

Essay

GLOBAL US ABSENCE & ALTERNATIVE POWER CENTERS

Shrouq Jaradat

INTRODUCTION

On September 18, 2025, the United States (US) cast its sixth veto in less than two years to block a draft resolution at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) demanding an immediate and permanent ceasefire in Gaza.¹ The vote occurred just days after a UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry concluded that Israel has been committing genocide in Gaza since October 2023.² The US position not only disregarded these findings but also the demands of the majority of UN Member States. As early as December 12, 2023, 153 countries voted in favor of a resolution calling for a ceasefire.³ Invoking the Uniting for Peace mechanism, which allows the General Assembly to take action when the UNSC fails to uphold its responsibility to maintain international peace and security,⁴ these states sent a clear message that the war must end. Yet, this global call remained symbolic, and the UN continues to be effectively paralyzed. The US, through its repeated vetoes at the UNSC, has signaled that the war should continue.

The UN's failed response to Gaza exposes deep cracks in the current international system. It is the decision of a single power, not the wider UN membership, that has prevailed. Today's geopolitical, social, and economic realities raise urgent questions about the effectiveness of the contemporary world order: Is it capable of meeting the needs of the majority of the world's population, and is US hegemony essential for maintaining global stability? If US leadership is disruptive or absent, can multilateral institutions continue to function? Are we moving beyond a unipolar order? And if so, in which areas, and to what extent, is it effective?

This Essay questions the presumption that US leadership is essential for maintaining global peace and security in the long run, while tracing the historical and ideological roots of this narrative. It also highlights the consequences of US dominance on the Global South and the emerging structures of non-hegemonic cooperation.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE POST-SECOND WORLD WAR INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

After the Second World War in 1945, the US led efforts to shape the current international system, including the creation of multilateral institutions that still govern our world today. At the UN, the US helped draft the Charter, secured a permanent seat on the UNSC, and leveraged its status as the organization's largest funder to advance its interests. By forming the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), US military leadership became vital to Europe's security. Through the global dollar system, the Bretton Woods Institutions – the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank – the World Trade Organization (WTO), among others, the US established its leadership in

international trade and economic systems. This has created what scholar G. John Ikenberry has termed “an American era: a period dominated by U.S. power, wealth, institutions, ideas, alliances, and partnerships.”⁵ Despite its lack of inclusivity and equity, economist Joseph E. Stiglitz acknowledges that this system prevented world wars, reduced poverty for hundreds of millions, and supported economic growth in marginalized areas.⁶ The role of the US in shaping an international system strengthened the belief that without US leadership, the world would descend into chaos.

Yet, this view is shaped by specific ideological underpinnings dating back to US foreign policy during the Cold War. In 1950, the US National Security Council drafted a classified policy paper, NSC-68, outlining the US defense policy against Soviet threats and justifying the need for a global US presence: “Our position as the center of power in the free world places a heavy responsibility upon the United States for leadership. We must organize and enlist the energies and resources of the free world in a positive program for peace.”⁷ According to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the NSC-68 marked a strategic shift: it promoted “increased defense spending, globalized the U.S. strategy of containment” and, notably, “rejected ‘distinctions between peripheral and vital interests’.”⁸ This was translated into building strong defense capabilities, military bases, intelligence networks, economic power, and humanitarian aid, anchoring the projection of US power in every aspect of its global engagement. Scholar Andrew Bacevich calls the NSC-68 the “Rosetta stone of American statecraft in the Cold War.” It explains why the US built a strong military that would not only support its containment strategy, but also position the country as “a global police force.”⁹

Even after the Cold War ended, this ideological framework remained. Paul Wolfowitz, former US Under Secretary of Defense, said in 1991: “With the end of the Cold War, we can now use our military with impunity [...] And we’ve got five, maybe 10, years to clean up these old Soviet surrogate regimes like Iraq and Syria before the next superpower emerges to challenge us.”¹⁰ Bacevich argues that the NSC-68’s “Manichaean outlook,” which paints the world in black and white, still shapes current US foreign policy.¹¹ This is evident in former President Joe Biden’s framing of the Ukraine war as “a battle between democracy and autocracy, between liberty and repression.”¹² In contrast, President Donald Trump’s ‘America First’ policy is undermining the traditional view of the US as a global policeman, even though he portrays himself as a “peacemaker”.¹³ Still, Trump, like his predecessors, remains reliant on US military and coercive power to serve US national interests, as seen in his threats towards Venezuela, Greenland, Panama, and Canada.¹⁴ The difference, though, lies in Trump’s focus on exerting power in the Americas, while retreating from Europe, raising questions about a return to a world defined by multiple spheres of influence between great powers.¹⁵

US LEADERSHIP AS SEEN FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH

While US influence in shaping the international system is undeniable, it has also undermined it through a retreat from multilateralism and a militarized foreign policy that destabilized peace and security in the Global South. Recent global developments have revealed deep inconsistencies in the US narrative of itself as the defender of the world order and liberal values. This is evident in the US' ongoing criticism of Russia's aggression against Ukraine versus its strong support for Israel's genocide in Gaza. It has condemned Russian attacks on schools, hospitals, and civilian infrastructure in Ukraine, while in Gaza, the same actions are labeled 'collateral damage'. The contrasting positions are further exemplified by the US threat to impose sanctions on the International Criminal Court (ICC) over its arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former Defense Minister Yoav Gallant,¹⁶ after praising the ICC warrant against Russian President Vladimir Putin.¹⁷ For many, especially in the Global South, the US' selective application of international law and human rights signified a decline, if not a collapse, of its credibility as a values-based leader.

This contradiction, however, is part of a historical pattern. American wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, among many others, have led to increased instability, poverty, and the displacement of millions. As David Hendrikson argues, "Historians have increasingly recognized that American rule, as it played out over time, meant the dispossession of and domination over disparate peoples, a key attribute of the move from continental to hemispheric to global empire."¹⁸ While many, especially in the West, benefited from the US-led liberal world order, the Global South often endured violence, marginalization, and exclusion. This disparity has heightened awareness across the Global South that US calls to promote human rights, international law, and freedom rarely apply to them, and remain tools to advance Western geopolitical interests.

As the US faces serious questions about its leadership credibility, the Global South, which represents approximately 80% of the world's population,¹⁹ is increasingly demanding a greater role in building a world order that is not driven by conflicts, inequalities, and power imbalances.

THE DECLINE OF US GLOBAL LEADERSHIP?

Discussions about the decline of US leadership are not new but have intensified during President Trump's first and second terms. His 'America First' policy, criticism of multilateral institutions, withdrawal from global agreements, and break from historic alliances have heightened concerns of a "hegemonic suicide" or an "abdication of global leadership" in the liberal international system.²⁰ This perceived shift in global

leadership is driven by internal action, not by the seizure of power by rivals. A stark display of perceived US weakness on the global stage is the Alaska summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and President Trump on August 15, 2025, where President Putin addressed the press first. This step, unusual in US protocol for visiting delegations, enabled Putin to set the tone of the meeting and lead the narrative.²¹

Analysts have different views of this shift in US foreign policy. Some believe that the liberal world cannot survive without the leadership of the dominant power that significantly contributed to its development. This view is rooted in ideas of ‘American exceptionalism’, the notion that the US, with its liberal and democratic values, cultural norms, and political system, is uniquely able to lead the global order. Professor Peter Marcus Kristensen notes that these beliefs portray “a world without American leadership as a disaster for the entire globe.”²² In this view, the lack of leadership is not just a power vacuum but also a crisis of values about who takes charge in addressing global issues.

Others, like former US defense official John Teichert, are worried that the “US absence in the world is as dangerous as US weakness,” arguing that it will lead to escalating conflict and aggression.²³ This view is also connected to fears that rival powers will exploit this gap in global leadership to reshape norms to their advantage. Journalist Fareed Zakaria notes that China is filling the vacuum where US engagement is declining, such as in the WTO, enabling the former to gain “status and clout”²⁴ in redefining international trade. The Partnership for Global Security think tank also warned that China and Russia are increasingly leading in advanced technology, while US influence is diminishing, including in climate governance, geopolitics, and innovation.²⁵ The decline of American soft power, particularly in international development and humanitarian aid, is further increasing these concerns. “By imposing tariffs on some of America’s closest partners while suspending US aid, the White House is wasting the country’s geopolitical influence,” writes journalist Osama Al-Sharif, noting that coalitions like BRICS+ and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) will attempt to step in.²⁶

Ikenberry, however, rejects the idea of declining American influence, emphasizing that the US is indeed facing challenges but remains deeply tied to the liberal order it built. This order should not be viewed as an empire that might collapse, but rather as a system supported by American ideas, values, principles, and institutions.²⁷ Whether the US primacy is declining, absent, or remains strong, the key question is if its leadership is essential to maintaining a global order facing unprecedented challenges. While analysts like Teichert would argue that it is, others like scholar Robert Keohane contend that cooperation can be sustained even in the absence of a hegemonic power, provided that institutions exist to reduce uncertainty and facilitate compliance. He

argues that international institutions are resilient and adaptable to shifts in power and interests.²⁸ If managed effectively, declining US leadership need not mean the collapse of the international system it helped create.

ENDURING US MILITARY POWER

Despite the rise of multipolarity, the US remains dominant in military and security areas. It has unparalleled defense resources, advanced technology, and global security alliances. In 2025, the Global Firepower Index ranked the US as the world's leading country in military power, followed by Russia, China, India, and South Korea.²⁹ The US defense budget in 2025 is approximately \$849 billion, supporting over 750 military bases, over 13,000 aircraft, and 1.328 million active personnel, along with advanced capabilities in nuclear power, space, cybersecurity, intelligence, and Artificial Intelligence (AI).³⁰ The US is also ranked as the world's leading exporter of advanced military systems.³¹ Additionally, as the President of Eurasia Group, Ian Bremmer, emphasizes, the US “is the only country that can send soldiers, sailors, and military hardware to every corner of the world.”³² No country or “no constellation of powers” is ready to take over the US leadership on security or “fill even a portion of that role.”³³

The US military dominance is evident in the global powers' reaction to the US strikes on Iran's nuclear sites in June 2025, as Beijing and Moscow, Washington's main rivals and Iran's partners, were limited to rhetorical condemnation. Another example is the US' significant influence on Israel's ongoing genocide in Gaza and the lack of any concrete international intervention to stop it. This highlights the US' uncontested dominance in global peace and security matters to this day.

Yet, the projection of US power has repercussions, both globally and domestically. Economist Jeffrey Sachs warns that President Trump's policies are creating more enemies worldwide, including among US allies, and emphasized that, domestically, “the endless wars and high costs of military dominance are taking their toll on U.S. society.”³⁴ However, as Bacevich puts it, “That the commitment of American armed might could actually backfire and make matters worse is a proposition that few authorities in Washington are willing to entertain.”³⁵

In military and security, multipolar cooperation remains minimal, as the US resists change in leadership and direction, ensuring its dominance remains unchallenged. Yet, its legitimacy is increasingly questioned, fueling calls for a post-hegemonic order.

BEYOND US UNIPOLARITY

With the world facing the highest number of armed conflicts since the Second World War,³⁶ the promise of establishing global prosperity and security under a post-Cold

War unipolar order is being tested. This has also sparked debates about the future of the international system and whether it is shifting toward bipolarity, multipolarity, or non-polarity. What is certain, however, is that the world is moving beyond an era dominated by a single hegemonic power. Bremmer argues that the current system has split into multiple orders: a unipolar security order dominated by the US, a multipolar economic order, and a digital order led by technology firms.³⁷

The shift away from unipolarity is evident in the rise of soft balancing (non-military cooperation) against the US and new partnerships in technology, trade, climate governance, and finance, as well as increasing uncertainties about the future of long-standing US alliances like NATO. A recent example of soft-balancing is the convening of the largest Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in China from August 31 to September 1, 2025, bringing together more than 20 non-Western leaders, including those of India, Russia, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Egypt, and Türkiye. The Summit concluded with the adoption of the Tianjin Declaration, in which signatory countries agreed to “develop the Eurasian Charter on Diversity and Multipolarity for the 21st Century” and to promote “a new type of international relations,” while affirming commitments to deepen cooperation on security, trade, green industries, and AI.³⁸ While tangible outcomes of the summit are yet to be seen, it was viewed by some “as showcasing Beijing's ambition for a new global security and economic order that poses a challenge to the U.S.”³⁹

Responses to the current shift in the global order differ across regions. According to the 2025 Munich Security Index, “people in the G7 countries [US, Germany, Canada, France, Great Britain, Italy, and Japan] are less optimistic about a more multipolar world than respondents in the ‘BICS’ countries (BRICS minus Russia).”⁴⁰ German Ambassador Christoph Heusgen and former Chairman of the Munich Security Conference warns that a world under multipolarity could either experience increased stability and fairness or encounter more conflicts, inequalities, and human rights abuses.⁴¹ For the US specifically, the rise of non-hegemonic cooperation is concerning. Deepening ties among China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, especially since the Ukraine war, are seen as anti-American and have been called “axis of upheaval”⁴² or “axis of autocracy.”⁴³ Foreign affairs expert Christopher S. Chivvis warns that while such framings exaggerate the realities of these alignments, “the fear of an axis of autocracies could become a self-fulfilling prophecy.”⁴⁴ Instead of fighting on many fronts at once, Chivvis advises the US to focus on weakening these ties by strengthening US relations with China and prioritizing ending the Ukraine war.⁴⁵ Such an approach to building more strategic alliances beyond traditional Cold War framings is necessary to meet the geopolitical realities of the contemporary post-hegemonic moment.

While the West navigates the geopolitical uncertainties of the current realignment,

the Global South remains more optimistic about the shift in the global order. Coalitions like BRICS+ are working toward more inclusive governance and institutional reforms, such as calling for the redistribution of voting rights in the IMF to strengthen the representation and shares of emerging markets and developing economies.⁴⁶ China is leveraging its substantial economic and trade influence to expand its role within BRICS+, aiming to reduce reliance on Western markets amid the US-China trade war and take a leading stance in shaping the global economy.⁴⁷ According to the IMF, in 2025, BRICS+ accounted for 40.7% of the world's GDP measured by Purchasing Power Parity (PPP), compared to 28.4% for the G7.⁴⁸ Professor Rodrigo Cezar underscores that the GDP growth of BRICS+ is “important economically, but also politically [...] It [BRICS+] is an actor that shows an alternative to the G7.”⁴⁹

SEIZING THE POST-HEGEMONIC MOMENT

While the fragmentation of multipolarity is a step toward shifting away from unipolarity, it should not be the ultimate goal. Instead, it should be leveraged to foster more inclusive global governance, rooted in the respect of international law. This transitional phase demands concrete action in the present and thoughtful discussions about the future, as those who oppose change in the global order might miss the chance to shape its course. The West must move away from its historic view of the Global South as a resource battleground and acknowledge its growing influence in shaping the international system. Restoring the world's trust in human rights and the rule of law requires consistent commitment to these principles by Western countries, particularly when addressing crises in the Global South. France and the United Kingdom's recent decisions to recognize the State of Palestine are one step in that direction. Europe must seize the opportunity to build strategic partnerships for greater autonomy from the US. As Fiker Institute's researcher Ala Laureen Twini notes, “by reducing its reliance on American military power, Europe may gain greater flexibility in international decision-making, lessening the political pressure to align with US policies.”⁵⁰ This is crucial considering Europe's limited resources compared to other global powers. Recent calls for trilateral proposals, such as the Morocco–China–EU initiative on Green Transition Minerals, are one example of Europe embracing multipolar cooperation based on shared interests despite divisions.⁵¹

As for the Middle East, regional powers should establish a unified political, economic, and security alliance to secure the region's prominence in global governance, rather than compete against each other. At the core of this endeavor is the realization that the US military presence in the area over the past three decades has either failed or led to unintended consequences.⁵² From the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the 2011 intervention in Libya, US military action has led to instability and the rise of extremist groups across the region. Meanwhile, the negotiation of a nuclear deal with Iran

that sidelined the security concerns of Gulf States demonstrated that the US is not a reliable security partner even for its closest allies. Middle Eastern countries should therefore reconsider relying on the long-standing American promises of stability and prosperity in the region, while remaining cautious about aligning too closely with one great power over another amid the high level of uncertainty in today's world order.

In the wider Global South, it is essential for African states that they be recognized as norm-setters in the emerging order. Experts Philani Mthembu and Francis Kornegay Jr. emphasize this by advocating for stronger integration of African Union (AU)-led strategies with bilateral and regional diplomacy, as well as reforming relations between the AU and the UN.⁵³ Asian powers are already developing their alternatives in critical areas such as green technology, trade, AI, and finance. Notable examples include the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), India's Framework for Responsible and Ethical Enablement of Artificial Intelligence (FREE-AI), and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). By emphasizing inclusivity and sharing benefits with local communities, ambitious initiatives like China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) could promote global development and enhance the region's political and economic influence worldwide. It is equally essential to help developing countries effectively manage any challenges related to investing in massive projects like the BRI, such as the possible debt burden associated with it. Addressing these risks would ensure the long-term benefits of such initiatives.

Furthermore, the UN needs to restore credibility in its Charter, mechanisms, and agencies. The UN80 reform initiative, if implemented, would represent a promising path to revive the UN, enhancing its efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and adaptability to emerging challenges.⁵⁴ The plan to relocate three major UN agencies to Kenya is another promising step to bring decision-making closer to the Global South.⁵⁵ Yet, these efforts remain limited if the expansion of the permanent membership and veto powers of the UNSC is not genuinely addressed. The Council's structure must reflect today's shifts in power, demographic realities, and the emerging world order. Without such reforms, the UN itself risks falling behind. Reform in this case is essential, not optional.

While the restructuring of the world order brings uncertainty and provokes anxiety, it does not necessarily need to mean disorder. It offers a historic opportunity to resolve longstanding grievances and inequalities. This requires political will, a unified vision, and decisive action to overcome ideological divides, reduce power imbalances, and avoid heavily militarized foreign policies. Most importantly, the international community must acknowledge that major powers, particularly China and Russia, will not assume the responsibility of defending human rights and international law. This duty should be shared more broadly across regions and coalitions. Middle powers, like South Africa,

Brazil, and South Korea, can play a key role in ensuring that the protection of human rights and the rule of law remains a collective responsibility.

CONCLUSION

While the West flourished post-Second World War, the Global South faced a different reality: deepening inequalities, marginalization, and increased violence, often influenced by foreign interventions of Western powers. Today, however, the international order is undergoing a realignment of power. More nations are standing against hegemony, and what once seemed permanent is shifting into a new reality: the rise of multipolar cooperation, a stronger voice from the Global South, and the recognition that the world's future cannot rest in the hands of a single power. The long-held belief that US leadership is essential to international peace and security is eroding. Despite the US' continuing dominance in military power, other countries are redefining global standards in trade, economics, climate governance, and AI, among others. How this tension will play out remains to be seen. Contemporary economic, demographic, technological, and geopolitical realities all demand shared leadership, anchored in international law and multilateral institutions, and a vision that views global cooperation as a win-win for everyone.

About the Author



Shurouq Jaradat is a Senior Fellow at Fiker Institute and a policy advisor and strategic communications expert with over a decade of experience in international diplomacy. She served as Senior Political Advisor and Speechwriter at the Permanent Mission of the United Arab Emirates to the United Nations, where she played a key role in shaping policy debates during the country's tenure on the UN Security Council. She holds a Master's in Global Affairs from New York University and is an alumna of the Sheikh Mohamed Bin Zayed Scholars Program.

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Author: Shurouq Jaradat
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