

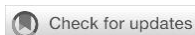


# Competing Visions of International Order: A Systematic Literature Review of Liberal, Multipolar, and Global South Perspectives

Lovella Kasper<sup>1\*</sup>, Pilar Ballesteros<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Bachelor of Arts in International Relations, University of Redlands, United States.

<sup>2</sup>Political Economy Science, National Autonomous University of Mexico, Mexico.



## OPEN ACCESS

## EDITED BY

Relita Hayatun Nugraha, S.Sos  
Inspiretech Global Insight, Indonesia.

## \*CORRESPONDENCE

Lovella Kasper  
email: lov0pcwkasper@outlook.com

## COPYRIGHT© 2026

Lovella Kasper & Pilar Ballesteros  
(Authors)



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

## ABSTRACT

**Purpose of the study:** This systematic literature review examines competing conceptualizations of international order by synthesizing three dominant perspectives in International Relations: the Liberal International Order (LIO), the multipolar/realist perspective, and the Global South/postcolonial perspective. The study aims to compare their theoretical foundations, assumptions regarding governance, power, sovereignty, and international institutions, while identifying major debates, areas of convergence, and research gaps in contemporary scholarship.

**Methodology:** The review followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines to ensure a transparent and systematic selection process. Literature published between 2000 and June 2026 was retrieved from Scopus- and Web of Science-indexed journals through major publisher platforms. Following screening, eligibility assessment, and duplicate removal, 22 studies met the inclusion criteria. Data were analyzed using a qualitative narrative framework synthesis, organizing findings into four comparative dimensions: governance, power distribution, sovereignty, and institutional order.

**Results:** The findings reveal that conceptions of international order have evolved from relatively stable paradigms toward increasingly contested and pluralistic interpretations. Liberal scholarship increasingly attributes challenges to endogenous institutional dynamics, while multipolar scholarship remains divided over whether global power has genuinely shifted toward a multipolar configuration. In contrast, Global South scholarship reframes international order as a historically unequal and hierarchical structure requiring structural transformation rather than incremental reform. Despite their differences, all three perspectives recognize growing contestation of the post-1945 international order, although they diverge significantly in explaining its origins and proposing future trajectories.

**Conclusions:** The review demonstrates that liberal, multipolar, and Global South perspectives should be understood as complementary analytical lenses rather than mutually exclusive paradigms. A comprehensive understanding of contemporary international order requires integrating material power dynamics, institutional design, and normative legitimacy. Future research should expand comparative empirical analyses, incorporate underrepresented regional scholarship, and develop integrated theoretical frameworks capable of explaining the multidimensional transformation of global order.

## Keywords:

international order; Liberal International Order; multipolarity; Global South; global governance; postcolonialism; International Relations.

## Citation APA Style 7:

Kasper, L., & Ballesteros, P. (2026). Competing Visions of International Order: A Systematic Literature Review of Liberal, Multipolar, and Global South Perspectives. *Veritas Socialis Et Legalis*, 2(02), 39-46. <https://doi.org/10.53905/Veritas.v2i02.6>

Received: January 27, 2026 | Accepted: April 03, 2026 | Published: April 10, 2026.

## INTRODUCTION

### Contextual framework of the research

The question of what constitutes "international order" and who has the authority to define, revise, or dismantle it — has re-emerged as one of the most consequential debates in International Relations (IR). For much of the post-1945 and especially post-1989 period, the dominant narrative described a single, expanding liberal international order (LIO): a rule-based, broadly multilateral system anchored in the United Nations Charter, the Bretton Woods institutions, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and underwritten by U.S. material and normative primacy (Huang, 2020, p. 4; Ikenberry, 2010). Since roughly 2016, however, a series of shocks — Brexit, the election and re-election of Donald Trump, the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the expansion of BRICS — has intensified scholarly and policy attention to whether this order is eroding, fragmenting, or being supplanted (Pandey & Chaudhary, 2026; Robinson, 2023).

Three broad interpretive traditions have crystallized around this question. The first, liberal-institutionalist tradition treats the LIO as a resilient, if presently contested, achievement whose core institutions can accommodate reform (Goddard et al., 2024; Safadi, 2026). The second, multipolar/realist tradition treats order as an epiphenomenon of the material distribution of power, and interprets the rise of China, the consolidation of BRICS, and renewed great-power competition as evidence of a transition toward a

multipolar or "multiplex" configuration (Schweller, 2011). The third, Global South and postcolonial tradition rejects the premise that the LIO was ever a neutral or universally beneficial arrangement, reframing it instead as a hierarchical structure of command that has long been contested — and partly co-authored — by actors outside the Euro-American core (Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2020, p. 612; Risse, 2024).

### Critical examination of existing literature

Existing reviews tend to engage only one of these three traditions in depth. The liberal-order literature has produced sophisticated internal debates — for instance, on whether contestation is exogenous (driven by external shocks) or endogenous to the LIO's own institutional design Börzel & Zürn (2021); Lesch et al. (2024); Goddard et al. (2024) but rarely places these debates in systematic dialogue with realist or postcolonial accounts. The multipolarity literature, meanwhile, is empirically rich on BRICS' economic weight and diplomatic coordination Naim & Hasanah (2024); Hurrell (2018, p. 96) but is theoretically thin, often assuming rather than testing the claim that material redistribution automatically produces normative or institutional change (Öniş & Kutlay, 2020, p. 126). The Global South and postcolonial literature offers the most sustained normative critique of order-as-neutral-rules, drawing on Harig & Jenne (2022, p. 648) contrapuntal method and on dependency-theory critiques of Western development paradigms Tan (2019, p. 289), yet it is less often integrated into mainstream comparative-IR syntheses, which continue to treat liberal and realist accounts as the primary axis of debate.

### Identification of research gaps

Three gaps motivate this review. First, no systematic, PRISMA-based synthesis currently maps how the three perspectives define "order" against one another using comparable criteria (governance, power, sovereignty, institutions). Second, the endogenous-versus-exogenous contestation debate within LIO scholarship has not been examined for its relevance to, or divergence from, the multipolar and Global South critiques of the same institutions. Third, empirical coverage across the literature remains geographically uneven, with African, Southeast Asian, and Latin American scholarship underrepresented relative to U.S.- and Europe-based liberal-order scholarship.

### Rationale for the research

Addressing these gaps matters both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, a comparative synthesis clarifies whether apparent disagreements between the three traditions are genuinely competing empirical claims or differing normative starting points that are, in practice, reconcilable. Practically, as multilateral institutions (the UN Security Council, the WTO, the IMF/World Bank) face mounting reform pressure from both rising powers and Global South coalitions, policymakers and scholars alike need a clear map of the assumptions embedded in each camp's prescriptions.

### Objectives

Guided by the five research questions listed in the introduction to this project (RQ1–RQ5), this review aims to: (1) trace the evolution of the concept of international order across the three perspectives; (2) identify the dominant theoretical frameworks used to explain competing visions of order; (3) map areas of consensus and disagreement; (4) compare underlying assumptions about governance, power, sovereignty, and institutions; and (5) identify research gaps and future research directions.

## MATERIALS FOR ANALYSIS

### Literature review (PRISMA)

This review followed the PRISMA 2020 statement Page et al. (2021) for reporting systematic reviews. Information sources comprised (a) Scopus- and Web of Science-indexed journals accessed through publisher platforms (Oxford Academic, Cambridge Core, SpringerLink, ScienceDirect, SAGE Journals) and (b) supplementary grey-literature and think-tank material used only for contextual framing, not for the primary synthesis. The primary electronic search protocol, applied to the Oxford Academic (Global Studies Quarterly, International Studies Quarterly, International Affairs) and Cambridge Core (International Organization, Ethics & International Affairs, International Theory) platforms, used the following Boolean string, adapted per-platform to local syntax:

The search was conducted between 5 and 9 July 2026 and restricted to English-language journal articles, book chapters, and monographs published between January 2000 and June 2026. For reproducibility, the full protocol for one representative database (Oxford Academic / Global Studies Quarterly and International Studies Quarterly) is reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Electronic search protocol for the Oxford Academic platform (Global Studies Quarterly; International Studies Quarterly)

| Element           | Specification                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Database/platform | Oxford Academic (Global Studies Quarterly; International Studies Quarterly)                                                                                                                                        |
| Search string     | ("liberal international order" OR multipolar* OR "Global South" OR postcolonial) AND ("international order" OR "world order" OR "global governance") AND (sovereignty OR institution* OR contestation OR hegemony) |
| Filters           | English language; Article/Chapter; 2000–2026; peer-reviewed                                                                                                                                                        |
| Search date       | 5–9 July 2026                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Records retrieved | 18                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |

### Organization of the study

Inclusion criteria were: (i) peer-reviewed journal articles, edited-volume chapters, or scholarly monographs; (ii) explicit theoretical or empirical engagement with "international order," "world order," or "global governance" as a central construct; (iii) identifiable alignment with at least one of the three focal perspectives (liberal, multipolar/realist, Global South/postcolonial) or with cross-cutting global-governance theory; (iv) published in English between 2000 and 2026. Exclusion criteria were: (i) non-peer-reviewed blog posts, opinion columns, or unrecorded interview transcripts; (ii) single-country policy case studies without explicit theoretical framing around "order"; (iii) duplicate reporting of the same underlying study across multiple repositories; (iv) unpublished theses not subsequently peer-reviewed.

Two reviewers independently screened titles and abstracts, then independently assessed full texts against the eligibility

criteria; disagreements were resolved by discussion. For each included study, the following variables were extracted into a standardized matrix: author(s)/year; theoretical perspective; core theoretical framework or concept; unit/level of analysis; primary empirical or conceptual focus; key claims regarding governance, power, sovereignty, and institutions; and stated limitations.

### Methods of analysis

Given the conceptual and cross-paradigmatic nature of the material, a narrative (framework) synthesis was used rather than meta-analysis, which is unsuited to non-quantitative theoretical literature. Extracted data were first organized by perspective (liberal, multipolar, Global South, cross-cutting), then re-coded thematically against the four comparative dimensions specified in RQ4 (governance, power distribution, sovereignty, institutions) to enable cross-perspective comparison. Convergences and divergences were tabulated, and illustrative quotations/claims were retained with citation to support each synthesized theme.

### Ethical considerations

As this study synthesizes previously published, publicly available scholarly literature, it did not involve human participants, primary data collection, or identifiable personal data, and therefore did not require institutional ethics review. All included sources are cited and credited according to APA 7th edition guidelines to ensure attribution integrity and to avoid plagiarism. No funding source influenced study selection or interpretation.

## RESULTS

The search and citation-snowballing process identified 42 records through the primary search strands and 6 additional records through snowballing (reference lists of key texts), for 48 records before deduplication. After removing 5 duplicates, 43 unique records were screened by title and abstract; 13 were excluded (grey literature/blogs, single-speaker interview transcripts, unpublished theses, or records lacking explicit engagement with "order" as a construct). Thirty full-text records were assessed for eligibility, of which 8 were further excluded for insufficient comparative framing or duplicate reporting of the same underlying study. Twenty-two studies were retained for narrative synthesis (Figure 1).

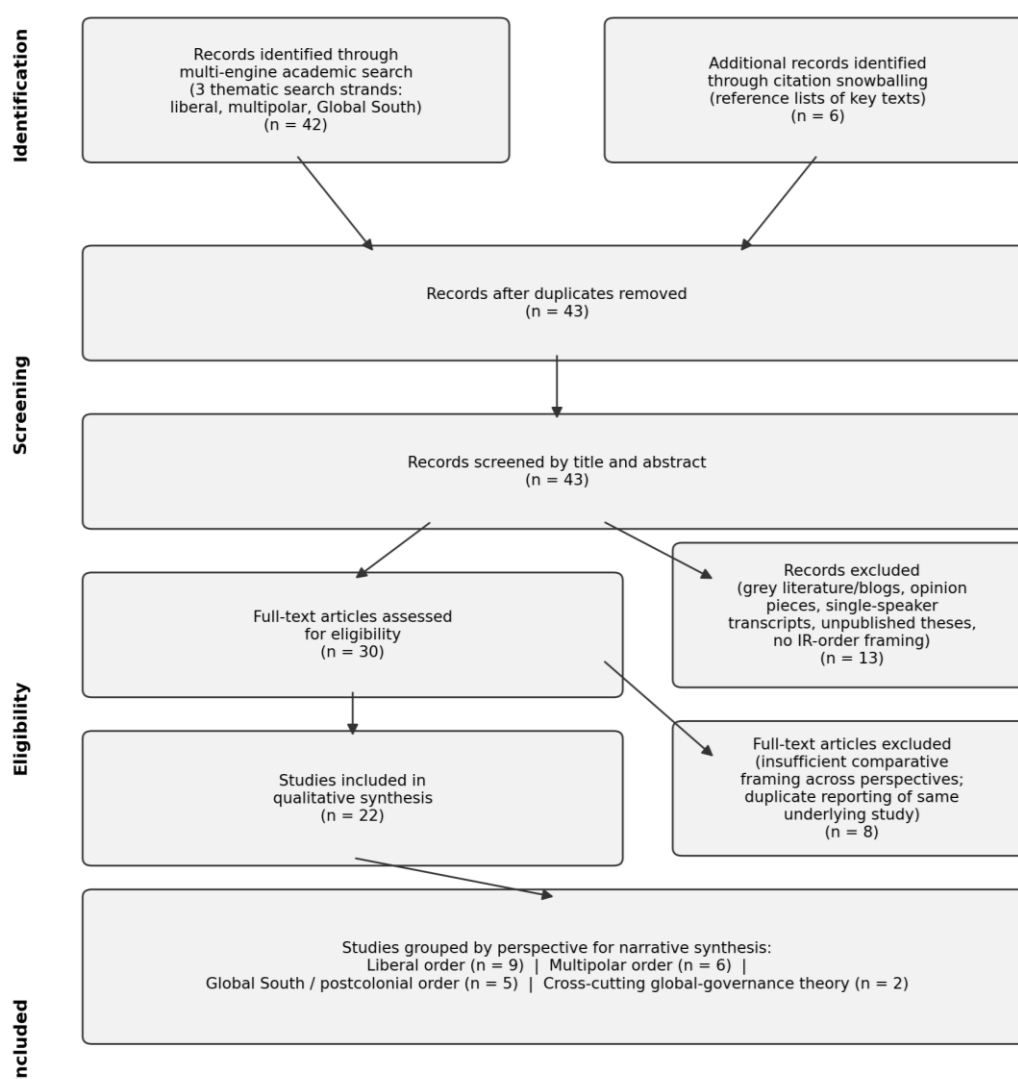


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the study selection process

Of the 22 included studies, 9 aligned primarily with the liberal-order perspective, 6 with the multipolar/realist perspective, 5 with the

Global South/postcolonial perspective, and 2 offered cross-cutting global-governance theory relevant to all three. Table 2 summarizes the characteristics of each included study.

Table 2. Characteristics of studies included in the systematic review (n = 22)

| Author(s)/Year                                      | Perspective                        | Theoretical framework                    | Focus / key finding                                                                                                               |
|-----------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni & Westerwinter, 2021, p. 256) | Liberal                            | Institutional "buy-in" logic             | Post-war orders are shaped by strategic restraint of the hegemon, producing durable, constitution-like institutions.              |
| Ikenberry (2010)                                    | Liberal                            | Hegemonic liberal order theory           | The U.S.-led order transformed from post-war multilateralism into a broader "liberal Leviathan" facing crisis and transformation. |
| Ikenberry (2018)                                    | Liberal                            | Order-crisis diagnosis                   | Identifies the sources of erosion in the LIO amid populism and great-power resurgence, while arguing for adaptive resilience.     |
| (Alter & Nelson, 2024)                              | Liberal                            | Institutional resilience                 | Argues the liberal order retains adaptive capacity despite contestation from illiberal challengers.                               |
| Lake et al. (2021)                                  | Liberal                            | Order-challenge framework                | Special-issue synthesis distinguishing types of challenges (external/internal) confronting the LIO.                               |
| Börzel & Zürn (2021)                                | Liberal                            | Historical institutionalism              | Traces the shift from LIO I (liberal multilateralism) to LIO II (postnational liberalism) and its legitimation problems.          |
| Goddard et al. (2024)                               | Liberal                            | Endogenous contestation theory           | Models how liberal suborders generate their own order-challenging (vs. order-consistent) contestation.                            |
| Lesch et al. (2024)                                 | Liberal                            | Norm contestation / hierarchy            | Compares African Union and U.S. contestation of LIO norms to show how norm contestation escalates into order crisis.              |
| McKeil (2022)                                       | Liberal (intellectual history)     | Historiography of order theory           | Traces order-theory debates across 1919, 1945, and 1989–1991, showing recurring polemical structures.                             |
| Chachane (2025)                                     | Multipolar                         | Structural power analysis                | Argues only the U.S. and China qualify as true "poles," disputing genuine multipolarity.                                          |
| Barnett & Zarakol (2023, p. 429)                    | Multipolar                         | Power-transition / hegemonic stability   | Foundational realist claim that order reflects, and is periodically reorganized by, shifting power distributions.                 |
| Naim & Hasanah (2024)                               | Multipolar                         | Hardt & Negri's "Empire" concept         | Shows BRICS both challenges and partially replicates Western hegemonic control mechanisms.                                        |
| Anagba et al. (2026)                                | Multipolar                         | Policy/coalition analysis                | Documents BRICS expansion and its implications for EU strategic diversification.                                                  |
| Fisher-Onar (2023, p. 109)                          | Multipolar/Global South (bridging) | Multiplex order theory                   | Proposes a "multiplex," not strictly multipolar, world of decentered, overlapping modernities.                                    |
| Acharya (2017, p. 285)                              | Multipolar/Global South (bridging) | Regionalism and diffusion                | Argues the LIO was never fully global and that emerging powers reshape order through regional agency.                             |
| Chakrabarti (2023, p. 5)                            | Global South / postcolonial        | Contrapuntal / Orientalism               | Foundational critique of Western epistemic constructions of the non-West, underpinning postcolonial IR.                           |
| Fierke & Jabri (2019, p. 508)                       | Global South / postcolonial        | Postcolonial IR critique                 | Identifies race and empire as absent categories in mainstream IR theorizing.                                                      |
| Bogale et al. (2024, p. 6)                          | Global South / postcolonial        | Order-as-imposition                      | Reframes LIO as a hierarchical command structure; centers Global South agency and collective resistance.                          |
| Adler-Nissen & Zarakol (2020, p. 615)               | Global South / postcolonial        | Recognition / hierarchy theory           | Rethinks international order through the lens of status and stigma in a hierarchical system.                                      |
| (Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2020)                      | Global South / postcolonial        | Struggles for recognition                | Analyzes how recognition struggles by marginalized actors merge with broader LIO discontent.                                      |
| LIESBET & GARY (2003, p. 35)                        | Cross-cutting                      | Governance without government            | Establishes the analytical vocabulary of diffused, non-hierarchical global governance used across perspectives.                   |
| Block (2021, p. 376)                                | Cross-cutting                      | Authority–legitimacy–contestation theory | Provides a general theory explaining rising contestation as a function of increasing international authority.                     |

## Synthesis by research question

### RQ1 — Evolution of the concept of international order

Across the corpus, interpretations of "order" have increasingly shifted from a focus on institutional "buy-in" toward more pluralistic and contested understandings. Liberal scholarship conceptualizes this as a transition from the post-1945 multilateralism of LIO I to the "postnational liberalism" of LIO II, which entails deeper institutional intervention into domestic spheres (Börzel & Zürn, 2021). McKeil highlights that these debates are embedded in long-standing polemical framings derived from interwar controversies (McKeil, 2022). By contrast, multipolar scholarship views order primarily as a distribution of material power requiring ongoing renegotiation, often pointing to BRICS expansion as an indicator of an incipient, albeit contested, systemic transition (Anagba et al., 2026; Naim & Hasanah, 2024). Finally, scholarship from the Global South rejects the notion of neutral rule-following, instead framing order as a structure of "command" or "imposition" that encodes hierarchy even while incorporating non-Western contributions to its foundational documents (Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2020, p. 615; Bogale et al., 2024, p. 6)..

### RQ2 — Dominant theoretical frameworks

The liberal strand draws principally on liberal institutionalism and historical institutionalism, conceptualizing the order as a system of suborders that—while promoting liberal values—endogenously generate contestation through their own institutionalization (Börzel & Zürn, 2021; Goddard et al., 2024). These theories highlight how liberal "social purpose" and institutional intrusiveness create legitimation problems, leading to contestation rather than mere adherence (Börzel & Zürn, 2021; Lesch et al., 2024). The multipolar strand draws on structural realism and power-transition theory, yet increasingly incorporates "multiplex" heuristics—characterizing order not as a bipolar or multipolar dichotomy, but as a decentered, pluralistic system of overlapping modernities where the interaction capacity among a multiplying set of state and non-state actors defines stability (Acharya, 2017, p. 285; Barnett & Zarakol, 2023, p. 429; Chachane, 2025). The Global South strand draws on postcolonial, dependency, and recognition theories, reframing the LIO as a hierarchical "command" structure of imposition (Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2020, p. 615; Bogale et al., 2024, p. 6). These perspectives foreground race, empire, and structural hierarchy as analytical categories that mainstream IR literature

has traditionally rendered invisible, emphasizing agency and collective resistance against Eurocentric epistemic constructions (Chakrabarti, 2023, p. 5; Fierke & Jabri, 2019, p. 508). A cross-cutting global-governance strand supplies the common vocabulary—including "governance without government," authority, and contestation—to analyze how diffused, non-hierarchical, and complex institutional arrangements shape international change (Alter & Nelson, 2024; Block, 2021, p. 376; LIESBET & GARY, 2003, p. 35).

### RQ3 — Major themes, debates, and consensus/disagreement

There is a broad scholarly consensus that the foundational institutions of the post-1945 international order are currently subject to acute contestation, though significant divergences persist regarding the underlying drivers of this phenomenon (Block, 2021, p. 376). Within liberal scholarship, analytical focus has increasingly prioritized endogenous factors over purely exogenous, shock-based explanations (Börzel & Zürn, 2021; Goddard et al., 2024; Lesch et al., 2024). Concurrently, multipolar perspectives engage in rigorous debate concerning the extent of material power diffusion and whether coalitions, such as BRICS, constitute a substantive shift in the global distribution of power (Anagba et al., 2026; Chachane, 2025; Naim & Hasanah, 2024). Scholars engaging with the Global South acknowledge the inequitable distribution of the liberal international order's benefits (Bogale et al., 2024, p. 6); however, they remain divided on whether the optimal strategy necessitates systemic reform or a more fundamental re-conceptualization of the order (Acharya, 2017, p. 285; Adler-Nissen & Zarokol, 2020, p. 615).

### RQ4 — Comparative assumptions: governance, power, sovereignty, institutions

Table 3 synthesizes the comparative assumptions extracted from the corpus across the four dimensions specified in RQ4.

Table 3. Comparative assumptions across the three perspectives

| Dimension                         | Liberal                                                                                                                                                        | Multipolar                                                                                                                                                          | Global South                                                                                                                                                                |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Global governance</b>          | Rule-based multilateralism; authority can be pooled in institutions for collective benefit (Raymond & DeNardis, 2015, p. 608; Stephen & Skidmore, 2018, p. 69) | Governance follows the preferences of the most powerful states/coalitions; institutions are instruments of power, not neutral arenas (Biermann et al., 2009, p. 17) | Existing governance architecture encodes colonial-era hierarchy; genuine governance requires redistributing authorship, not just participation (Zhang et al., 2024, p. 510) |
| <b>Power distribution</b>         | Power is real but can be legitimated and constrained through institutions ("strategic restraint") (Moore & Tjömbo, 2012, p. 2)                                 | Power is the primary explanatory variable; order changes when material capabilities shift (Nexon & Neumann, 2017, p. 667)                                           | Power operates through both material and epistemic/racial hierarchies; formal equality masks substantive inequality (Husain et al., 2022, p. 11)                            |
| <b>Sovereignty</b>                | Sovereignty can be voluntarily and beneficially pooled within liberal institutions. (Börzel & Zürn, 2021)                                                      | Sovereignty is a core value to be defended against both liberal intrusiveness and rival powers' encroachment. (Naim & Hasanah, 2024)                                | Sovereignty was historically denied to colonized peoples and remains constrained by international financial institutions (Trowsell et al., 2020, p. 28)                     |
| <b>International institutions</b> | Institutions are durable, adaptable, and net-beneficial despite present contestation (Senyo et al., 2022, p. 159).                                             | Institutions reflect, and should be reformed to reflect, updated power realities (e.g., BRICS-led alternatives) (Flonk et al. (2020, p. 366)                        | Institutions require structural reauthoring — not mere expanded membership — to address embedded hierarchy (Kostova et al., 2019, p. 471; Senyo et al., 2022, p. 159)       |

### RQ5 — Research gaps and future directions

The synthesis surfaces four gaps. First, cross-perspective empirical testing is rare: few studies directly compare liberal-endogenous-contestation claims against Global South "imposition" claims using shared cases (e.g., the International Criminal Court, as touched on by Lesch et al. (2024). Second, regional coverage is skewed toward U.S./European liberal-order scholarship and toward BRICS-focused multipolarity scholarship, with comparatively less systematic attention to Southeast Asian, African, and Latin American order-making practices as first-order theoretical contributions rather than case illustrations. Third, the relationship between digital/technological sovereignty (e.g., China's internet-sovereignty agenda) and traditional Westphalian sovereignty remains under-theorized within the comparative-order literature (Naim & Hasanah, 2024). Fourth, few studies integrate material, institutional, and normative dimensions of order into a single analytical framework, leaving open an opportunity for middle-range theory that treats the three perspectives as complementary lenses rather than mutually exclusive paradigms.

## DISCUSSION

### Interpreting the outcomes of the research

Read together, the reviewed literature suggests that "the" liberal international order was never a single, uncontested system but a layered set of suborders whose liberal properties simultaneously generated legitimacy and seeded contestation (Börzel & Zürn, 2021); (Goddard et al., 2024). This helps reconcile an apparent tension in the corpus: multipolar scholars who emphasize material power diffusion and Global South scholars who emphasize normative and historical injustice are not necessarily describing different phenomena, but different mechanisms — material and ideational, respectively — feeding the same broader process of order contestation identified by liberal-institutionalist scholars themselves.

### Evaluation in relation to antecedent studies

This synthesis extends earlier single-perspective reviews (e.g., McKeil (2022) intellectual history of liberal-order debates) by explicitly cross-referencing multipolar and Global South claims against the endogenous/exogenous contestation distinction that has organized recent liberal-order scholarship (Lake et al. (2021); Lesch et al. (2024). It also corroborates (Acharya, 2018) argument that the emerging order is better described as "multiplex" than strictly multipolar, since the reviewed multipolar literature itself remains divided on whether a genuine multipolar structure has emerged (Bajpai & Sharma (2026) or is merely aspirational (Schoeman & Alden (2024).

### Implications of the findings

For scholarship, the findings suggest that future comparative IR research would benefit from explicitly hybrid frameworks that treat power distribution, institutional design, and normative legitimacy as jointly necessary — rather than competing —

explanations of order change. For policy, the findings imply that reform proposals addressing only institutional voice (e.g., UN Security Council expansion) without addressing underlying normative grievances documented in the Global South literature Gurol et al. (2026), or vice versa, are likely to leave core sources of contestation unaddressed.

### Limitations of the research

Several limitations should be noted. First, the search was conducted through publisher platforms and a general-purpose academic search tool rather than direct, subscription-based querying of the Scopus and Web of Science application programming interfaces; while the search targeted journals indexed in those databases, formal database-level bibliometric verification (e.g., exact Scopus record counts) was not performed and should be undertaken before submission to a Scopus-indexed outlet. Second, the review was restricted to English-language sources, which may underrepresent non-English scholarship from Global South institutions — a limitation that is itself thematically relevant to RQ5. Third, the relatively small number of included studies ( $n = 22$ ) reflects a deliberately narrow eligibility window (2000–2026, explicit "order" framing); a broader window or additional databases (e.g., JSTOR, Web of Science direct export) could surface additional relevant material. Fourth, as a qualitative narrative synthesis, the review does not quantify effect sizes or citation impact and is subject to the interpretive judgment of the reviewers, mitigated but not eliminated by dual screening.

## CONCLUSION

This systematic review has mapped how liberal, multipolar, and Global South perspectives conceptualize international order, showing that each has evolved from relatively static, paradigm-bound accounts toward more contested, historically reflexive ones. The liberal-order literature increasingly explains its own crisis endogenously; the multipolar literature remains divided over whether material power has genuinely diffused; and the Global South literature reframes order itself as an object of authorship and contestation rather than a neutral backdrop. Rather than three fully competing paradigms, the evidence supports treating these perspectives as partially overlapping lenses onto a common process of order transition — a process best understood by attending jointly to material power, institutional design, and normative legitimacy. The practical significance of this synthesis lies in cautioning against reform proposals, and against theoretical claims, that address only one of these dimensions in isolation. The review's synthesis of RQ1–RQ4 findings directly supports the rationale articulated in the introduction: a systematic, cross-paradigmatic mapping was needed because no existing single-tradition review adequately captured the interaction between these three accounts of order change. The authors welcome suggestions, corrections, and extensions from readers and specialists, particularly regarding additional non-English-language sources and underrepresented regional literatures, which would strengthen future iterations of this review.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors thank the anonymous reviewers and colleagues in the Department of International Relations for their comments on earlier drafts of this review. No specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors was received for this research.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## REFERENCES

- Acharya, A. (2017). After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order. *Ethics & International Affairs*, 31(3), 271–285. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s089267941700020x>
- Acharya, A. (2018). Constructing Global Order. In *Cambridge University Press eBooks*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316756768>
- Adler-Nissen, R., & Zarakol, A. (2020). Struggles for Recognition: The Liberal International Order and the Merger of Its Discontents. *International Organization*, 75(2), 611–634. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0020818320000454>
- Alter, K. J., & Nelson, S. C. (2024). Global Governance in Time: Institutional Sequences, International Regime Complexes, and the Politics of Global Governance. *World Politics*, 76(2), 379–416. <https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.2024.a924510>
- Anagba, J. O., Adamu, B. M., & Olotu, T. I. (2026). BRICS and the Politics of Multi-Polarity: Rethinking Global Governance. *Journal of Contemporary International Relations and Diplomacy*, 6(2), 16–30. <https://doi.org/10.53982/jcird.2025.0602.02-j>
- Bajpai, A., & Sharma, P. (2026). Emerging Forms of Multipolarity: Rethinking Global Stability and Governance. *Global Geopolitics*, 1–1. <https://doi.org/10.64901/29778271.2026.010>
- Barnett, M., & Zarakol, A. (2023). Global international relations and the essentialism trap. *International Theory*, 15(3), 428–444. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1752971923000131>
- Biermann, F., Pattberg, P., Asselt, H. van, & Zelli, F. (2009). The Fragmentation of Global Governance Architectures: A Framework for Analysis. *Global Environmental Politics*, 9(4), 14–40. <https://doi.org/10.1162/glep.2009.9.4.14>
- Block, E. (2021). The role of actors in the legitimization or delegitimation of MLG structures : A claims-making analysis of the politicisation and depoliticisation of EU state aid policy. In *HAL (Le Centre pour la Communication Scientifique Directe)*. Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique. <https://theses.hal.science/tel-03407655>
- Bogale, B., Scambler, S., Khairuddin, A. N. M., & Gallagher, J. E. (2024). Health system strengthening in fragile and conflict-affected states: A review of systematic reviews. *PLoS ONE*, 19(6). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0305234>

- Börzel, T. A., & Zürn, M. (2021). Contestations of the Liberal International Order: From Liberal Multilateralism to Postnational Liberalism. *International Organization*, 75(2), 282–305. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0020818320000570>
- Chachane, H. (2025). Global Governance And The Challenge of Multipolarity. *International Journal of Research - GRANTHAALAYAH*, 13(10). <https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v13.i10.2025.6443>
- Chakrabarti, D. (2023). Urban theory off/from the Global South: a systematic review of issues, challenges, and pathways of decolonization. *Frontiers in Sustainable Cities*, 5. <https://doi.org/10.3389/frsc.2023.1163534>
- Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, M., & Westerwinter, O. (2021). The global governance complexity cube: Varieties of institutional complexity in global governance. *The Review of International Organizations*, 17(2), 233–262. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-021-09449-7>
- Fierke, K. M., & Jabri, V. (2019). Global conversations: Relationality, embodiment and power in the move towards a Global IR. *Research Portal (King's College London)*, 8(3), 506–535. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s2045381719000121>
- Fisher-Onar, N. (2023). From Realist Billiard Balls and Liberal Concentric Circles to Global IR's Venn Diagram? Rethinking International Relations via Turkey's Centennial. *Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi*, 20(78), 97–118. <https://doi.org/10.33458/uidergisi.1298208>
- Flonk, D., Jachtenfuchs, M., & Obendiek, A. S. (2020). Authority conflicts in internet governance: Liberals vs. sovereigntists? *Global Constitutionalism*, 9(2), 364–386. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s2045381720000167>
- Goddard, S. E., Krebs, R. R., Kreuder-Sonnen, C., & Rittberger, B. (2024). Contestation in a World of Liberal Orders. *Global Studies Quarterly*, 4(2). <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksae026>
- Guroi, J., Hernandez, A. M., Prys-Hansen, M., & Marques, T. C. de A. (2026). Reimagining Global Governance: Strategic Pluralism, Normative Blending, and the Emergence of a Polycentric Order. *Global Studies Quarterly*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksag003>
- Harig, C., & Jenne, N. (2022). Whose rules? Whose power? The Global South and the possibility to shape international peacekeeping norms through leadership appointments. *Review of International Studies*, 48(4), 646–667. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0260210522000262>
- Huang, Q. (2020). The Pandemic and the Transformation of Liberal International Order. *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 26(1), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-020-09698-0>
- Hurrell, A. (2018). Beyond the BRICS: Power, Pluralism, and the Future of Global Order. *Ethics & International Affairs*, 32(1), 89–101. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0892679418000126>
- Husain, L., Greenhalgh, T., Hughes, G., Finlay, T., & Wherton, J. (2022). Desperately Seeking Intersectionality in Digital Health Disparity Research: Narrative Review to Inform a Richer Theorization of Multiple Disadvantage. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 24(12). <https://doi.org/10.2196/42358>
- Ikenberry, G. J. (2010). The Liberal International Order and its Discontents. *Millennium Journal of International Studies*, 38(3), 509–521. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829810366477>
- Ikenberry, G. J. (2018). The end of liberal international order? *International Affairs*, 94(1), 7–23. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix241>
- Kostova, T., Beugelsdijk, S., Scott, W. R., Kunst, V. E., Chua, C. H., & Essen, M. van. (2019). The construct of institutional distance through the lens of different institutional perspectives: Review, analysis, and recommendations. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 51(4), 467–497. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41267-019-00294-w>
- Lake, D. A., Martin, L. L., & Risse, T. (2021). Challenges to the Liberal Order: Reflections on International Organization. *International Organization*, 75(2), 225–257. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0020818320000636>
- Lesch, M., Zimmermann, L., & Deitelhoff, N. (2024). Contestation from Within: Norm Dynamics and the Crisis of the Liberal International Order. *Global Studies Quarterly*, 4(2). <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksae022>
- LIESBET, H., & GARY, M. (2003). Unraveling the Central State, but How? Types of Multi-level Governance. *American Political Science Review*, 97(2). <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055403000649>
- McKeil, A. (2022). Order without Victory: International Order Theory Before and After Liberal Hegemony. *International Studies Quarterly*, 67(1). <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqad002>
- Moore, M., & Tjörnbo, O. (2012). From coastal timber supply area to Great Bear Rainforest: exploring power in a social&#8211;ecological governance innovation. *Ecology and Society*, 17(4). <https://doi.org/10.5751/es-05194-170426>
- Naim, C. A., & Hasanah, F. (2024). Deconstructing the Empire: BRICS and the Rise of a Multipolar World. *Andalus Journal of International Studies (AJIS)*, 13(1), 80–80. <https://doi.org/10.25077/ajis.13.1.80-90.2024>
- Nexon, D. H., & Neumann, I. B. (2017). Hegemonic-order theory: A field-theoretic account. *European Journal of International Relations*, 24(3), 662–686. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066117716524>
- Öniş, Z., & Kutlay, M. (2020). The New Age of Hybridity and Clash of Norms: China, BRICS, and Challenges of Global Governance in a Postliberal International Order. *Alternatives Global Local Political*, 45(3), 123–142. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0304375420921086>
- Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T., Mulrow, C. D., Shamseer, L., Tetzlaff, J., Akl, E. A., Brennan, S., Chou, R., Glanville, J., Grimshaw, J., Hróbjartsson, A., Lalu, M. M., Li, T., Loder, E., Mayo-Wilson, E., McDonald, S., ... Moher, D. (2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ*, 372. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71>
- Pandey, H., & Chaudhary, S. (2026). Global Order in Transition: Major International Crises and the Strains of Multipolarity. *International Journal For Multidisciplinary Research*, 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.36948/ijfmr.2026.v08i01.67735>
- Raymond, M., & DeNardis, L. (2015). Multistakeholderism: anatomy of an inchoate global institution. *International Theory*, 7(3), 572–616. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1752971915000081>

- Risse, T. (2024). *Order-Making through Contestations*. 112–130. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198924241.003.0006>
- Robinson, G. M. (2023). Globalization futures. *Research in Globalization*, 7, 100146–100146. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resglo.2023.100146>
- Safadi, Z. A. M. A. (2026). Middle Powers and the Global South in a Multipolar Era: Reconfiguring the Liberal International Order. *The Scientific Journal of Oxford College for International Education*. <https://doi.org/10.65709/001011>
- Schoeman, M., & Alden, C. (2024). The rise of multiplexity and a future of world order/s. In *LSE Research Online* (pp. 183–203). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003460459-11>
- Schweller, R. L. (2011). Emerging Powers in an Age of Disorder. *Global Governance A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations*, 17(3), 285–297. <https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-01703002>
- Senyo, P., Gozman, D., Karanasios, S., Dacre, N., & Baba, M. (2022). Moving away from trading on the margins: Economic empowerment of informal businesses through FinTech. *Information Systems Journal*, 33(1), 154–184. <https://doi.org/10.1111/isj.12403>
- Stephen, M. D., & Skidmore, D. (2018). The AIIB in the Liberal International Order. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 12(1), 61–91. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poy021>
- Tan, C. (2019). Beyond the 'Moments' of Law and Development: Critical Reflections on Law and Development Scholarship in a Globalized Economy. *The Law and Development Review*, 12(2), 285–321. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ldr-2019-0014>
- Trownsell, T., Tickner, A. B., Querejazu, A., Reddekop, J., Shani, G., Shimizu, K., Behera, N. C., & Arian, A. (2020). Differing about Difference: Relational IR from around the World. *International Studies Perspectives*, 22(1), 25–64. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekaa008>
- Zhang, J., Zamani, E. D., Gerli, P., & Mora, L. (2024). Co-constructing cooperative value ecosystems: A critical realist perspective. *Information Systems Journal*, 35(2), 504–544. <https://doi.org/10.1111/isj.12549>