

International Legal Politics in the Transition of the World Order Towards Multipolarity

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Abstract

The shift in the world order from a unipolar system to a multipolar system is a global phenomenon that influences the dynamics of international legal politics. The dominance of one major power after the Cold War has begun to shift with the strengthening role of other major powers and the increasing influence of regional actors in global decision-making. This study aims to analyze international legal politics in response to the shift in the global power structure toward multipolarity and its implications for the formation and enforcement of international law. The research method used is normative legal research with a conceptual approach and an international legislative approach, through a literature review of international treaties, legal doctrine, and contemporary international relations practices. The results show that the shift toward a multipolar world order has influenced the process of forming international legal norms, which are increasingly influenced by the political interests of major powers, often weakening global consensus. However, multipolarity also opens up opportunities for creating a more inclusive balance of power and expanding the participation of developing countries in international legal governance. This research is expected to contribute academically to understanding the direction of developments in international legal politics amidst the changing global world order.

A. INTRODUCTION

Developments in global power dynamics indicate a shift in the world order from a unipolar to a multipolar system (Rachmat, 2017). Following the end of the Cold War, the unipolar structure was characterized by the dominance of the United States as the primary power in determining the direction of international political, economic, and security policies (Hasyaimi, 2015). This dominance was reflected in its influence over international institutions and its role in shaping international legal norms and regimes (Pradana, 2023).

However, the past two decades have seen significant changes in the global distribution of power. The emergence and strengthening of new powers, such as China and Russia, coupled with the increasing role of developing countries and the strengthening of regional blocs and cooperation, have created a more pluralistic and

competitive power configuration (Amin, 2023). Global economic factors, geopolitical rivalries, technological advances, and international security dynamics have contributed to the weakening of the dominance of a single power and encouraged the formation of a multipolar world order (Muhaimin et al., 2022).

The transition to a multipolar world order does not necessarily mark the end of the absolute dominance of a single power bloc, but rather indicates a more equitable distribution of influence among major powers and regional powers (Muzzaffar et al., 2017). In this order, power relations are no longer a single hierarchy, but rather dynamic and contextual, where a country's influence depends on the issue, region, and its economic, political, and military capacity. This condition reflects a new complexity in the international system that cannot be explained simply by a single model of power distribution (Xuetong, 2015).

Correspondingly, various international security reports and analyses indicate that the current global power structure exhibits a mixed character, with elements of unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar occurring simultaneously (Wardoyo, 2015). On certain issues, such as strategic military security, power relations tend to be bipolar, while in the economic and technological spheres, multipolar patterns appear more prominent. Meanwhile, in certain aspects, the influence of a single major power still exhibits a unipolar character (Sarjito et al., 2023). This hybrid power configuration has significant implications for global stability and influences the direction of the formation and enforcement of international legal norms (Burhanuddin, 2017).

The transition to a multipolar world order has structural implications for the development of international law, particularly in the context of international legal politics (Alunaza, 2021). In a power configuration no longer dominated by a single actor, the process of establishing international legal norms tends to be influenced by the competing interests of various major states and regional powers that occupy relatively equal positions (Rosyidin, 201). This situation has led to the formulation of international legal norms becoming increasingly compromising and political, often resulting in rules that are ambiguous or difficult to apply universally. Consequently, the effectiveness of international law as an instrument regulating relations between states faces increasingly complex challenges (Sulaeman & Tiara, 2021).

In addition to influencing the norm-formation process, the multipolar world order also impacts the implementation and enforcement of international law. Differing interests and political orientations among global actors often hinder the achievement of consensus in international law enforcement mechanisms, whether through international judicial institutions or multilateral forums (Sunnyowati, 2013). On the other hand, multipolarity also opens up space for developing countries to participate more actively in shaping the international legal agenda, thus encouraging

the creation of a more inclusive global legal order. Thus, international legal politics in the era of multipolarity stands at a crossroads between the challenges of norm fragmentation and the opportunities for more representative reform of international legal governance (Linda, 2022).

Studies on the transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world order have been extensively developed in the literature on international relations and global politics. Several classic studies, such as Cerny & Prichard (2017), highlight changes in the global power structure through a security and regionalism approach, demonstrating that the distribution of global power is increasingly fragmented and no longer concentrated in a single dominant actor. Meanwhile, research by Mazarr (2022) emphasizes the rise of new great powers as a key factor shifting the global balance of power and increasing strategic competition among major powers. These studies provide a theoretical foundation for the dynamics of multipolarity, but still focus on aspects of international politics and security.

In the context of international law, several studies address the challenges of the effectiveness of international legal norms and institutions amidst global geopolitical changes. Research by Bettiza & Lewis (2020) emphasizes that international law cannot be separated from the political interests of powerful states, thus legal norms often become an arena for power contestations. Another study by Anne-Marie Slaughter examines the role of global networks and international institutions in global governance, but does not specifically link them to the shifting power structure toward multipolarity. These studies demonstrate a close relationship between politics and international law, but do not yet position multipolarity as a primary analytical variable.

Based on this mapping of previous research, it can be concluded that there is still a lack of normative studies that comprehensively analyze the politics of international law in the context of the transition to a multipolar world order. This study aims to fill this gap by placing the politics of international law as the primary focus of analysis, specifically examining how changes in the configuration of global power influence the process of formation, implementation, and enforcement of international law. Therefore, this research is expected to provide conceptual and academic contributions to understanding the direction of development of the international legal order in the multipolar era.

The novelty of this research lies in its normative approach, which specifically positions international legal politics as the primary analytical framework in understanding the shift of the world order toward multipolarity. Unlike previous research that generally separates geopolitical and international legal studies, this research integrates changes in global power structures with the process of formation,

application, and enforcement of international legal norms. This research views international law not merely as a passive product of global political dynamics, but as a strategic arena actively influenced and shaped by the contestation of interests of major powers and regional powers in a multipolar world order. Thus, this research offers a new conceptual perspective on the direction of development of international law as an instrument of global governance amidst the tension between norm fragmentation and demands for inclusivity in the contemporary international system.

B. METHODS

This research uses a qualitative method with a descriptive approach. This approach was chosen to understand and analyze in depth the dynamics of international legal politics in the context of the transition of the world order towards multipolarity. Through a descriptive approach, this research seeks to systematically describe changes in the global power structure and their implications for the formation, interpretation, and enforcement of international legal norms (Anggito & Setiawan, 2018). The type of research used is library research, with data sources in the form of secondary data obtained from textbooks, scientific journal articles, international organization documents, and relevant theoretical studies, including international legal realism and Third World Approaches to International Law (TWAIL). Data were analyzed using descriptive qualitative analysis techniques through a critical and interpretive review of the literature to draw conclusions regarding the implications of international legal politics in the multipolar era.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Transition of the World Order Toward Multipolarity from an International Law Perspective

In recent decades, the trend toward a multipolar world order has strengthened along with the rise of several major powers outside the United States. The rise of China, Russia, and the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) countries is a key indicator of this shift in the global distribution of power. China, in particular, has established itself as the world's second-largest economy after the United States, bolstered by its mastery of advanced technology, massive industrial capacity, and a significant domestic market share. These structural advantages make China's rise long-term rather than a temporary phenomenon, significantly shifting the configuration of global economic and political power (Yuliantoro, 2021).

The trend toward multipolarity is also reflected in fundamental changes in the global monetary and energy order, particularly through the termination of the petrodollar agreement between the United States and Saudi Arabia. For decades, the

petrodollar mechanism—which requires oil sales transactions to be conducted in United States dollars (USD)—has created stable global demand for the USD and simultaneously strengthened the United States' hegemonic position in the international financial system (Azmi et al. 2022). This scheme not only underpins US economic dominance but also exerts significant political influence through control of the global monetary architecture. Therefore, the petrodollar's diminishing role marks the weakening of one of the main pillars of US unipolar power.

The petrodollar's waning dominance is influenced by several structural factors. First, the increasing use of renewable and alternative energy sources has gradually reduced global dependence on oil as a primary energy source. This energy transition has directly reduced oil's strategic role in the global economy, indirectly weakening the relevance of the petrodollar system. Second, the strong push by countries like Russia and China to use their national currencies in international trade has further accelerated the dedollarization process. Initiatives such as yuan-denominated oil contracts, strengthening bilateral financial cooperation, and increasing gold reserves are part of a systematic strategy to reduce dependence on the USD and build an alternative global monetary system.

Besides economic and energy factors, the political dimension also plays a significant role in the weakening of the US dollar's dominance. The unilateral economic sanctions imposed by the United States on several countries, such as Iran, Russia, and Venezuela, have sparked global discontent and resistance. US dominance over the international financial system has enabled these sanctions to be effectively implemented, but has also pushed affected countries to seek alternative trading mechanisms beyond the dollar. This situation has reinforced the fragmentation of the international monetary system and fostered the formation of a more pluralistic global economic order (Pamungkas et al., 2019). More broadly, these dynamics emphasize the shift toward a multipolar world order, reflected not only in the distribution of political and economic power but also in the legal structure and governance of international finance.

This new world order is underscored by Vladimir Putin's success in restoring Russia's status as a global power. Through assertive foreign policies, military interventions, and efforts to strengthen alliances with non-Western countries, Russia has challenged US dominance (Carnelian et al., 2017). Meanwhile, the BRIC group of countries has collaborated in various economic, political, and security fields. The creation of the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingency Reserve (CRA) are examples of collective efforts to create alternatives to Western financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank.

On the other hand, the old powers, the US and the European Union, inevitably

have to adjust or adapt. Failure to recognize the new reality (multipolarity) will cost them dearly. The Ukrainian war, for example, stemmed from the arrogance of forcing NATO expansion onto Russia's borders, specifically Ukraine. This effort was naturally opposed by Putin. Numerous figures and experts, including Angela Merkel, have warned that the effort was dangerous and unattainable.

However, the UK and the US paid no attention; they wanted Russia cornered to perpetuate their unipolar power. Unfortunately, Russia cannot be cornered. If Ukraine cannot be prevented from joining NATO, it wants to establish a buffer zone separating itself from Ukraine. As a result, Ukraine is now paying a heavy price for the unipolar ambitions of Western nations. President Zelenski is trapped in a war he cannot win. How can a country be defeated with nuclear weapons? Unlike the Soviet Union's war in Afghanistan, for Russia, the Ukrainian war is about the country's very existence. When it comes to existence, the use of nuclear weapons cannot be considered irrational.

The transition from a multipolar world order to a multipolar one, from an international legal perspective, must be understood as a fundamental shift in the structure of global normative authority. In a unipolar system, the dominance of a single great power allows for the formation of a relatively stable international legal consensus, where international norms, regimes, and institutions often reflect the preferences of the hegemonic state. However, in a multipolar system, the weakening of the position of a single hegemon leads to the loss of a "center of legitimacy" in the formation and interpretation of international law. As a result, international law no longer develops through universal consensus, but rather through fragmented and competitive negotiations between states with conflicting interests.

Multipolarity also has a direct impact on the process of lawmaking. Large states and regional powers with relatively equal political and economic capacity tend to promote legal norms that reflect their respective strategic interests. This condition weakens the principle of universalism in international law and encourages the emergence of a plurality of norms, whether in the form of exclusive international treaties, regional regimes, or diverse legal practices. In this context, international law increasingly exhibits a political character, where the validity of norms is determined largely by the balance of power rather than solely by legal legitimacy.

From the aspect of international law enforcement, the multipolar order demonstrates a decline in the effectiveness of compliance mechanisms. The absence of a single authority with global coercive capacity makes international law enforcement highly dependent on the political will of states. Powerful states tend to apply double standards, demanding legal compliance from others while ignoring international legal obligations deemed detrimental to their national interests. This

practice systematically weakens the principle of *pacta sunt servanda* and erodes the credibility of international law as a binding legal system.

Furthermore, multipolarity encourages the re-emphasis of state sovereignty as a pretext for limiting intervention in international law. States are increasingly selective in accepting the jurisdiction of international institutions, including international courts and dispute resolution mechanisms. As a result, international law experiences what can be called *selective compliance*, where compliance is no longer normative but rather instrumental. This phenomenon confirms that in a multipolar order, international law operates in a tension between legal norms and the interests of power.

Thus, the transition to a multipolar world order indicates that international law is experiencing a structural legitimacy crisis. International law has not completely lost its relevance, but its function has shifted from a universal regulatory instrument to an arena for contestation of interests between global actors. Therefore, the primary challenge for international law in the multipolar era lies not only in the formation of new norms, but also in maintaining the legitimacy, consistency, and binding force of law in an increasingly fragmented and nationally-interested international system..

The Politics of International Law in the Formation and Enforcement of Norms in the Multipolar Era

The politics of international law in the multipolar era is characterized by a shift in power from unipolar (dominated by one state) to multipolar (many centers of power), resulting in the formation and enforcement of norms becoming more complex, fragmented, and often politicized. In this context, international law is not simply a set of rules, but rather a political instrument used by states to assert national interests, influence the global order, and justify their actions.

The following is an analysis of the politics of international law in the formation and enforcement of norms in the multipolar era:

Dynamics of Norm Formation

In the multipolar era, the process of forming international legal norms is no longer dominated exclusively by Western states, as was the case in the post-World War II period and the post-Cold War unipolar era. The weakening of Western normative hegemony has opened up space for a more pluralistic configuration of power, in which various non-Western actors have begun to play a significant role in determining the direction of international legal development. This situation marks a significant shift in the structure of law-making authority, from a centralized and hegemonic one to a more dispersed and competitive one.

The rise of new powers such as China, Russia, and India, along with the

increasingly solid position of Global South countries, has had direct implications for the contestation of international legal norms. These countries are no longer merely acting as rule-takers but are increasingly becoming rule-shapers, promoting legal norms and principles that align more closely with their strategic interests, political values, and historical experiences. In various multilateral forums, this trend is evident in efforts to challenge Western normative standards, particularly on issues of sovereignty, non-intervention, development, and more balanced global governance.

Concurrently, there is a restructuring of international legal norms, marked by a shift from claims of homogenous universal norms to the formation of more pragmatic, thematic, and regional norms. Rather than producing a broadly binding global consensus, international law in the multipolar era develops through sectoral regimes and regional frameworks that reflect the specific needs and interests of its actors. This phenomenon demonstrates increasingly apparent normative fragmentation and confirms that the universalism of international law is often political and contextual.

In this context, developing countries are capitalizing on the momentum of multipolarity to strengthen their bargaining position in the formation of international law. Through a collective and regional approach, developing countries are demanding normative justice, sovereign equality, and respect for the fundamental principles of international law, which have often been diminished by hegemonic practices. The role of ASEAN, for example, demonstrates how regional organizations can serve as a medium for articulating the interests of developing countries by emphasizing the principles of non-intervention, consensus, and respect for sovereignty as the foundation of international legal interactions.

Challenges of Norm Enforcement

The enforcement of international legal norms in the multipolar era faces an increasingly apparent crisis with increasing geopolitical competition between major powers. In a fragmented power configuration, international law no longer functions as a relatively stable normative framework but is often drawn into global political rivalries. This condition leads to reduced legal certainty and a weakening of the binding power of international norms, particularly when these norms directly conflict with the strategic interests of powerful states.

One of the main challenges in enforcing international law is the increasing politicization of international law. Major powers tend to selectively interpret, apply, or even ignore international legal norms to support their foreign policy agendas. International law in this context is often misused as an instrument of political pressure, legitimizing intervention, or justifying unilateral sanctions. From the perspective of international legal realism, this phenomenon confirms that compliance

with international law is driven not by normative obligations, but by calculations of interests and the distribution of power.

The international law enforcement crisis is also reflected in the dysfunction of institutional enforcement mechanisms, particularly the United Nations Security Council. The veto power held by major powers often paralyzes the Security Council's ability to act effectively in response to serious violations of international law, including the use of force and human rights abuses. As a result, the principle of collective security loses its operational substance, and international law fails to provide a consistent response to threats to international peace and security.

Furthermore, the tension between the principle of state sovereignty and demands for international intervention is increasingly prominent in the context of norm enforcement. Sovereign states often use legal arguments, such as non-intervention and territorial integrity, to justify unilateral actions that contradict the values of international law. On the other hand, international law struggles to limit the unilateral use of force, especially when the perpetrator is a state with significant military and political power. This creates a normative paradox, where international law recognizes state sovereignty but simultaneously fails to prevent the abuse of that sovereignty.

From a TWAIL perspective, this crisis of norm enforcement is not neutral but disproportionately impacts developing countries. Countries in the Global South are often the target of harsh and selective enforcement of international law, while similar violations by powerful states tend to go unpunished. This inequality reinforces the criticism that international law in the multipolar era still operates within a hierarchical structure, where law enforcement reflects power relations more than principles of global justice.

Implications of International Legal Politics

The multipolar era has fundamental implications for international legal politics, particularly in how legal norms are formed, implemented, and maintained. International legal politics no longer operates within a relatively homogeneous universal framework, but rather within the context of a fragmented global distribution of power. The weakening dominance of a single power center has led to the loss of a single normative standard, resulting in international law being increasingly influenced by the political and strategic interests of various state actors with varying degrees of power.

One of the most prominent implications is the fragmentation of international law. In a multipolar order, legal norms no longer apply uniformly throughout the international system, but instead develop sectorally, thematically, and regionally. Various regional legal regimes—such as regional economic law, regional security

mechanisms, and locally context-based human rights regulations—have emerged in response to the inability of universal norms to address diverse interests. This fragmentation demonstrates that international legal politics is moving away from universalism toward normative pluralism, where the applicability of law is highly dependent on power configurations and regional agreements.

A further implication is the strengthening of pragmatism in international legal politics. Maintaining global peace and stability tends to be achieved through practical and situational approaches, rather than based on idealistic and consistent enforcement of norms. In many cases, conflict resolution emphasizes short-term stabilization, ceasefires, or political compromise, rather than upholding substantive justice such as accountability for violations of international law. From a realist perspective, this condition reflects a shift in the function of international law from an instrument of normative justice to a conflict management tool subordinated to the political interests of powerful states.

Furthermore, the multipolar era has also re-enforced the position of state sovereignty in international legal politics. States are increasingly asserting their prerogative to interpret and respond to international norms according to their respective national interests. The principles of sovereignty and non-intervention are again becoming primary arguments for limiting international intervention, including on issues previously considered of global importance, such as human rights and collective security. This indicates a re-nationalization of international law, where adherence to norms is selective and instrumental.

From TWAIL's perspective, the political implications of international law in the multipolar era are ambivalent. On the one hand, the weakening of Western dominance opens up space for Global South countries to participate more actively in the formation and interpretation of international law. However, fragmentation and pragmatism risk perpetuating structural injustice if not accompanied by profound institutional reform. Without changes to global power structures and the epistemology of international law, international legal politics in the multipolar era has the potential to simply replace dominant actors without altering the hierarchical character of the international legal system itself.

Thus, the implications of international legal politics in the multipolar era indicate that international law is in a complex and tense phase of transformation. The fragmentation of norms, the pragmatism of enforcement, and the reassertion of state sovereignty mark a shift from idealistic international law to an increasingly political one. The challenge going forward is not only to maintain the relevance of international law but also to ensure that international legal politics is not entirely controlled by the logic of power, but rather continues to orientate itself toward justice,

equality, and more inclusive global governance.

D. CONCLUSION

The transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world order represents a structural change with profound implications for the existence and function of international law. The weakening of the dominance of a single hegemonic power has transformed the landscape for the formation, application, and enforcement of international legal norms. These norms no longer operate within a framework of universal consensus, but rather within a fragmented and competitive global power configuration. In this context, international law is increasingly influenced by calculations of national interests and the distribution of power among states. The multipolar era demonstrates that the formation of international legal norms is no longer monopolized by Western states, but involves new actors from the Global South and increasingly assertive regional powers. However, this broader involvement has not necessarily resulted in a more just and egalitarian international legal order. Instead, it has resulted in fragmented norms and legal pluralism, often weakening the principle of universalism and giving rise to inconsistencies in the application of international law across various regions and legal regimes.

From a law enforcement perspective, the multipolar order has exacerbated the crisis in the enforcement of international legal norms. The politicization of law, the use of double standards by powerful states, and the paralysis of collective enforcement mechanisms—especially within the United Nations framework—demonstrate that the effectiveness of international law depends heavily on the political will of states, rather than on the normative force of the law itself. This condition erodes the legitimacy of international law as a binding and universal legal system. The political implications of international law in the multipolar era are also marked by the strengthening of pragmatism and the reaffirmation of the principle of state sovereignty. International law tends to function as an instrument of conflict management and short-term political stabilization, rather than as a means of upholding substantive justice. States are increasingly selective in accepting and implementing international norms, so that legal compliance is instrumental and contextual.

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