

Multilateralism Under Pressure: International Organizations and Great Power Rivalry in a Fragmented World

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ABSTRACT

Multilateralism remains a central feature of international order, yet international organizations now operate in an environment increasingly shaped by strategic rivalry and political fragmentation. As competition among major powers intensifies, shared institutions face growing pressure over authority, legitimacy, procedural fairness, and institutional direction. The purpose of this article is to examine how great power rivalry reshapes the role and political meaning of international organizations in a fragmented world. The article employs a qualitative research design based on document analysis and is guided by an order-based analytical framework that links multilateralism, institutional contestation, and fragmented governance. Data are drawn from international organization reports, official resolutions, summit declarations, policy documents, diplomatic records, and scholarly sources relevant to global governance and great power competition. The analysis focuses on institutional authority, strategic engagement, procedural inclusion, rivalry within multilateral settings, and the consequences of fragmentation for global order. International organizations remain active and politically relevant, but their authority is increasingly conditional, contested, and shaped by selective engagement from major powers. Multilateralism persists as an important mode of governance, yet it operates under altered political conditions in which cooperation and rivalry coexist within the same institutional arenas. The article contributes to the field by integrating debates on international organizations with a broader understanding of fragmented order and strategic contestation in world politics.

Keywords: Multilateralism, International Organizations, Great Power Rivalry, Global Governance

INTRODUCTION

Multilateralism has long been regarded as a central institutional principle of modern international order. Through international organizations, states have sought to manage conflict, coordinate policy, reduce uncertainty, and create rules for cooperation across borders. These organizations were expected to provide stable frameworks for collective action in areas such as security, trade, development, health, and environmental governance (Kim, 2020). Their legitimacy has often rested on the assumption that common institutions can mediate competing interests and preserve a degree of order even in unequal systems. Yet the global environment in which multilateralism operates has changed significantly in recent years. Intensifying rivalry among major powers has placed growing pressure on international organizations and challenged the cooperative foundations on which many of them were built. In a fragmented world, multilateralism is increasingly shaped not only by shared problems but also by geopolitical competition over influence, rules, and institutional direction (Yang, 2025).

The central problem arises when international organizations are expected to maintain collective order while their member states are increasingly divided by strategic rivalry. Great powers continue to rely on multilateral institutions for legitimacy, coordination, and agenda-setting, yet they also seek to use those same institutions to defend national interests and constrain their rivals (Arlen et al., 2023). This creates tension between the universalist promises of multilateralism and the competitive logic of power politics. In practical terms, such tension affects decision-making, institutional reform, budgetary

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commitments, norm development, and the implementation of collective mandates. The real-world relevance of this issue is evident in growing deadlock, selective engagement, competing institutional initiatives, and declining trust in shared governance mechanisms. Smaller states and weaker actors are also affected because they often depend more heavily on international organizations to protect procedural fairness and preserve institutional voice (Panda & Park, 2024). The problem is therefore not only whether multilateral institutions can survive great power rivalry, but how rivalry reshapes their role, authority, and political meaning in an increasingly fragmented international system.

A substantial body of scholarship already explains that multilateralism has always operated within structures of unequal power rather than above them. International organizations are not politically neutral arenas, because they reflect bargaining outcomes, institutional design choices, and broader distributions of influence in world politics (Schmidtke et al., 2023). Existing research has shown that powerful states often shape agendas, control resources, and selectively support or obstruct institutional processes according to strategic interest. Studies of institutionalism also demonstrate that organizations may endure even when cooperation becomes difficult, because they provide information, routines, legitimacy, and coordination benefits that states still value. At the same time, scholarship on great power politics has emphasized that rivalry can weaken institutional consensus, undermine compliance, and create competing visions of order within shared forums. More recent debates on global governance suggest that fragmentation does not necessarily destroy multilateralism, but can produce differentiated forms of cooperation, contested leadership, and parallel institutional arrangements (Henning et al., 2023). What is known, then, is that international organizations remain important under pressure, but their operation is deeply conditioned by power asymmetry and strategic competition.

Even so, important questions remain insufficiently developed in the literature. Much of the existing work treats international organizations either as arenas of cooperation or as sites of power contestation, but less attention is given to how these two logics interact under conditions of sustained fragmentation (Guo et al., 2024). There is still limited conceptual clarity on how great power rivalry transforms multilateralism without necessarily causing institutional collapse. In many discussions, institutional weakness is described mainly in terms of paralysis or decline, even though organizations may also be repurposed, selectively activated, or strategically bypassed. The consequences for institutional legitimacy, norm authority, and procedural fairness remain underexamined in many accounts of global fragmentation. The position of middle and smaller powers within this process is also not sufficiently integrated into dominant explanations, despite their strong stake in stable multilateral frameworks. What remains unclear, therefore, is how international organizations adapt, absorb, or reflect rivalry when multilateralism persists in form but becomes increasingly contested in substance (Park, 2022).

This gap becomes more visible when the issue is approached through a theoretical perspective that links multilateralism to order formation and institutional contestation. Within such a framework, international organizations can be understood not merely as technical problem-solving bodies, but as arenas where competing actors negotiate authority, legitimacy, and the rules of participation in world politics. The research gap lies in the weak synthesis between studies of institutional resilience and theories of fragmented order under great power rivalry (Steffek, 2023). One strand explains why organizations persist and continue to matter, while another explains how strategic competition produces division, hierarchy, and contested governance. Fewer analyses bring these strands together to show how multilateral institutions function simultaneously as instruments of cooperation, sites of competition, and

symbols of wider order. A stronger synthesis is needed because pressure on multilateralism cannot be understood only through institutional design or only through rivalry in isolation. The interaction between organizational continuity and geopolitical fragmentation is central to understanding the current transformation of global governance (D'Alessandra & Gildea, 2025).

Filling this gap is theoretically justified because multilateralism today cannot be explained through cooperative institutionalism alone. International organizations continue to operate within a world shaped by rivalry, unequal capabilities, and competing projects of order, which means that institutional performance is inseparable from broader political struggle. A theory-driven approach helps explain why some organizations become arenas of intensified contestation, why others retain partial effectiveness, and how institutional authority changes under pressure (Sithole et al., 2024). This is important because fragmentation should not be reduced to visible breakdown alone, but understood as a process that alters institutional function, normative coherence, and patterns of participation. Such a perspective also clarifies why great powers do not simply abandon international organizations, but often remain engaged in order to shape agendas, block rivals, and preserve influence. Theoretical coherence is especially necessary where multilateralism appears simultaneously weakened and indispensable. By linking institutional analysis to fragmented order, the article can better explain how rivalry reshapes multilateral governance without assuming either stable cooperation or total institutional failure (Owen, 2025).

From this foundation, the article is guided by several interrelated research questions. How does great power rivalry affect the authority, function, and legitimacy of international organizations in a fragmented world? In what ways do international organizations remain useful to powerful states even when multilateral cooperation becomes more contested and selective? How does fragmentation reshape the balance between institutional continuity, procedural inclusion, and geopolitical competition within multilateral settings? To what extent do international organizations absorb rivalry, reflect rivalry, or reproduce wider divisions in global order? How can an order-based perspective on multilateralism improve understanding of institutional pressure beyond simple narratives of crisis or decline? What implications do these dynamics have for smaller states that rely on multilateral rules and organizations to protect voice, predictability, and limited forms of equality? These questions direct attention to the political transformation of multilateral governance rather than to institutional performance in purely technical terms (Woods, 2023).

The urgency of this research lies in the fact that international organizations remain central to managing global problems even as the political foundations of cooperation become more contested. Issues such as security, trade, public health, development, migration, and climate governance cannot be addressed effectively without some form of institutional coordination, yet great power rivalry increasingly complicates that coordination. This makes the present issue especially significant because the future of multilateralism will shape how the international system responds to crises under conditions of fragmentation.

The article contributes by providing a clearer conceptual account of how international organizations operate under pressure from strategic competition without assuming that they have become irrelevant. It also contributes by connecting debates on great power rivalry with broader questions of institutional legitimacy, order transformation, and differentiated participation in global governance (Hurd, 2018). In doing so, the discussion offers a more coherent way to understand why multilateralism persists even when its cooperative foundations are under strain. Such a perspective helps

explain why international organizations remain politically important not despite fragmentation, but increasingly because fragmentation itself is mediated through them (Bhattarai, 2025).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine how international organizations operate under the pressures of great power rivalry in an increasingly fragmented world. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research addresses institutional authority, legitimacy, strategic contestation, and the political meaning of multilateralism, all of which require interpretive and context-sensitive analysis rather than numerical measurement alone (Green & Thorogood, 2018). The analytical framework combines a perspective on multilateralism with an order-based approach that focuses on institutional contestation, fragmented governance, and the relationship between cooperation and rivalry in world politics. This framework makes it possible to connect the formal role of international organizations with the broader geopolitical pressures that shape their function, relevance, and political use.

The design is suitable for this research because the core objective is to explain how multilateral institutions are reshaped by strategic competition without assuming either simple continuity or institutional collapse. It also works well because international organizations are not only formal structures but political arenas in which authority, procedural inclusion, and power asymmetry are continuously negotiated. Qualitative analysis allows the study to capture these layered dynamics across institutional settings, policy domains, and strategic interactions (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2017). For these reasons, a qualitative design provides the most coherent basis for a theory-informed analysis of multilateralism under contemporary geopolitical pressure.

The study relies on qualitative secondary data drawn from international organization reports, official resolutions, summit declarations, institutional statements, policy documents, diplomatic records, and scholarly publications relevant to multilateral governance, great power rivalry, and fragmented order (Gioia, 2020). Data collection was conducted through purposive selection of documents that directly address institutional mandates, governance disputes, reform debates, strategic blockage, and patterns of selective cooperation within multilateral settings. The units of analysis are institutional discourses, organizational practices, and political interactions through which international organizations are shaped by rivalry and used in the management of global order (White et al., 2025).

The main analytical instrument is a document analysis matrix designed to classify and compare recurring themes across the selected materials. The principal analytical dimensions include institutional authority, legitimacy, procedural inclusion, power asymmetry, strategic contestation, and implications for fragmented governance (Johnson & Vindrola-Padros, 2017). Validity was strengthened by aligning these dimensions closely with the research questions and theoretical framework, while reliability was supported through transparent source selection, consistent coding procedures, and systematic documentation of the analytical process.

Trustworthiness was further ensured through source triangulation and the use of credible, publicly accessible, and institutionally authoritative materials to improve credibility and dependability. Ethical considerations were maintained by accurately representing all sources, respecting intellectual ownership, and, because the research did not involve direct human participants, informed consent and confidentiality were not required in a conventional sense, although all documentary materials were handled with academic integrity and due care (Leplaa et al., 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Results and Discussion section addresses how international organizations operate under mounting pressure from great power rivalry in an increasingly fragmented international environment. The material examined indicates that multilateralism has not disappeared, nor has it become institutionally irrelevant. Instead, its function has been reshaped by strategic competition, selective engagement, and growing disagreement over rules, authority, and institutional direction. International organizations continue to provide forums for negotiation, coordination, and legitimation, yet they do so under conditions in which major powers increasingly view them as arenas of geopolitical contestation (Erdilmen, 2019). This changes the political meaning of multilateralism from a relatively stable framework of collective governance into a more contingent and contested institutional practice. The significance of this pattern lies in the fact that fragmentation does not simply unfold outside international organizations. It is mediated through them, reproduced within them, and sometimes managed by them. Multilateralism remains active, but it operates under altered political conditions that constrain its authority and complicate its normative claims.

A central pattern emerging from the analysis concerns the persistence of international organizations despite intensified rivalry among powerful states. Institutional continuity remains visible in the maintenance of formal procedures, regular meetings, agenda-setting processes, and administrative functions across major governance domains (Tallberg & Zürn, 2019). This continuity matters because it suggests that rivalry does not automatically lead to institutional abandonment or systemic collapse. Yet persistence should not be equated with stable authority. International organizations continue to function, but their authority is increasingly conditional on the willingness of major powers to tolerate procedural outcomes that do not fundamentally threaten strategic interests. Where those interests are sharply contested, institutional mandates become narrower, implementation becomes more selective, and collective commitments become more fragile. The result is a form of constrained multilateralism in which organizations endure but face greater difficulty exercising independent normative or political influence. Multilateral institutions therefore remain present as structures of order, even as their capacity to shape that order becomes more contested.

Great power rivalry also transforms multilateralism rather than merely weakening it. The pressure generated by strategic competition alters agendas, delays reform, intensifies procedural dispute, and changes the terms under which institutional legitimacy is claimed and contested. Major powers do not approach international organizations only as neutral sites for cooperation, but as platforms through which broader geopolitical projects may be advanced, defended, or obstructed. This means that institutional politics increasingly reflects wider struggles over influence and hierarchy in the international system (Cooper et al., 2025). Rivalry enters multilateral settings not simply through overt confrontation, but through budgetary bargaining, staffing preferences, rule interpretation, coalition building, and selective compliance. As a result, organizations may remain formally intact while their substantive direction becomes shaped by competition over institutional control. This transformation is especially important because it complicates binary interpretations that portray multilateralism as either functioning or failing. It is more accurate to understand contemporary multilateralism as being politically reconfigured through rivalry while retaining organizational continuity.

The analysis further indicates that major powers continue to engage international organizations because those institutions still provide important strategic value. Multilateral settings offer legitimacy,

visibility, and opportunities to shape rules in ways that unilateral action cannot always secure as effectively. They also provide mechanisms for blocking rival initiatives, framing normative debates, and influencing the procedural terms of international participation. This selective engagement reveals that international organizations are not used only to solve common problems, but also to manage competition under conditions of interdependence and institutional density (Chu et al., 2024). Strategic actors therefore remain invested in multilateral forums even when they challenge specific decisions or resist particular norms. Such behavior underscores that multilateralism is not external to power politics. It is one of the principal arenas through which power is exercised, negotiated, and symbolically justified. The political relevance of international organizations persists because rivalry itself is increasingly conducted through institutional channels rather than outside them.

This dynamic has uneven consequences across the international system. Smaller and middle powers continue to rely heavily on international organizations for procedural stability, normative predictability, and limited protection against arbitrary exercises of power. For these actors, multilateral institutions often provide one of the few available mechanisms through which voice can be expressed and collective concerns can be institutionalized (Dellmuth et al., 2019). However, when organizations are increasingly shaped by rivalry among stronger states, procedural certainty becomes less reliable and institutional fairness becomes more difficult to sustain. Smaller states may remain formally included while facing diminished influence over substantive outcomes. Middle powers may attempt to preserve institutional functionality through coalition building, mediation, or issue-specific leadership, yet their room for maneuver narrows when major-power competition intensifies. This unevenness demonstrates that fragmentation affects not only institutional efficiency but also the distribution of voice and security within global governance. Multilateralism under pressure therefore raises important questions about inclusion, representation, and asymmetrical dependence in a contested international order.

To clarify the principal relationships identified in the analysis, Table 1 summarizes the main dimensions through which great power rivalry reshapes international organizations and the practice of multilateralism.

Table 1. International Organizations, Great Power Rivalry, and Multilateralism in a Fragmented World

Analytical Dimension	Observed Pattern	Implication for Multilateralism
Institutional authority	Organizations remain active but face strategic constraint	Authority becomes conditional and contested
Great power rivalry	Competition reshapes agendas, procedures, and reform debates	Multilateralism becomes more selective and politicized
Strategic engagement	States use organizations for legitimacy, influence, and obstruction	Institutions serve both cooperation and rivalry
Inclusion and procedural fairness	Smaller states retain formal access but face reduced certainty	Institutional voice becomes more uneven
Governance continuity	Formal structures endure despite substantive disagreement	Persistence does not guarantee coherent collective action
Global order	Fragmentation is mediated through institutional settings	Multilateralism persists within a more divided system

The table supports the broader argument by demonstrating that pressure on multilateralism is not reducible to institutional paralysis alone. Several dimensions of organizational life remain active, yet their meaning is altered by the strategic environment in which they operate. The coexistence of continuity and contestation is especially important because it shows that fragmentation does not eliminate

multilateral governance. Instead, it modifies the conditions under which institutional authority is exercised and recognized. The table also clarifies that international organizations now perform dual roles. They remain sites of cooperation in formal and procedural terms, while simultaneously functioning as arenas of rivalry, legitimacy struggle, and strategic filtering. This duality explains why organizations persist even when confidence in shared governance declines. By organizing the relationship between authority, rivalry, inclusion, and order, the table provides a concise representation of the article's central claim that multilateralism is being reconfigured rather than displaced.

The discussion resonates with earlier scholarship on liberal institutionalism, particularly its argument that institutions can endure because they reduce uncertainty, preserve routines, and provide coordination benefits even under adverse political conditions. That insight remains valuable because it explains why international organizations continue to matter despite growing strategic tension. Yet an institutionalist reading on its own is insufficient to explain the depth of current pressures. What becomes more visible here is that institutional survival does not necessarily imply stable normative coherence or effective collective problem-solving. Organizations may remain operational while becoming increasingly shaped by conflict over rules, membership, authority, and procedural outcomes. This interpretation brings institutional persistence into closer dialogue with theories of power politics and contested order. Multilateralism does not stand apart from rivalry as a neutral mechanism of cooperation. It is increasingly embedded within the same struggles that shape the wider international system. Such a view strengthens the analytical bridge between institutional continuity and geopolitical fragmentation.

The discussion also extends debates on global governance fragmentation by showing that institutional division is not always expressed through formal breakdown or organizational replacement. Fragmentation may occur through selective participation, uneven compliance, procedural contestation, overlapping initiatives, and differentiated commitments within existing organizations. This is analytically important because it shifts attention from visible institutional failure to more subtle forms of transformation in governance practice. International organizations may continue to convene actors and issue rules while losing some of the shared normative consensus that previously underpinned their authority. The effect is a more segmented multilateral landscape in which institutional form survives but political substance becomes increasingly contested. Such a condition differs from simple decline. It reflects a reordering of governance in which institutions remain central yet operate under fragmented expectations and strategic asymmetries. Multilateralism in this context is not post-rivalry governance, but governance adapted to rivalry without fully overcoming it.

The theoretical implications are significant for understanding how order is maintained and contested through institutions. A fragmented-order perspective helps explain why international organizations remain indispensable even when they are under severe political strain. Their importance lies not only in solving collective problems, but also in structuring the terms on which rivalry is expressed, managed, and legitimized. This makes institutions constitutive of order even when they are unable to produce consistent consensus. Authority under such conditions becomes relational and contingent rather than fixed and universal. Legitimacy is no longer secured simply through formal mandate, but must be continuously negotiated against the background of strategic competition. This perspective also clarifies why multilateralism may appear simultaneously weakened and necessary. It is weakened in its capacity to generate broadly shared direction, yet necessary because no alternative framework offers equivalent

procedural reach and symbolic legitimacy. International organizations therefore remain central to contemporary order precisely because fragmentation increasingly passes through institutional channels. An unexpected complexity in the discussion concerns the degree to which rivalry can coexist with continued institutional dependence. Major powers often criticize, constrain, or selectively bypass international organizations, yet they rarely disengage from them completely. This pattern suggests that multilateralism retains strategic and symbolic value even for actors dissatisfied with particular rules or outcomes. Institutions remain useful because they provide platforms for agenda control, coalition management, legitimacy claims, and reputational positioning.

At the same time, this continued engagement may deepen institutional strain by turning organizations into arenas of repeated procedural conflict. The result is not simple erosion, but a more ambivalent institutional condition in which dependence and contestation reinforce one another. This complexity is important because it challenges the assumption that institutional pressure necessarily leads to institutional exit. Multilateralism may instead persist through conflict, adaptation, and contested use rather than through stable consensus.

Several strengths and limitations emerge from the present discussion. A major strength lies in the capacity of the analytical framework to connect institutional continuity with geopolitical rivalry rather than treating them as separate dynamics. This makes it possible to explain why international organizations remain politically significant even when their cooperative foundations are under strain. The discussion also captures the differentiated effects of fragmentation across major powers, middle powers, and smaller states, thereby broadening the analysis beyond great-power interaction alone. At the same time, limitations arise from the diversity of international organizations themselves, since institutional mandates, membership structures, and governance logics vary across issue areas. A document-based analysis can identify patterns of authority, rivalry, and procedural contestation, but it cannot exhaust the full range of internal institutional variation. Moreover, the pace of geopolitical change means that forms of rivalry and institutional adaptation may evolve faster than existing categories can fully encompass. These limits do not undermine the central argument, but they indicate the need for continued comparative and theory-informed work on multilateralism under pressure.

The broader relevance of the discussion lies in its implications for global governance, institutional reform, and future research. International organizations remain essential for addressing transnational problems, yet their effectiveness increasingly depends on how they navigate rivalry without losing legitimacy or procedural balance. This presents a practical challenge for policymakers seeking to preserve cooperation while managing strategic competition in ways that do not further erode institutional credibility. Future research would benefit from comparative analysis across global and regional organizations, closer attention to norm contestation and reform politics, and deeper examination of how smaller states seek to preserve institutional voice under fragmented conditions. Additional work is also needed on issue-specific variation, since rivalry may affect security, trade, health, climate, and development institutions in different ways. Such inquiry would refine understanding of how multilateralism adapts across distinct domains of global governance. The present discussion establishes the conceptual basis for that agenda by demonstrating that international organizations remain central not in spite of fragmentation, but because fragmentation itself increasingly unfolds through the institutions of multilateral order.

CONCLUSION

Multilateralism remains a central component of international order, yet its operation is increasingly shaped by the pressures of great power rivalry and the wider fragmentation of global politics. The discussion has emphasized that international organizations have not become obsolete, nor have they simply collapsed under strategic competition. Instead, they continue to provide coordination, legitimacy, and procedural structure while operating within a more contested political environment. Their authority has become more conditional, their agendas more politicized, and their capacity to sustain broadly shared institutional purpose more uneven. Great powers remain engaged in these organizations not only to support cooperation but also to influence rules, manage rivalry, and protect strategic interests. At the same time, smaller and middle powers continue to depend on multilateral institutions for voice, predictability, and limited procedural balance in an increasingly divided system. The broader significance of this argument lies in showing that multilateralism persists not as a stable alternative to rivalry, but as one of the main arenas through which rivalry is now mediated.

The article contributes to the field by integrating the study of international organizations with a broader perspective on fragmented order and great power competition. Existing scholarship has often emphasized either the resilience of institutions or the disruptive effects of power politics, but these approaches do not always explain how multilateralism is transformed when both dynamics operate simultaneously. By placing institutional continuity, strategic contestation, and differentiated participation within a single analytical frame, the discussion clarifies how international organizations remain politically relevant under conditions of mounting pressure. This perspective also refines the understanding of multilateralism by showing that institutional persistence does not necessarily imply stable authority, normative coherence, or effective collective action. International organizations emerge here as arenas in which cooperation, legitimacy, hierarchy, and rivalry are negotiated at the same time. Such an approach strengthens debates in global governance, international political theory, and institutional analysis by offering a more coherent explanation of how multilateralism adapts within a contested and fragmented international system.

Future research should examine more closely how different categories of international organizations respond to rivalry across issue areas such as security, trade, climate, health, and development. Comparative work between global and regional institutions would help clarify the conditions under which multilateral arrangements retain authority, absorb contestation, or become more selectively used by powerful states. Greater attention is also needed to the strategies of middle and smaller powers, particularly how they preserve voice, build coalitions, and navigate procedural inequality in increasingly polarized institutional settings.

Another important direction concerns the long-term implications of fragmented multilateralism for legitimacy, rule-making, and institutional reform. Research that traces the interaction between great power rivalry, organizational adaptation, and normative contestation would deepen understanding of how governance is being restructured in the current period. Continued inquiry is necessary because the future of international cooperation will depend not only on institutional design, but also on how multilateralism is politically redefined under conditions of persistent fragmentation.

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