

FROM TRANSITION TO RUPTURE: THE FATE OF THE RULES-BASED WORLD ORDER AND PAKISTAN'S STRATEGIC RECKONING

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Abstract

The international system is no longer undergoing a gradual transition but rather a systemic rupture, characterised by shifts in the distribution of power, erosion of institutional legitimacy, and fragmentation of normative consensus. Drawing on realist, liberal, and constructivist perspectives, the article examines the structural and normative drivers undermining the post-1945 international order, including great power rivalry, institutional paralysis, selective rule compliance, and technological and geo-economic coercion. Using qualitative analysis of recent geopolitical developments and regional conflicts, the study demonstrates that the emerging global environment is characterised by fragmentation, transactionalism, and power-centric behaviour rather than shared rules. It further assesses the strategic implications of this rupture for middle and developing powers, with particular emphasis on Pakistan's diplomatic space, security calculus, and strategic choices in an increasingly polarised international system.

Keywords: Rules-Based World Order, Systemic Rupture, Great Power Rivalry, Global Governance, Geopolitics, International Relations, Strategic Fragmentation, Middle Powers, Pakistan.

Introduction

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's now-infamous speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos (2026) vividly captured what other leaders had long evaded: that the world is "... in the midst of a rupture, not transition".¹ The Munich Security Report 2026, issued post the Munich Security Conference, went further in labelling the international order "Under Destruction", owing to the "Wrecking ball politics" of the "Demolition Men".² Modern-day geopolitics has moved ahead of both Fukuyama's promising "end of history"³ thesis and Huntington's gloomy "Clash of Civilizations"⁴ thesis. The present state of affairs is best described by the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci's idea of the "interregnum", where the "crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum variety of morbid symptoms appear".⁵

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Great-power rivalry, including US retrenchment, China's rise, and Russia's resurgence, weaponised interdependence, selective compliance with international law, and the rise of competing technological-economic blocs, has led to a shift from rules-based multilateralism to a transactional sphere of influence, minilateral coalitions, and grey zone contestation. This rupture presents acute dilemmas for Pakistan and necessitates recalibration of its diplomatic, geoeconomic, and security spheres. Since the stakes are existential, Pakistan will have to adapt with strategic clarity and internal resilience, lest it be subsumed by the logic of fragmentation.

This study employs a qualitative and interpretive research design to examine the evolving dynamics of the contemporary international system. Secondary sources, including policy documents, academic literature, strategic assessments, and reports of international organisations, have been analysed. A thematic analytical approach is used to identify the drivers of the systemic rupture, the great-power competition, institutional paralysis, weaponised interdependence, normative fragmentation, and technological rivalry. More recent geopolitical developments have been examined as illustrative case studies to assess the extent of the structural transformation. The study then evaluates the implications of these developments for middle powers, focusing on Pakistan's strategic environment and policy options.

The article seeks to answer the following question: Is the contemporary international system undergoing a gradual transition towards multipolarity, or is it experiencing a deeper systemic rupture that fundamentally alters the structure, norms and institutions of the post-1945 international order? A subsidiary question concerns the implications of this rupture for middle powers, particularly Pakistan.

The article advances the hypothesis that the contemporary international system is not merely undergoing a redistribution of power but is experiencing a systemic rupture characterised by the simultaneous erosion of international legitimacy, normative consensus, and strategic stability, thereby creating a more fragmented and competitive global environment with significant implications for middle powers such as Pakistan.

The Intellectual Architecture of Order: Concepts, Theories, and Literature

The Architecture

Orders are born out of necessity, designed by leadership, and enforced by those with the wherewithal to demand and ensure compliance. Its architecture includes power distribution arrangements, behavioural norms, and strong institutions that can manage conflict. It also incorporates a combination of shared principles, legitimate narratives, trade routes, and military bases. Like any architecture, it is vulnerable to decay. Hence, without hegemonic commitment, institutional adaptations, and normative reinforcement, cracks appear, foundations shift, and the entire edifice risks collapse.

Different architectural styles of the world order have succeeded one another across centuries, each bearing the dominant aesthetic and philosophical assumptions of its era.

Early Ideas of Social Order

The conceptual foundations of social order were systematically constructed through more than two millennia of philosophical contestation. Socrates contributed to the concept of the social contract by suggesting that individuals should obey the law, and was also a proponent of rule by competence. Plato's 'The Republic' (375 BC) and Aristotle's 'Politics' (325 BC) kindled early ideas of social order, including justice, legitimate authority, and systemic balance.

In his magnum opus, 'The Leviathan'⁶ (1651), Thomas Hobbes opined that in the absence of a central authority, individuals would remain in the 'state of nature', driven by self-interest, leading to chaos and a 'war of all against all'. John Locke considered that human beings were born as 'tabula rasa: blank slate'⁷ (1689), free and equal, and possessed inalienable rights of life, liberty, and property. In 'The Social Contract' (1762), Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that "man is born free but everywhere in chains". Rousseau explained that individuals willfully surrender their rights to the 'general will', which embodies legitimate political authority, based on public consent.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) emphasised the need for a social order to be morally justified, with its laws aligning with universal reason, with the citizens free but bound by duty, and with nations cooperating under cosmopolitan justice. In 'Perpetual Peace' (1795), Kant proposed the formation of a federation of states to prevent war, and gave the idea of universal human rights. In "Das Kapital" (1867)⁸ and "The Communist Manifesto" (1848)⁹, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels characterised capitalism as an exploitation of the working class, and advocated for a communist society without class distinctions.

Foundational Thinkers of World Order and Their Ideas

- **Morgenthau's Classic Realism:** In "Politics among Nations" (1948)¹⁰, Morgenthau, the founding father of classical realism, understood world order as rooted in the interplay of power politics, human nature, and moral purpose. Unlike structural realists, Morgenthau emphasised that material power could not sustain order alone; it was to be animated by moral purpose and exercised with prudence.
- **Bull's International Society:** Hedley Bull offered the most systemic classical statement on world order in "The Anarchical Society" (1977), with his central insight being that "sovereign states can form an international society"¹¹ despite anarchy.

Bull distinguished international order from world order, in that international order was an order amongst states to sustain the society of states, while world order was an order among humankind as a whole to sustain social life across society.

- **Waltz's Structural Turn:** In 'Theory of International Politics' (1979), Waltz argues that international outcomes are explained not by unit-level attributes like Morgenthau's leadership qualities, but by the structure of the internal system.¹² Waltz preferred the bipolar model to the multipolar model as it reduced the chances of miscalculations and provided clear lines of responsibility.
- **Keohane and Nye's Liberal Counter-Architecture:** In 'Power and Interdependence' (1997), Nye and Keohane profess neoliberal institutionalism, with emphasis on complex interdependence and soft power as crucial elements of world order. Both contend for an order where multiple channels connect societies, and military force is not used against other states.¹³
- **Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism:** Mearsheimer developed his theory of "offensive realism" in "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics"¹⁴, arguing that the great powers were engaged in a never-ending power struggle, as anarchy forced states to maximise their relative power to ensure survival. He argued that the USA and China were destined adversaries and recommended curtailment of China's economic growth rather than engaging with it.¹⁵
- **Kissinger's Pluralistic Architecture:** In 'World Order' (2014), Kissinger, both a practitioner and scholar, argued that "no truly global world order had ever existed"¹⁶ and the Westphalian order was a product of a congress of a select few empires, to the exclusion of most of the world's civilisations. For instance, while the Westphalian order developed in Europe, China developed a distinct order in the Far East, Islam developed a different concept of world order in the Middle East, and a new world order emerged in the "New World". He explained world order as the concepts held by a region or civilisation about the nature of just arrangements and the distribution of power thought to apply to the entire world.

While these theoretical perspectives provide valuable insights into the evolution and functioning of world order, none fully explain the contemporary phenomenon of systemic rupture. Realist thinkers correctly anticipate great-power competition and the return of balance of power politics. Realism tends to understate the importance of institutions, norms and economic interdependence. Liberal institutionalism explains the stabilising role of institutions and economic cooperation but struggles to account for the growing irrelevance of institutions in periods of geopolitical contestation. Constructivist perspectives highlight the role of identity, norms, and legitimacy, but often underestimate the enduring influence of material power.

The contemporary international environment reflects elements of all three traditions. The emerging rupture is simultaneously structural, institutional, normative, and technological. Consequently, understanding the present moment requires an eclectic analytical framework rather than exclusive reliance on any single theoretical perspective.

Table 1: Intellectual Evolution of World Order – Key Theorists

Scholar	Seminal Work	Theoretical Lens
Hans Morgenthau	Politics among Nations (1948)	Classical Realism
Hedley Bull	The Anarchical Society (1977)	English School (Classical)
Kenneth Waltz	Theory of International Politics (1979)	Structural (Neo) Realism
Nye & Keohane	Power and Interdependence (1997)	Neoliberal Institutionalism
John Mearsheimer	The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (2001)	Offensive Realism
Henry Kissinger	World Order (2014)	Realist Practitioner

Source: Author's Compilation

Existing scholarship on the changing international system primarily focuses on power transition, multipolarity, great-power competition, and the decline of the liberal international order. Much of this literature assumes continuity of core institutions and norms despite shifts in the distribution of power. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to the possibility that the contemporary international system may be experiencing a broader systemic rupture involving the simultaneous weakening of institutions, fragmentation of norms, technological decoupling, and geo-economics coercion. Furthermore, limited research has examined the implications of such a rupture for middle powers operating within contested geopolitical environments. This article seeks to address that gap by conceptualising the current moment as a systemic rupture rather than a conventional transition and by examining its implications for Pakistan's strategic choices.

Evolution of World Order: From Humble Beginnings to the Unipolar Moment

The Origins of Order

The origins of social order long predate the modern state, to the times when humanity's transition from hunter-gatherer bands to agricultural settlements fundamentally altered social scale and complexity.

Sedentary agriculture enabled population concentration and stratification – and with these emerged the perennial challenges of coordination and authority. Civilizational order developed independently in the six main cradles of civilizations – Mesopotamia, Egypt, Indus, China, Mesoamerica, and the Andean region. Over time, civilizations moved toward integration as they interacted through conquest, trade, and exploration, with philosophy and religion shaping governance and influencing inter-civilizational relations.¹⁷ The “Epic of Gilgamesh” (2100-1200 BC), the earliest known piece of poetry, propagated foundational insights: power without restraint breeds disorder, and greatness lies in safeguarding civilization. “The Code of Hammurabi”¹⁸ (1755-1751 BC) was the earliest codified legal system, which set a precedent for a rule-based society. Its 282 provisions established that governance should proceed according to publicly known rules rather than arbitrary will.

In the pre-Westphalian period, a layered system of religious legitimacy, imperial dominance, and customary norms structured international interactions. Order in human societies was sustained through a combination of religious legitimacy (Muslim Caliphate, Catholic Church), imperial dominance and military power (Roman, Ottoman, Chinese Empires), feudal hierarchies (kings, nobles, knights), customary law (Roman Law, Code of Hammurabi), and balance amongst powerful rulers (alliances, marriages, treaties).

The Institutionalisation of Order

The Magna Carta (1215), signed between King John and the rebellious barons, was the first step towards establishing the rule of law and constitutional governance, and laying limits on arbitrary royal authority. Far more decisively, the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), ushered in much-needed peace at the end of the 30-years’ War, and institutionalised the nation-state as the basic unit of international order. The principles it introduced - territorial sovereignty, equality amongst states, noninterference in the domestic affairs of states, and maintaining the balance of power in the international system – constituted the foundational load-bearing structures of the modern national state system. The treaty encouraged religious freedom and tolerance, and set a precedent for diplomatic negotiations instead of settling issues through brute force.¹⁹

The French Revolution (1789-1799) precipitated transformative ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity that challenged monarchical authority and inspired movements for independence, nationalism, and republicanism throughout Europe.²⁰ It was followed on its heels by the Congress of Vienna (1815), which established the Concert of Europe, leading to a new socio-political order in Europe. At its core, it focused on maintaining a balance of power among states, making territorial adjustments, and restoring monarchies overthrown during the Napoleonic wars.

The European revolutions (1848) in France, the German Confederation, the Austrian Empire, Italy, and elsewhere, also called the “Springtime of Nations,” rapidly disseminated liberal and democratic ideals, including national self-determination, participatory government, and nationalistic ideas.

In the Americas, the ‘Monroe Doctrine’²¹ (1823) signified a clean break from the European realm by articulating three main concepts: a separate sphere of influence for the Americas and Europe, non-colonisation, and non-intervention. It was later upgraded by the ‘Roosevelt Corollary’ (1904), which legitimised US intervention in Latin American states, embedding hegemonic prerogative within the regional order.

The inadequacies of the balance-of-power diplomacy culminated in the First World War (The War to End all Wars), leading to the demise of the imperialistic orders in the German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Ottoman empires, initiated the decolonisation process, and unleashed democracy, socialism, and intensified nationalism. While the war ended with the Treaty of Versailles (1919), grievances and instability lingered on in Europe.²²

The formation of the League of Nations (1920) was an attempt to institutionalise collective security and rules-based international dealings. It, however, lacked enforcement mechanisms and the participation of key players such as the USA and USSR, rendering it fatally ineffective, and highlighting the enduring vulnerability of institutions lacking universal commitment and coercive power.²³ The fragile peace could thus not hold and gave way to the Second World War.

Towards the Post-1945 Liberal Rules-Based World Order

US isolationism and French-British appeasements failed to bear fruit, as the 2nd World War witnessed the major powers throwing in their complete wherewithal into a total war, proving a watershed in international politics, dismantling old power structures and remodelling the international system, global politics, economy, and society. None of the pre-war political constructs, such as the balance of power system, US isolationism, totalitarianism, fascism, or appeasement doctrines, survived the war. In their place arose a liberal consensus emphasising democracy, the rule of law, market economics, collective security, and multilateralism, fostering economic growth, global trade, and relative peace among great powers.

Post-war, the new international order was divided between the US-led capitalist camp, institutionalised through NATO, and the Communist-led Soviet camp and its Warsaw Pact. The international economy was modelled by the Bretton Woods System (1944), which established the World Bank (WB) for reconstruction and development and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for monetary stability.

The Nuremberg and Tokyo trials advanced modern international law, while the United Nations (UN) institutionalised collective security and conflict prevention. The war decisively accelerated decolonisation, universalising sovereignty and national self-determination beyond Europe.²⁴

Dollar hegemony was reinforced first by the 1971 ‘Nixon Shock’, which ended gold convertibility, and then decisively by the 1974 US-Saudi Arabia petrodollar agreement, which established the dollar as the exclusive currency for the trade of oil. This bipolar Cold War order persisted until the Soviet collapse (1991) appeared to herald its universal triumph.

The Coming of the Unipolar Moment

Mikhail Gorbachev’s attempts at Perestroika (restructuring) and glasnost (openness) proved unable to hold the Union.²⁵ Chronic economic stagnation, the consequent internal discord, the superimposition of a costly Afghan War (1979-1989), the Chernobyl disaster (1986), and intensifying nationalist separatism in the Baltics, Eastern Europe, and Soviet Republics precipitated the Soviet Union’s abrupt disintegration in December 1991. The USA emerged as the sole superpower, enjoying an unparalleled qualitative lead across major power dimensions, particularly in economic, military, and technological terms. Glimpses of US political thought were evident from George H.W. Bush’s Iraq War speech to the Congress on 11 September 1990, which articulated a “new world order” emerging from crisis:

“Out of these troubled times, our fifth objective – a new world can emerge – a new era freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice, and more secure in the quest for peace”²⁶

In the aftermath of the demise of the Soviet Union, political pundits theorised various projections of the future world order. Mearsheimer (1990)²⁷ predicted a unipolar world reminiscent of the 1930s, Fukuyama’s end-of-history thesis (1989)²⁸ proclaimed liberal democracy’s ultimate ideological victory over other political thoughts, Huntington’s clash-of-civilisations thesis (1993)²⁹ projected cultural faultline conflicts, while Krauthammer (1990)³⁰ explicitly predicted a unipolar moment.

What followed was a period of unprecedented unipolar ascendancy spanning over two decades, with the US exercising unrivalled influence over the international system and its institutions, leading military interventions, driving economic globalisation, and advancing democratic norms.

The Contemporary World Order

The contemporary international system is at an unsustainable crossroads of mounting great-power rivalry, radical geopolitical realignments, and accelerated depletion of unipolar power, which requires urgent and severe competitive examination to prevent the fall into disorder or conflict.

The 21st century dawned with the rude awakening of 9/11, when the global hegemon (USA) was blatantly attacked and its superiority challenged. To reassert its superiority, it led a global war on terror, which consumed vast military, financial, and diplomatic resources. This overextension diverted US strategic focus precisely as emerging powers, most notably China, gained momentum, enabling their quiet ascent while Washington remained mired in protracted Middle Eastern, South Asian, and other engagements.

During this timeframe, the Middle Eastern order also started shifting as it cascaded into political and security turmoil owing to the War on Terror (2001-onwards), the Arab Springs (2011-onwards), and ensuing civil wars in Syria, Libya, Yemen, and elsewhere, leading to power vacuums exploited by non-state actors and regional rivals.³¹ The Great Recession³² (2007-2008), resulting from the subprime mortgage collapse and the fall of Lehman Brothers, Bear Sterns, and their likes, wiped out \$ 17 trillion from household wealth and another \$ 2 trillion from the US government assets, deepening the political polarization within Western democracies, manifesting in populist surges, as reflected in Brexit (2016) and the election of Trump (2016), fracturing liberal cohesion and eroding trust in multilateral institutions.

China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 finally awakened the sleeping giant, catalysing its explosive transformation into the 'factory of the world'.³³ China lifted 770 million people above the international poverty line, and started to assert itself internationally, evident from its stances regarding Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the South China Sea, while it expanded its outreach to the Middle East and Africa and embarked upon an ambitious global connectivity project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with China at its centre. Such developments led Graham Allison to frame the rise through the lens of the 'Thucydides Trap', predicting as 'Destined for War'.³⁴

In response, the US-led Western bloc also experimented with various initiatives, such as Trump's 'Better Utilisation of Investment Leading to Development (BUILD) Act' (2018)³⁵, Biden's 'Build Back Better World Initiative', later renamed the 'Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment' (2021),³⁶ and the EU's 'The Global Gateway Program'.³⁷

India viewed the BRI project as China's bid to dominate Asia, and choking India's rise through a 'string of pearls' encirclement around it in the Indo-Pacific region, partially prompting it to adopt an 'Act East Policy', invest in the Chabahar Port, and deepen Indo-Pacific alliances through the QUAD (USA, Japan, Australia, India), positioning itself as a pivotal counterweight to China.³⁸ These developments reveal a world order in flux: US primacy wanes amid distraction and division, while China's revisionist ambitions intensify. The stakes could not be higher – systemic fragmentation, economic decoupling, or Thucydidean conflict loom unless adaptive diplomacy and institutional resilience prevail.

The Rupture: Anatomy of Systemic Collapse

The Cracks in the International System

The current rupture did not come about all of a sudden. It has been in the making for some time now. The promise of a stable rules-based international order has gradually given way to strategic rivalry, institutional paralysis, economic fragmentation, and normative contestation. Significant inflection points include the Global Financial Crisis (2008), Russia's annexation of Crimea (2014), the rise of populism, anti-globalization politics, protectionist policies (2016), China's BRI (2016), and COVID-19 (2020). The more recent inflection points include the Russo-Ukraine war (2022-onwards), the Gaza conflict (2023 onwards), Iran-Israel conflicts (2025 & 2026), US withdrawal from 66 international organizations (2026), US intervention in Venezuela (2026), the intensifying power-contestation between China and the USA, and geopolitical issues in Sudan, Afghanistan, Pakistan-India, and the Middle East. These events collectively ushered in the change in the international system.

The Drivers of Rupture

- **Intensifying Great-power Competition and the Redistribution of Global Power:**³⁹ The foremost driver of the rupture remains the intensifying great-power competition, which has its roots in the rise of China, the resurgence of Russia, and the relative decline of the USA. China's rapid economic growth and technological development have positioned it as a systemic challenger to American primacy, while Russia has demonstrated a willingness to challenge Western security structures through military force. Concurrently, US strategic retrenchment and increasing unilateralism have acted as a catalyst; hence, there is a visible eastward shift in the ideational, military, and economic orders. Such multipolarity, however, strains the international system as major powers pursue divergent strategic interests and visions of global governance.
- **Weaponisation of Interdependence:** The second significant driver remains the weaponisation of interdependence, as the same geopolitical and economic networks that stabilised the old order are now being used as instruments of coercion, damaging trust, and accelerating fragmentation. Financial sanctions, export controls, and restrictions on technology transfers have become central instruments of competition, and can potentially divide the global economy along geopolitical lines, as witnessed in the exclusion of Russia from the SWIFT system, freezing of its \$ 300 billion bank assets, and the increasing de-dollarization efforts by BRICS+ aimed at replacing the petrodollar with other alternate currencies such as the Chinese Yuan and the Russian Ruble.

Supply chains are also increasingly being weaponized, as evident from the US export controls on advanced semiconductors to China, the EU's Critical Minerals Act (2023), and increased friend-shoring and near-shoring.

- Technological decoupling has given space to the emergence of two distinct technological spheres. Global commons, particularly space, seas, cyberspace, and data, are emerging as new battlegrounds.

Table 2: Top 10 GDPs by PPP in 2026⁴⁰

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>GDP by PPP (Trillion \$)</i>
1.	<i>China</i>	43.5
2.	<i>USA</i>	31.8
3.	<i>India</i>	19.1
4.	<i>Russia</i>	7.3
5.	<i>Japan</i>	6.9
6.	<i>Germany</i>	6.3
7.	<i>Indonesia</i>	5.4
8.	<i>Brazil</i>	5.2
9.	<i>France</i>	4.7
10.	<i>UK</i>	4.6

Source: Author's Compilation

- **Institutional Paralysis:**⁴¹ Thirdly, international institutions are facing irrelevance as they remain paralysed, bypassed, and undermined, removing mechanisms for peaceful dispute resolutions. The Russian veto on UNSC resolutions on Ukraine, US vetoes on Gaza ceasefire resolutions, the collapse of the WTO, and the rise of unilateralism in the form of AUKUS, Quad, IPEF, BRICS+, etc., all point in the same direction. Post-1945 institutions, including the UN, IMF, and WTO, are facing institutional fatigue, legitimacy, and effectiveness challenges. Technological competition, competing governance models, and geopolitical conflicts are all imposing their toll. The selective application of international law is giving space to a no-rules world.
- **Normative Fragmentation:**⁴² The fourth driver of rupture is normative fragmentation and the end of liberal consensus, as competing truth claims erode the shared basis for discourse, and social media algorithms amplify polarisation. Democratic backsliding in Western countries, as seen in Hungary, Poland, and the US Capitol Hill attacks, and the rise of populism, is giving way to a post-liberal landscape in Europe. Russia's authoritarian statehood, China's civilizational state, the Global South's pursuit of strategic autonomy, and Turkey, Pakistan, and the Gulf states' pivot towards Islamic solidarity signal an era where regional identity supersedes Western-led international norms.

- **Technological and Digital Rivalry:**⁴³ Divergent regulatory approaches (US innovation-led, EU rights-based, and China's state-controlled) shape competing global standards for AI, data governance, and military application. Rivalry between the US and China increasingly centres on AI, semiconductor production, cyber capabilities, and digital infrastructure. This technological contest is gradually driving the global economy into competing innovation ecosystems.
- **Expansion of Grey Zone Competition:**⁴⁴ Contemporary strategic competition has adopted hybrid approaches instead of military opposition. Information warfare, economic coercion, political influence campaigns, and cyber-hacking have become commonplace in statecraft. Blurring the lines between peace and conflict, grey zone activities have led to a consistent atmosphere of strategic contest.
- **Emergence of Alternative Institutional Frameworks:**⁴⁵ Dissatisfaction with existing Western-dominated institutions has encouraged the development of new platforms of cooperation among emerging powers. Strategic organisations/ projects such as BRICS, SCO, AIIB, GDI, GSI, and BRI reflect efforts to reshape aspects of global governance and reduce dependence on traditional Western-led institutions. The BRICS+ and the SCO Summit (2025) called for a new order aligned with Global South perspectives. China also pledged 12 billion Yuan, proposing an SCO Development Bank.

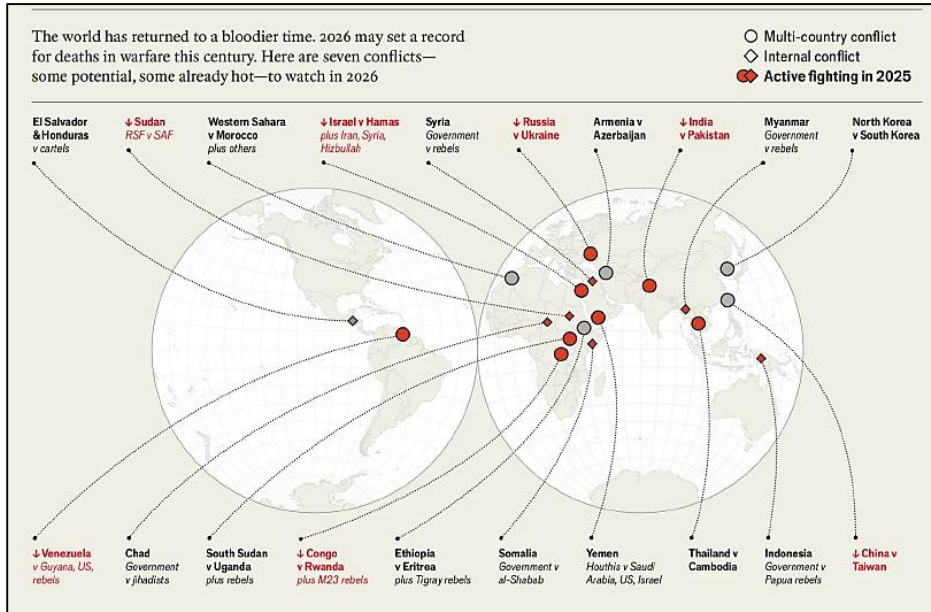
Recent Developments Hastening the Rupture

- **The Donroe Doctrine & US Unilateralism:**⁴⁶ Trump's second presidency has catalysed dramatic disruptions. His administration's National Security Strategy (NSS 2025), explicitly declared the end of US primacy in upholding the global order, pivoting toward Western Hemisphere priorities and treating tariffs as core security tools. This included aggressive tariffs on allies and adversaries, withdrawal from agreements like the Paris Accord and the WHO remnants, and threats to acquire territories, e.g., Greenland, the Panama Canal, etc. These actions undermined NATO solidarity, frosted transatlantic relations, and indicated withdrawal from collective security obligations. At the same time, China used its control over essential minerals and rare earths against US technological restrictions, introducing export bans in retaliation and compelling tariff reductions. The beginning of 2026 witnessed a US military operation in Caracas, forcibly capturing President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, and declared that the US would manage Venezuela until implementing a security transition.

The increasingly assertive “Donroe Doctrine” aims at ensuring hemisphere dominance, coercive intervention to remove unfriendly leaders or secure resources, and actively denying competitors (China and Russia) a strategic or economic foothold in the region.

- **US-European Divergence:**⁴⁷ Perhaps no development more profoundly affected the architecture of world order than the structural transformation of US-European relations. What had been the bedrock of the liberal order fractured into open divergence. US NSS 2025 pointed towards European civilizational decline due to demographic trends and mass migration, questioned the reliability of European allies, and declared its intent to correct Europe’s current development trajectory. The US has also demanded the handing over of Greenland to the USA, by Denmark, a key NATO ally.
- **Russo-Ukraine War:**⁴⁸ The Russo-Ukrainian conflict has dragged on without resolution. Russian forces captured key areas like Pokrovsk but failed to achieve broader operational breakthroughs. Trump’s initiative of negotiations has not borne fruit and has exposed collective security limits. September 2025 witnessed the scrambling of jets as Russian drones entered Polish airspace. The Kremlin’s muted response, without giving any explanation or apology, indicated Russia’s strategic emboldening to push the boundaries of the rules-based system with impunity.
- **Middle East Turmoil:**⁴⁹ The illegal occupation and genocide by Israel in Gaza, and its utter disregard for the Geneva Conventions and international law, have challenged the credibility of the world order, showing that the powerful can do as they wish. The security situation of the Gulf has been further aggravated by Israel’s Operation Rising Lion, the US’s Operation Midnight Hammer, and Israel’s strikes on Qatar during ceasefire talks with Hamas in 2025. Regional tensions lingered below the surface, eventually erupting into Operation Epic Fury (2026), with Israel and USA attacking Iran, assassinating the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, leading to Iran’s retaliation across the region, disrupting and eventually blocking movement in the Straits of Hormuz and striking US assets in Gulf countries. 2025 also witnessed G7 members, including France, Canada, and the UK, signalling intent to formally recognize Palestinian statehood, directly contravening US policy.
- **Cascading Regional Conflicts:**⁵⁰ Operation Sindoor and its response, Marka-e-Haq (2025), displayed the fragility of South Asian peace and stability. Similarly, the border conflict between Thailand and Cambodia produced acute human suffering and mass displacement, while the war in Sudan also led to over 150,000 fatalities and over 11 million displacements. The withdrawal of Arctic ice has turned the area into another high-stakes geopolitical frontier between the great powers. Such overlapping crises merit immediate attention as local escalations have now become threatening of systemic contagion in the prevailing anarchic geopolitics.

Figure 1: Conflicts to Watch in 2026⁵¹



Source: Author’s Compilation

Present-Day World View of the Rupture

- World Economic Forum – Davos 2026:**⁵² The yearly meeting of the WEF (19-23 Jan) was convened under the theme “A Spirit of Dialogue” and was attended by about 3000 leaders from 130 countries. The forum reached consensus that the erstwhile predictable geopolitics, which were rooted in shared norms, backed by international institutions, were over. The “WEF Global Risks Report 2026”⁵³ has identified geoeconomic confrontation followed by armed conflict as the top two risks at the global level. International leaders present at the WEF, including the Canadian PM Mark Carney and French President Emmanuel Macron, expressed concerns over the weakening of the contemporary order. The Finnish President Alexander Stubb framed the moment as generational, akin to 1918, 1945, or 1989, where power politics overtake liberal norms. Trump’s presence amplified tensions, with his mercantile approach towards tariffs as security tools and territorial bids symbolising American retrenchment from global leadership. China positioned itself as a defender of multilateralism. The ‘WEF Global Cooperation Barometer 2026’⁵⁴ noted that trade and capital cooperation flattened, and the peace and security cooperation continued to decrease, as conflict escalated, military spending rose, resolution mechanisms struggled to de-escalate crises, and the number of forcibly displaced people grew to 123 million globally.

- **Munich Security Conference 2026:** ⁵⁵ The 62nd Munich Security Conference (13-15 February), attended by over 40 heads of state, also starkly diagnosed the rules-based international order to be actively “under destruction”. The Munich Security Report 2026⁵⁶ framed the world as being dominated by wrecking-ball politics, with the US being the primary force eroding core elements in favour of transactional bilateralism, private lessons, and great-power dominance. German Chancellor Friedrich Merz declared the order no longer exists as it once did, asking Europe to reduce its dependence on the US and adopt strategic autonomy. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio also acknowledged that the old world was gone. European Commission President, European Union, Ursula Von Der Leyen, amongst others, called for principled and pragmatic power projections to defend values and fill governance voids through new coalitions. Consensus emerged on profound uncertainty: transactional diplomacy now eclipses multilateralism, geo-economic threats proliferate, and middle powers must independently build resilience. MSC 2026 crystallised 2026’s paradigm shift – multipolar contestation, securitised geopolitics, and eroded predictability.

The Emergent Landscape: Contours of the Post-Rupture World

With the trajectory that geopolitics has taken, it seems that the world order is unlikely to replicate either the unipolar moment or the bipolar order witnessed after the Cold War. Instead, it will take a new shape with several structural characteristics.

Multipolar Distribution of Power

The most visible feature will be multipolarity, wherein instead of one powerful hegemon, several major powers will shape the international system simultaneously. These include China, the USA, Russia, the EU, and India. A slightly different view is given by Amitav Acharya, who views the incoming order as a ‘Multiplex order’, in which there would be no globally dominant country, bloc, ideology, or institution. Order would be culturally and politically diverse, and global governance would be pluralistic with increased regional institutions, while the Liberal World order would return to its original form of a club of Western nations.⁵⁷

Layered & Fragmented Globalisation

While globalisation is beneficial and cannot be rolled back, it is likely that it will become selective and securitised. Regionalised supply chains, strategic decoupling in critical technologies, and competing economic blocs are likely to appear. Institutions like the WTO will lose authority. International relations will be more transactional than value-based, with national interest becoming the ‘new values’.

Competitive Institutionalism & Regionalised Security Orders

A Pluralistic world order will feature parallel institutional networks, instead of one dominant authority. NATO, BRICS+, and SCO will increase. Grand institutions of the 20th century (UN, WTO) are likely to be abandoned in favour of minilateralism – small, agile, and often exclusionary groups, e.g., AUKUS, SMDA, etc.

Technological & Economic Blocs

Competing ecosystems may emerge around AI, semiconductor supply chains, digital infrastructure, and space and cyber domains. Governments are racing towards building their own 'Sovereign AI' infrastructure and owning their national AI stacks, which would enable them to formulate and even dictate economic growth, security, culture, and innovation; they risk remaining dependent permanently. For the moment, a 'digital iron curtain' is setting in between the US and Chinese tech hubs, while an off-ramp is nowhere in sight.

Greater Strategic Space for Middle Orders

The rupture is imposing unprecedented structural pressure on middle powers while simultaneously redefining the logic of their strategic behaviour. Intensifying rivalry between the US and China, together with the declining effectiveness of institutions such as the UN, is compressing strategic autonomy through sanctions vulnerability, technological exclusion, and coercive interdependence. Yet this rupture also generates limited but consequential opportunities for diplomatic manoeuvrability. Middle powers, including Pakistan, are increasingly compelled to adopt calibrated multi-alignment strategies within a fragmented, competitive, and normatively weakened order that is becoming structurally harsher and strategically less forgiving.

Pakistan at the Crossroads: Implications and Strategic Pathways

Strategic Implications

- **Systemic Rupture & Pakistan's Strategic Context:** Pakistan's strategic environment is adversely impacted by the rupture of the international order. Its traditional approaches towards balancing international relations remain stressed owing to the erosion of institutional authority and increasing coercion in interdependence. Over-reliance, either on China or on Western partners thus exposes Pakistan to bloc-based pressures, sanctions, and conditionalities. Navigation of such challenging circumstances necessitates strategic clarity, institutional predictability, and internal resilience.

It needs to maintain a calibrated approach towards global actors, while balancing security, economic, and technological needs, in order to preserve its strategic manoeuvrability and safeguard its strategic autonomy.

- **Regional Embeddedness & Security Challenges:** Pakistan's security dynamics are further complicated by regional issues. At the centre lies the enduring rivalry with India, a dispute that continues to shape the national and regional psyche. To the west, fragility in Afghanistan contributes to cross-border militancy, inflows of refugees, and trade closures. Beyond the immediate neighbourhood, Pakistan needs to navigate the shifting sands of Middle Eastern diplomacy between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Simultaneously, as the US and China compete for influence, Islamabad faces the daunting task of carving out a pragmatic path to avoid being sidelined.
- **Economic Vulnerabilities and Strategic Exposure:** For Pakistan, the weight of external debt and trade gaps is more than a fiscal challenge – it is a struggle for national autonomy. When global lenders operate through a geopolitical lens, economic survival becomes tied to difficult foreign trade-offs. Building a resilient domestic economy is no longer just about numbers: it is about protecting the country's ability to chart its own course amidst global pressure.
- **Technological Fragmentation and Dependency:** In a world divided by competing technologies, Pakistan's digital choices are no longer just about convenience – they are about the country's right to choose its own future. Relying on one global ecosystem risks closing the door to another, quietly eroding national autonomy. Mastering our own tools in AI and cyber-security isn't just a technical goal; it is the only way to ensure Pakistan's voice remains heard and its borders remain secure.
- **Changing Character of Conflict – Increased Hybridity:** Today's security landscape is no longer a predictable map, but a shifting terrain of deep uncertainty. As global rivalries penetrate South Asia, the safety once promised by international institutions and conflict-management mechanisms is fading, leaving nations to rely on their own deterrence. With hybrid threats, including cyber threats and disinformation, blurring the lines of traditional warfare, security is now about navigating ambiguity. Preparing for this future requires more than just strength; it demands a new, human-centric agility.

Strategic Pathways

- **Strategic Pathway I–Multi-Alignment under Constraints:** In a fragmented world, Pakistan's path is a delicate balancing act of 'constrained multi-alignment'. It is not just about policy, but about maintaining deep-rooted ties with China while keeping the doors open to Western trade and technology.

This journey through multilateral forums like the SCO and UN is a quest for diplomatic breathing room to ensure the country remains connected without becoming overextended in global rivalries.

- **Strategic Pathway II–Goeconomic Re-Orientation:** Geo-economics must become central to Pakistan’s national strategy. The significant regional connectivity potential of its geographic position at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East is well-known. The CPEC 2.0 provides a platform to transform Pakistan into a key transit and trade hub. However, realising this potential requires sustained economic reforms, improved governance, and a stable investment climate. Diversifying economic partnerships beyond China to include Western economies, Gulf states, and emerging markets is essential to reducing vulnerabilities and enhancing resilience.
- **Strategic Pathway III–Regional Stabilisation and Connectivity:** For Pakistan, geography is a bridge to shared prosperity. By weaving together trade and energy with Central Asia, we turn regional friction into a common interest. Even where old disputes linger, such as with India, incremental steps in trade and development help reclaim our role as a vital connector, building a more stable, human-centred future for all.
- **Strategic Pathway IV–Technological and Institutional Adaptation:** Investing in technology is more than a policy – it is about securing Pakistan’s future in a digital age. By strengthening our digital infrastructure, cyber resilience, and scientific research, we protect our national potential. Further progress requires that Pakistan’s economic, diplomatic, and security institutions maintain a coordinated, coherent, and human-centred response to an unpredictable global landscape.
- **Strategic Pathway V–Internal Resilience as Strategic Foundation:** The ability to absorb external pressures and exploit opportunities depends on the degree of social cohesion, institutional effectiveness, and economic stability. A strong domestic foundation remains essential for proactive policies.

Limitations of the Study

This study has certain limitations. First, it relies primarily on qualitative analysis and secondary sources rather than quantitative modelling. Second, several geopolitical developments examined in the article remain ongoing, making definitive conclusions difficult. Third, the concept of systemic rupture is inherently interpretive and may be viewed differently through alternative theoretical lenses. Finally, the rapidly evolving nature of international politics means that future developments may reinforce, modify, or challenge some of the arguments advanced herein. The finding should therefore be viewed as an analytical assessment of emerging trends rather than a deterministic forecast.

Concluding Thoughts—Living with the Rupture

The global shift is more than a structural change; it is a profound test of national character. For Pakistan, the end of unipolarity removes the safety net of a single patron, but it also restores a sense of agency that was long suppressed. Challenges that were once hidden by a stable system are now exposed, yet this fragmentation creates the space for a more independent, self-determined path. The future will thus not be dictated by great powers or influenced by alliances but by Pakistan's own strategic clarity, manoeuvrability abroad, and internal strength. The current rupture in the world order is a stark ultimatum: Pakistan must either evolve and forge a new course or risk being sidelined by global forces.

Pakistan can navigate this interregnum by activating its unique assets, including its geostrategic location, nuclear capabilities, and the global outreach of its diaspora, within a unified framework of economic and diplomatic reform. This is not just a policy adjustment; it is a reckoning that demands we transform domestic resilience into international leverage. The response will determine the fate of the nation for times to come.

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