



" Great Power Competition: A Continuous Challenge for Global Stability,
International Norms and International Law"

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Citation: Munazza Khalid, Asima Ashraf, Saqib Mahmood, & Noor Fatima. (2024). Great Power Competition: A Continuous Challenge for Global Stability, International Norms and International Law. *Al-Qirtas*, 3(3). Retrieved from <https://al-qirtas.com/index.php/Al-Qirtas/article/view/342>

Abstract:

The re-emergence of great power competition poses a significant threat to multilateralism, regional and international order. The United States and China are the two world superpowers that have been seen battling for the control of the international order and power supremacy; the world gets to see the change in the geopolitical landscape in a way that seems to erode the gains that had been made in world order and war management within the last fifty years. The conflict, which has an economic dimension, a technological dimension and geopolitical confrontation, can lead to the destabilization of regions, increase the intensity of existing conflicts and undermine the principles of international law. It has been not seen as a bilateral conflict between the USA and China, but as a system-level confrontation. Being concerned with their own interests in the global power, these two powers may undermine the current world order institutions, rules, and regulations. This could lead to deterioration of cooperation in areas such as climate change, nuclear proliferation, and human rights among other areas. Further, the competition might lead to arms races, higher spending on defence, and also potential chances of a deliberate or inadvertent conflict. The last two decades have seen deterioration of international norms, and the system of rules in the international relations threatens the stability of the world. Globalisation is a reality where international norms and standards are not strictly adhered to by great powers, thus making the world a volatile place. The disintegration of the global institutions also means continued loss of systems for the prevention of armed conflicts and maintaining international order, including the United Nations. To avoid these risks, the members of the global society should once again express commitment to international law, bolster institutions that are already in place, and foster conversation and collaboration between the superpowers.

Keywords: Great power competition, Global stability, International norms, International law, Rule-based international order



Introduction

Great power competition is the competition between the leading world powers based on their national interests and political and economic systems, and the quest for world hegemony. This has been the backbone of international relations throughout history as states' competition to achieve a dominant position in the international system. Such examples include the Cold War where the United States and the Soviet Union were in competition resulting to proxy wars, arms race, and formation of two different blocs (Gaddis, 2005). This bipolar rivalry period had a great impact on the formation of international norms and laws as both superpowers tried to challenge the other in an effort to dominate the world. However, Cold War did not end in the twentieth century but rather re-emerged in the twenty-first century with different players such as China and Russia challenging the existing international system (Allison, 2017).

In the modern world, great power competition has been considered as a threat to stability in the world, international norms, and the international legal frameworks. There is increased competition between the superpowers such as the United States, China, and Russia which has resulted in a world that is divided and unpredictable with increased tendencies of conflicts and insecurity (Friedberg, 2020). This rivalry is evident in economic aggression, the militarization of states, and use of computer viruses and diplomacy that threatens the cooperation structures that have been put in place to support peace and order (Mearsheimer, 2018). This aggression is done in a bid to protect the sovereign interests of these world powers, but it comes at the cost of violating other principles of international law including sovereignty, human rights, and the rule of law hence demeaning international law. With the increasing competition among great power, the threats to world stability as well as the violation of international law become more apparent thereby posing threats to the international system of the future (Ikenberry, 2020).

This paper contends that the new great power competition is not only a threat to global order but also to the sustenance and growth of international norms and the international legal order as well. With great powers putting their international interests first, the world becomes in danger of shifting back to being more of a state of war. This erodes the standards of civilization like sovereignty and respect of treaties and agreements which are the basis of the international legal order and the structures which exist to prevent and control conflict and violence (Nye, 2020). Furthermore, the rivalry between the great powers intensifies the existing global problems, for example, climate change, nuclear proliferation, and cyber security, as those states are less likely to cooperate on the shared issues. These issues can only be resolved by the rejuvenation of the international order which implies the reestablishment of multilateralism, the consolidation of international organizations and the bolstering of the international legal framework which is crucial to preserving world order amid intensifying great power competition.

The Nature of Great Power Competition



The competition between great powers in the contemporary world can be characterized by certain features that separate it from previous epochs. Pivotal to this competition is the fact that great power competition is not a simple contest, but one that is multi-faceted especially between the US, China, and Russia (Mearsheimer, 2019). While the Cold War was a bipolar war of sorts between two superpowers, today's struggle is characterized by entwinement and multiple actors. This setting encourages not only limited war and war by proxy, but also sanctions and alliances. The increase in competition is further backed up by China as it aims to displace the United States as the superpower of the world and seeks to shape the international order to its advantage (Ikenberry, 2020). This dynamic in my view suggests a transition towards a more complex world structure that is more diversified and polycentric and which is altering traditional power relations.

The economics of great power rivalry has risen to the forefront of the international system due to technological advancements and state-led economic strategies. The trade wars which are still being experienced such as that of the US and China are a clear indication of the importance of economic power in the modern day rivalry (Baldwin, 2021). Both powers are moving in a high-stakes contest to dominate the latest technology including in areas of artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and 5G technology (Kreisberg, 2022). Sanctions in the form of tariffs, trade and investment liberalisation and restrictions have emerged as one of the important elements of state power in shaping the economic and technological systems of the world. It is evident in the attempts to control new markets and supplies, proving that economic and technological plans are inseparable in determining geopolitical realities.

Ideological and geopolitical factors also define the character of the great powers' confrontation and contribute to the understanding of the tendencies and objectives. In fact, it is argued that contemporary great power rivalry is based on the conflicting ideas of the system of order and governance (Mearsheimer 2019). The US supports a liberal international order with democratic and open market democracy while China supports state sovereignty and regime controlled market access (Ikenberry, 2020). This ideological cleavage is reflected in their foreign policies and international positioning from security architecture to economic governance. It also entails geopolitical strategic balancing whereby the world powers try to assert their dominance over strategically important regions like the Indo-Pacific and Eastern Europe (Baldwin, 2021). It is crucial to grasp such ideological and geopolitical incentives in order to discern the general trends of present great power rivalry.

Impact on Global Stability

The lack of confidence and collaboration in today's international relations is another impact of great power rivalry. In the contest between the USA, China and Russia, among others, standard diplomatic conventions and multilateral agreements are eroded (Friedman, 2021). The erosion of the role of international organizations coupled with increased reliance on individual states' actions are indicative of the erosion of trust in the international realm. For example, the decision



of the US to withdraw from such agreements as the Paris Climate Accord and the World Health Organization only prejudiced relations and weakened the efficiency of global governance institutions (Ikenberry, 2020). It distorts the collective approaches towards global issues like climate change and pandemics undermining the collective ability to tackle these problems.

Another negative outcome of great power competition is the higher chances of an error and a conflict. The current relations between the major powers have led to a situation where small incidents are likely to escalate (Taliaferro, 2022). For example, the military posturing and frequent confrontations in contested regions like the South China Sea and Eastern Europe raise the likelihood of unintended conflicts (Mearsheimer, 2019). The presence of advanced weaponry and rapid technological advancements further complicates the strategic landscape, increasing the chances of misjudgments that could lead to open conflict. This risk is exacerbated by the lack of effective communication channels and crisis management mechanisms between rival powers.

This paper argues that regional stability and security are significantly impacted by the continuous real struggle between the great powers with various consequences across different regions. For instance, in the Indo-Pacific, the Washington-Beijing rivalry has further militarized the region and redrawn strategic alliances (Blackwill, 2021). Likewise, in Eastern Europe, the competition has deepened security issues and shaped the defence dynamics of this region (Friedman, 2021). Such dynamics make states engaged in these systems spend more on defence, increase tensions in the affected regions, and trigger second-tier conflicts, which in turn erode stability. The changes in friends and foes and the changes in power relations are responsible for a relatively unstable regional security environment affecting both the regional and the global security.

Challenges to International Norms

The weakening of multilateralism and strengthening of unilateralism present major challenges to international norms. The major institutions that have served and guided the process of global cooperation and collective action, multilateralism, has been left to the background as nations, especially the US, advances its policies on unilateralism (Ruggie, 2021). For instance, the recent actions of the American administration withdrawing its commitment from some critical multilateral agreements like the Paris Climate Accord and the World Health Organization indicate a world that is embracing the solutions that only enhance the interests of the sovereign state than the commonly accepted global solutions (Haas, 2022). This action is counterproductive to the principles of multilateralism which is important in addressing issues of global nature such as climate change and global health crises. This tendency undermines the collective adherence to the rules which are supposed to govern international relations and interferes with the cooperative arrangements that have been the key to regulating global affairs.

The gradual decline of human rights and liberal democracy is an acute problem in the context of increasing tensions. Authoritarian states, including China and Russia, are gradually turning a blind eye to international human rights norms and democratic values while



undermining the world's foundations (Levitsky & Roberts, 2022). The crackdown on protests; restrictions on freedoms; and interference with elections in different countries indicate a decline of democracy (Mounk, 2021). This erosion is not only a loss for human rights but also a loss of confidence and impact in international human rights instruments. Such erosion of these norms has been influenced by current global political trends and has implications on the future of democracy around the world.

Competition over the management of the international system through the structures of global governance institutions intensifies the problem of international norms. Major Powers are now challenging the sovereignty and right of the United Nations and the World Trade Organization and others like them (Blackwill & Kahl, 2021). The United States and China, for instance, have been involved in strategic competition that influences these institution's efficiency and legitimacy (Kissinger, 2021). It results in the decentralisation of global governance and weakens the integration of international norms. These institutions are being changed to reflect the interests of the major powers and the international community has found it much harder to present a joint approach to the governance of the world and the standards that should apply.

The Weakening of International Law

The willingness to violate international conventions and protocols is one of the most important threats to the stability and unity in the sphere of international law. In the past, treaties and agreements have been the cornerstone of international relations especially as a means of regulating interstate relations. But emerging tendencies show that there is a clear tendency towards non-compliance and selectivity (Krasner, 2020). For instance, the US departure from the Paris Climate Accord as well as the Iran Nuclear Deal demonstrates a deeper trend of the practice of national selfishness over international responsibility (Kinsella, 2022). This erodes the sovereignty of treaties and reduces the strength of the systems that are put in place to manage world problems, therefore making the international system even more chaotic and uncoordinated.

International law becomes the instrument in geopolitical struggle to weaken opponents which makes the understanding of the global legal framework even more challenging. International law is politicised as Major Powers use the legal principles and institutions to achieve their planned policies (Klabbers, 2021). For instance, the international legal claims by China in the South China Sea are used tactically to exercise control over the territories while at the same time questioning the existing maritime laws (Zhang, 2022). In the same way, the degree and manner in which humanitarian law is observed by different states is also questionable since this compromises the authority and legitimacy of international law. Such an instrumentalization of international law distorts its function of the third party and weakens its legitimacy.

These trends carry certain significant implications for the order and security of the global system. This undermines the framework upon which global cooperation and the protection of international peace and stability rely (Cox, 2021). When international treaties provide less stable environment and legal norms are in question, the capability of the international community in



responding to the global problems reduces. This instability can result in escalation of conflicts both at the international and regional level as the set order that has been formed reduces conflicts (Slaughter, 2022). The erosion of the respect for international law, therefore, jeopardizes the underlying framework that has in the past been instrumental in the preservation of international peace and security.

Case Studies

The South China Sea is a clear example of the great power rivalry occurring in the Asia-Pacific region. Chinese aggressive behavior in the process of claiming the territories in the South China Sea through the construction of artificial islands and military facilities has raised tensions with countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia (Kaplan, 2021). This competition is crucial to regional security as well as maritime law since China's activities violate the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and erode the rules-based order (Zhang, 2022). The United States and its allies have responded by conducting FONOPs and diplomatic pressure to balance China's assertiveness and maintain freedom of navigation and international law (Ikenberry, 2020). Nonetheless, international intervention has not been effective in the resolution of the issue as China's regional hegemonic power and strategic inroad persists to alter the geopolitics of the South China Sea.

The Ukraine crisis is one of the most vivid examples of great power rivalry in Europe, which shows Russia and Western countries. In recent past, the Russia's military intervention in Ukraine particularly the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its support to separatists in the eastern Ukraine has resulted into serious confrontation with EU and NATO (Mearsheimer, 2019). This conflict presents the issues of stability in a region and the actions of the international organizations in the face of territorial invasion. Consequently, the EU and the US have applied sanctions against Russia and offered military and economic assistance to Ukraine (Applebaum, 2021). Although these measures have put pressure on Russia economically, they have not brought the end to the conflict and do not roll back Russian territorial gains. The ongoing instability in Ukraine underscores the limitations of international responses in addressing territorial disputes and the broader implications for European security.

The conflict in Syria is a good example of how the struggle between major powers affects the Middle East and its countries. The United States and Russia and Iran have had different approach towards Syria, Russia and Iran supporting the Assad regime while the US and its allies supporting various groups of the opposition (Marten, 2020). The leading powers have not only perpetuated the crisis but also contributed to the difficulties of finding a peaceful resolution. The international actors have also not responded well to the situation through diplomacy, aid, and recognition of the situation because of conflict of interest among the powers and the dynamics of the region (Tessler, 2022). The case of Syria might also be used to demonstrate that it is challenging to reach consensus and provide efficient action in conflicts where the great power



interests are vested deep, thus showing the inefficiency of the international mechanisms in the resolution of the corresponding disputes.

Implications for Global Governance

The continuous competition between great powers, therefore, necessitates a changed international system which can effectively meet challenges of the modern world. The current international system which was created after the Second World War is increasingly seen as ill-equipped to deal with the contemporary global politics (Ikenberry, 2020). The emergence of the multipolar world and the change of power between the leading states requires the adaptation of the existing international system to new conditions and new threats (Kissinger, 2021). In some cases, the processes of change may imply the improvement of the existing order, for instance, by revitalising the United Nations and making its principal organs more legitimate and efficient while also addressing the questions of representation and accountability in the context of the contemporary distribution of power (Ruggie, 2021). These reforms are needed to preserve the stability around the world and to guarantee that international organizations are capable to regulate conflicts and search for the cooperative outcomes.

In order to address the new challenges and changes in the international relations, it is necessary to develop the current institutions and establish new ones which can correspond to the new challenges. International organizations such as the UN and WTO are important in the regulation of International Relations but their efficiency is sometimes marred by political influence and bureaucracy (Klabbers, 2021). To strengthen these institutions' ability to address global challenges, the reforms that have to be made are aimed at strengthening the decision-making systems, raising the representativeness of these institutions, and fortifying enforcement procedures (Slaughter, 2022). Also, new institutions or forums dedicated to specific issues, for instance cybersecurity or climate change or any other that may arise can be effective in addressing existing challenges than the traditional bodies (Haas, 2022). Building up and enlarging the international institutions is essential for governing international relations and meeting the contemporary geopolitical challenges as well as the demands of the international society.

'Newcomers' or rising states, most notably China and India, are not passive recipients of the changes taking place in the international system, but actors that have the potential to shape the future of the international system and international governance. When these countries are economically and militarily powerful, they will necessarily bring their interests and priorities to the global management of norms and rules (Mearsheimer, 2019). The China's Belt and Road Initiative and its active participation in the international organizations are seen as a sign of China's desire to redesign the international economic and political systems (Blackwill & Kahl, 2021). Likewise, the increasing geopolitical role and international alliances play the part of India in shaping global trends, including trade or climate change (Saran, 2021). The emergence of these new powers requires that their role and input be incorporated into the international system so



that they are fully involved in decision making. These changes could pave way for a new order that is fair bearing in mind the changing dynamics of the world in the 21st century.

The potential for new forms of conflict

Emerging threat types including cyber warfare and space warfare are new forms of conflict which are a departure from the old world security threats. With the development of technology, such new fronts of confrontation are gradually entering the sphere of strategic interests for countries of the world.

Cyber Warfare:

It is evident that the cyber warfare is now a featured and disruptive form of conflict in the modern world. Both state and non-state actors are using cyber capabilities to steal information and infiltrate, sabotage, and manipulate. Computer hackers can carry out complex operations sponsored by certain states to steal classified information from government and military databases or simple cyberattacks on civilian infrastructure including electric power stations and financial institutions. The current battlefronts are in cyberspace, and cyberspace is a different fight than the conventional fight; it has no face and it is international. The chances of doing very large amounts of damage at a relatively low cost and the non-identifiability of a cyber-attack greatly increases the risks and the complexities of cyber warfare. In the context of growing dependence of countries on digital platforms, the potential of cyber battles as threats to national security and global peace grow more significant.

Space Warfare:

Another new type of conflict is also the space warfare as countries and private companies invest in the technologies for space exploration and in military purposes. The new dangers to the international stability arise from space weaponization and satellite destruction: satellite-based weapons and anti-satellite systems. There is a possibility of space-based conflicts affecting satellite communication, navigation and observation systems that are useful in civilian and military operations. Thus, if space continues to accumulate more satellites and other objects, the chances of accidental contact as well as the tensions in this sphere will rise. The use of space assets as critical components of modern warfare and the growing rivalry for space superiority makes it imperative to develop new rules and regulation of this force.

Hybrid and Asymmetric Warfare:

However, the application of cyber and space warfare, hybrid and asymmetric warfare strategies are gradually emerging as the new trends. Hybrid warfare is an unconventional warfare, wherein the methods used are not limited to but include cyber warfare, information warfare, and economic warfare and aims to achieve strategic goals without necessarily opting for a military war. Security



threats also arise where one side of a conflict seeks to take advantage of the weaknesses of the other side hence the asymmetrical warfare. They all pose new obstacles to old military paradigms and force new forms of thinking in terms of security and foreign policy.

Dealing with these new types of conflict calls for multilateral approaches and formulation of new paradigms of managing and regulating risks. Setting of rules and regulations governing the use of cyberspace and space, improvement of cooperation in the field of cyber security, and the development of procedures for the prevention of conflicts in these relatively new fields are vital to stability and security in the modern world..

Conclusion

In conclusion, the current great power contestation affects global governance as it questions the relevance of international institutions and norms. The current waning of multilateralism, the weakening of human rights, and the calculated use of international law are some of the challenges associated with dealing with the new evolving international politics. National self-interests and inter-bloc animosities, which form part of Strategic Rivalries between Major Powers, have continued to erode Supranational Cooperation in the management of global issues relating to territorial conflicts, human rights abuses among others. These dynamics lead to the occurrence of a fragmented and an unstable environment in the international system and this makes it difficult for the world to maintain order and security. The threats that stem from great power competition are complex; these include the erosion of conventional international norms, growing geo-political rivalry, and the selective use of laws. With the current phenomenon of emergent states seeking to exert increased influence on the international system, the need for a new international system that is more representative becomes more and more imperative.

From this complex environment, there are the following important measures: consolidating existing institutions, developing new ones to respond to new challenges and making sure that international actions are efficient and fair. If these challenges are not met, the world is likely to see the further decay of the international system, its fragmentation. Continuation of cooperation and adherence to the principles of international law is important for the stability of the world and to deal with the problems that humanity faces. The events of the past years make it crucial for the international community to provide support for multilateralism as well as to start the process of adapting the world governance system to the new realities. Through encouraging cooperation, applying international standards non-discriminatorily, and including as many states as possible in decision making, international relations can work out the conflicts, protect human rights, and respond to international challenges. Finally, it is necessary to underline the significance of saving the international cooperation and law as the foundation for a stable, just, and prosperous world.

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