek greater influence over

global institutions and regional security arrangements. This leads to what realists describe as a “security dilemma,” where defensive actions by one state are interpreted as threats by others, escalating tensions (Waltz).

Realists also argue that institutions have limited ability to prevent conflict because they reflect underlying power distributions rather than independent sources of stability.

2.3 Liberal Institutionalism and Interdependence

In contrast, liberal theorists emphasize the role of institutions, economic interdependence, and cooperation in mitigating conflict. Keohane argues that international institutions reduce transaction costs, increase transparency, and promote long-term cooperation even in anarchic systems (Keohane).

From this perspective, the deep economic integration between the United States and China creates strong incentives for stability despite political rivalry. Global supply chains, trade networks, and financial interdependence act as constraints on full-scale conflict.

Nye expands this argument by introducing the concept of complex interdependence, where states are connected through multiple channels beyond military competition, including trade, technology, and culture (Nye). This interconnectedness makes systemic rivalry more managed and less likely to escalate into direct war.

However, recent trends such as trade wars, sanctions, and technological restrictions suggest that interdependence is becoming more selective rather than absolute, leading to what scholars describe as “fragmented globalization.”

2.4 Constructivist Interpretations of Global Rivalry

Constructivist scholars offer a different explanation by focusing on ideas, identities, and norms. Wendt famously argues that “anarchy is what states make of it,” meaning that international politics is socially constructed rather than structurally predetermined (Wendt).

From this perspective, systemic rivalry is shaped not only by material power but also by perceptions and narratives. The U.S.–China rivalry, for instance, is influenced by competing ideological frameworks, including liberal democracy versus state-led governance models. These identities shape how states interpret each other’s actions and intentions.

Acharya further argues that the global order is evolving into a “multiplex world,” where multiple normative systems coexist rather than a single dominant ideological framework (Acharya). This suggests that global transformation is not only material but also ideational.

2.5 Contemporary Studies on Fragmentation and Decoupling

Recent scholarship highlights increasing fragmentation in the global system. Scholars argue that globalization is no longer linear but is being reshaped by strategic competition. One key concept is “strategic decoupling,” where states reduce dependence on rivals in sensitive sectors such as technology, energy, and defense.

Technological rivalry, particularly in artificial intelligence and semiconductors, has become a central feature of systemic competition. The United States has imposed export controls on advanced technologies, while China is investing heavily in indigenous innovation systems to reduce external dependence.

Nye argues that power in the modern era is increasingly distributed across both hard and soft dimensions, including information networks and digital platforms (Nye). This shift has expanded the scope of rivalry beyond traditional military domains.

2.6 Regional and Institutional Dimensions

Regional powers and institutions also play a significant role in shaping global order. The European Union, India, and ASEAN states are increasingly adopting flexible strategies to navigate between

competing major powers. This reflects a move away from rigid alliance systems toward pragmatic balancing.

Institutions such as the United Nations continue to provide platforms for dialogue and conflict management, but their effectiveness is often constrained by great power disagreements. As Ikenberry notes, the liberal order is not collapsing entirely but is undergoing “contestation and adaptation” (Ikenberry).

2.7 Synthesis of Literature and Analytical Gap

The literature demonstrates three dominant perspectives: realism emphasizes power transition and conflict; liberalism highlights interdependence and institutions; and constructivism focuses on ideas and identity. While each approach provides valuable insights, they remain analytically fragmented.

A key gap in existing research is the lack of an integrated framework that explains systemic rivalry as simultaneously material, institutional, and ideational. Furthermore, limited attention has been given to how technological change and non-state actors reshape global order dynamics.

This study addresses these gaps by synthesizing multiple theoretical perspectives to provide a comprehensive analysis of systemic rivalry and global order reconfiguration.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to critically analyze systemic rivalry and its role in reshaping the global order in the 21st century. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the subject deals with complex political, economic, and ideological processes that cannot be fully captured through numerical data alone. Instead, interpretive analysis allows for a deeper understanding of global power transitions, institutional behavior, and theoretical debates in International Relations (Creswell).

The research is primarily analytical and descriptive, aiming to interpret existing knowledge rather than generate new empirical datasets. It focuses on synthesizing theoretical perspectives and policy developments to explain how systemic rivalry is transforming global order structures.

3.2 Data Collection Method

The study relies on secondary data sources, including:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles in International Relations
- Books by leading IR theorists such as Ikenberry, Mearsheimer, Keohane, and Nye
- Policy papers and strategic documents from international institutions
- Reports from global organizations such as the United Nations, World Bank, and IMF
- Reputable academic databases and geopolitical research centers

Secondary data is selected to ensure a broad and well-established theoretical foundation for analyzing global systemic changes.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The study employs a theoretical triangulation approach, integrating three major schools of thought in International Relations:

1. Realism – Focuses on power distribution, security competition, and state survival. According to Mearsheimer, the anarchic structure of the international system compels states to pursue power maximization (Mearsheimer).
2. Liberalism – Emphasizes institutions, interdependence, and cooperation. Keohane argues that international institutions reduce uncertainty and facilitate cooperation even under conditions of anarchy (Keohane).
3. Constructivism – Highlights the role of identity, norms, and ideas in shaping state behavior. Wendt argues that the meaning of power and threat is socially constructed

rather than purely material (Wendt).

By combining these frameworks, the study provides a multidimensional understanding of systemic rivalry.

3.4 Method of Analysis

The research uses thematic content analysis, which involves identifying, categorizing, and interpreting key themes from existing literature. The major themes include:

- Power transition and global hierarchy
- Economic competition and technological rivalry
- Institutional transformation and governance challenges
- Ideological contestation and normative shifts
- Role of emerging powers and non-state actors

These themes are analyzed comparatively to understand how different dimensions of rivalry interact in shaping global order transformation.

3.5 Validity and Reliability

To ensure academic rigor, the study uses cross-verification of sources from multiple scholarly and institutional publications. Information is validated through comparison of different theoretical interpretations and empirical findings. Reliance on well-established academic authors and institutions enhances the reliability of the analysis.

3.6 Limitations of the Study

While the study provides a comprehensive theoretical analysis, it has certain limitations:

- It does not include primary empirical data such as interviews or surveys.
- It focuses on macro-level global trends rather than case-specific micro-level analysis.
- Rapid geopolitical changes may affect the long-term applicability of some interpretations.
- Despite these limitations, the study remains valuable for understanding broad structural transformations in global politics.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Since this research is based on secondary sources, ethical considerations primarily involve proper citation and acknowledgment of original authors. All theoretical frameworks and scholarly contributions are appropriately referenced following MLA citation standards to avoid plagiarism and ensure academic integrity.

4. Theoretical Analysis

4.1 Introduction to Theoretical Framework

The transformation of the global order in the 21st century, driven by systemic rivalry among major powers, can be best understood through established theoretical frameworks in International Relations. This chapter integrates Realism, Liberal Institutionalism, and Constructivism to explain how global power structures are being reconfigured. Each theory offers a distinct explanation of how and why systemic rivalry emerges and how it reshapes international politics.

Rather than relying on a single perspective, this study adopts a multi-theoretical approach, recognizing that contemporary global dynamics are too complex to be explained by one paradigm alone (Burchill et al.).

4.2 Realist Perspective: Power Transition and Strategic Competition

Realism provides the most direct explanation of systemic rivalry. According to classical and structural realists, international politics is governed by an anarchic system where no central authority exists to regulate state behavior. As a result, states prioritize survival and power accumulation (Waltz).

Mearsheimer argues that great power competition is inevitable because rising powers seek to maximize their influence, while dominant powers attempt to preserve their status (Mearsheimer). From this perspective, the rise of China represents a classic power transition challenge to the United States, leading to intensified strategic rivalry across economic, military, and technological domains.

Realists also emphasize the security dilemma, where defensive measures by one state are perceived as threats by another, creating cycles of mistrust and escalation. This dynamic is evident in increasing military deployments and strategic competition in regions such as the Indo-Pacific.

Thus, realism explains systemic rivalry as a structural outcome of power distribution in an anarchic international system.

4.3 Liberal Institutionalism: Cooperation under Anarchy

In contrast, liberal institutionalism argues that cooperation is possible even in an anarchic system due to the role of institutions and interdependence. Keohane contends that international institutions facilitate cooperation by reducing uncertainty, providing information, and establishing rules that govern state behavior (Keohane).

The post-1945 global order, built around institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, reflects this liberal vision. These institutions have historically helped manage conflict and promote economic integration.

Nye expands this argument by introducing the concept of complex interdependence, where states are connected through multiple channels including trade, finance, and communication networks (Nye). Even amid rising rivalry, economic interdependence between major powers creates incentives for restraint and cooperation.

However, recent developments such as trade restrictions, sanctions, and supply chain restructuring indicate a shift toward selective decoupling, suggesting that liberal interdependence is being reconfigured rather than eliminated.

4.4 Constructivist Perspective: Identity, Norms, and Perception

Constructivism provides a third dimension by focusing on the role of ideas, identities, and norms in shaping international relations. Wendt argues that the structure of the international system is socially constructed and that state behavior depends on shared meanings rather than only material capabilities (Wendt).

From this perspective, systemic rivalry is not inevitable but is shaped by how states perceive each other. For example, the strategic competition between the United States and China is influenced by contrasting political identities—liberal democracy versus state-centric governance models.

Acharya further suggests that the global order is evolving into a “multiplex world”, where multiple normative systems coexist rather than a single dominant ideological framework (Acharya). This indicates that global transformation is not only about power shifts but also about changing ideas of legitimacy and governance.

4.5 Critical Synthesis of Theoretical Approaches

While realism emphasizes structural power competition, liberalism highlights the stabilizing role of institutions, and constructivism focuses on ideational factors. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive understanding of systemic rivalry.

However, each theory has limitations when applied individually. Realism tends to overlook cooperation and institutional influence, liberalism underestimates power politics, and constructivism may neglect material constraints. Therefore, a combined theoretical approach is necessary to fully explain the complexity of contemporary global order transformation.

Systemic rivalry, therefore, is best understood as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by the interaction of power, institutions, and ideas (Burchill et al.).

5. Discussion/Analysis

5.1 Introduction: From Order Stability to Competitive Interdependence

The contemporary global order is increasingly characterized by a shift from relatively stable cooperation to competitive interdependence, where major powers remain economically interconnected while strategically opposed. This paradox defines the nature of systemic rivalry in the 21st century. The intensifying competition between the United States and China has become the central axis of global politics, influencing trade, security, technology, and governance structures (Nye).

Rather than producing a complete breakdown of globalization, systemic rivalry is generating a fragmented and restructured global order. This transformation is not linear but multidimensional, involving both cooperation and confrontation simultaneously.

5.2 Economic Statecraft and Strategic Decoupling

One of the most visible dimensions of systemic rivalry is economic competition. Economic instruments such as tariffs, sanctions, export controls, and investment restrictions have become central tools of foreign policy. The United States and China have increasingly engaged in strategic decoupling, particularly in sensitive sectors like semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and telecommunications.

Mearsheimer argues that economic competition is an extension of great power politics, where states use economic leverage to weaken rivals and strengthen their own strategic position (Mearsheimer). At the same time, Keohane notes that deep economic interdependence historically reduces the likelihood of full-scale conflict due to mutual vulnerability (Keohane).

This creates a structural contradiction: while interdependence promotes stability, strategic rivalry encourages fragmentation.

5.3 Technological Rivalry and Digital Power Competition

Technology has emerged as a core battlefield of systemic rivalry. Control over advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and semiconductor manufacturing is increasingly viewed as essential to national power.

The competition between the United States and China in technological innovation reflects a broader struggle for digital supremacy, where technological leadership translates into economic and military advantage. Nye argues that in the modern era, power is increasingly defined by information networks and technological capacity rather than traditional military strength (Nye). This technological competition has led to the emergence of “digital blocs,” where countries align with different technological ecosystems, further contributing to global fragmentation.

5.4 Military Competition and Regional Security Dynamics

Military competition remains a fundamental aspect of systemic rivalry, particularly in strategically sensitive regions such as the Indo-Pacific. Increased naval deployments, military modernization, and alliance strengthening reflect growing security tensions.

Realist theory explains this development through the concept of the security dilemma, where one state’s defensive actions are perceived as offensive threats by others, leading to escalation cycles (Waltz). The expansion of military alliances and defense partnerships reinforces strategic competition between major powers.

However, unlike traditional bipolar conflicts, modern military rivalry coexists with economic interdependence, making direct confrontation costly and less likely.

5.5 Ideological Contestation and Normative Competition

Systemic rivalry is not limited to material competition; it also includes ideological and normative dimensions. Competing governance models liberal democracy versus state-led capitalism represent contrasting visions of global order.

Wendt argues that international politics is shaped by shared ideas and identities, meaning that ideological perceptions significantly influence state behavior (Wendt). In this context, rivalry is reinforced by differing narratives about legitimacy, development, and governance.

Acharya further emphasizes that the global system is becoming multiplex, where multiple normative orders coexist without a single dominant ideological framework (Acharya). This increases complexity in global governance and reduces normative consensus.

5.6 Role of Institutions and Global Governance Challenges

International institutions continue to play a stabilizing role, but their effectiveness is increasingly challenged by great power competition. Institutions such as the United Nations face difficulties in achieving consensus among rival powers.

Ikenberry argues that the liberal international order is not collapsing entirely but is undergoing a process of contestation and adaptation (Ikenberry). While institutions remain important, their ability to regulate systemic rivalry is weakening due to geopolitical polarization.

This has led to the emergence of alternative governance structures, including regional alliances and issue-based coalitions, which reflect a more decentralized global order.

5.7 Emerging Powers and Non-State Actors

Another important dimension of systemic transformation is the increasing role of emerging powers and non-state actors. Countries such as India, Brazil, and regional blocs are adopting flexible diplomatic strategies to navigate between competing major powers.

Additionally, multinational corporations and digital platforms now exert significant influence over global economic and informational systems. This challenges traditional state-centric models of International Relations and introduces new layers of complexity into global governance.

5.8 Synthesis: Fragmentation within Interdependence

The analysis shows that systemic rivalry does not result in complete global separation but rather produces fragmented interdependence. Economic, technological, and institutional linkages continue to exist, but they are increasingly politicized and selectively restricted.

Thus, the global order is not collapsing but evolving into a more complex structure characterized by competition, adaptation, and partial decoupling. This reflects a transition from a unified liberal order to a contested multipolar system shaped by multiple centers of power.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary of the Study

This study critically analyzed systemic rivalry and its role in the reconfiguration of the global order in the 21st century. The research demonstrated that the contemporary international system is undergoing a profound transformation from a relatively stable unipolar structure to a more fragmented and competitive multipolar configuration. The central driver of this transformation is the intensifying rivalry between major powers, particularly the United States and China, which extends across economic, technological, military, and ideological domains (Mearsheimer).

Through an integrated theoretical framework combining realism, liberalism, and constructivism, the study showed that systemic rivalry cannot be understood through a single explanatory lens. Instead, it is shaped by the interaction of material power shifts, institutional constraints, and ideational factors (Wendt).

6.2 Key Findings

The study produced several important findings:

First, systemic rivalry is structural rather than temporary, meaning it is embedded in the evolving distribution of global power rather than being a short-term political tension.

Second, the global order is experiencing fragmented interdependence, where states remain economically connected while strategically competing, especially in sensitive sectors such as technology and defense (Nye).

Third, international institutions such as the United Nations continue to play a stabilizing role, but their effectiveness is increasingly constrained by geopolitical polarization and great power competition (Ikenberry).

Fourth, emerging powers and non-state actors are contributing to a decentralized global order, reducing the dominance of any single hegemonic structure.

Finally, ideological and normative competition has become as significant as material power struggles, shaping how states interpret global governance and legitimacy.

6.3 Theoretical Implications

The findings confirm that no single IR theory is sufficient to fully explain systemic rivalry. Realism explains power competition and security tensions, liberalism highlights interdependence and institutional resilience, while constructivism explains the role of identity and norms in shaping state behavior.

Together, these theories reveal that global order transformation is multidimensional, involving simultaneous processes of competition, cooperation, and contestation (Keohane). This supports the argument that the international system is evolving into a hybrid structure rather than a strictly bipolar or unipolar order.

6.4 Policy Implications

The study has important implications for global policymakers. It suggests that managing systemic rivalry requires balancing competition with cooperation. Complete decoupling between major powers is neither feasible nor desirable due to deep economic interdependence. Instead, selective cooperation in areas such as climate change, global health, and financial stability is necessary to prevent systemic instability.

Strengthening international institutions and adapting governance frameworks to reflect multipolar realities is also essential. Without institutional reform, global governance risks becoming increasingly ineffective in managing emerging conflicts.

6.5 Future Outlook

The future of the global order is likely to be shaped by continued systemic rivalry, but not necessarily by direct military confrontation. Instead, the international system will likely evolve toward a competitive multipolar structure, where multiple powers coexist in a state of managed rivalry.

Technological innovation, especially in artificial intelligence and digital infrastructure, will play a decisive role in determining future power hierarchies. At the same time, environmental challenges and global crises may create opportunities for limited cooperation despite strategic competition.

6.6 Final Conclusion

In conclusion, systemic rivalry is a defining feature of contemporary international relations and a central force driving the reconfiguration of the global order. It reflects deeper structural shifts in global power distribution as well as changing norms and institutional dynamics. Rather than signaling the collapse of the international system, systemic rivalry is reshaping it into a more complex, fragmented, and multipolar configuration.

Understanding this transformation is essential for scholars and policymakers seeking to navigate the uncertainties of 21st-century global politics. As the study demonstrates, the future global

order will not be defined by dominance alone but by the continuous interaction of power, institutions, and ideas (Acharya).

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