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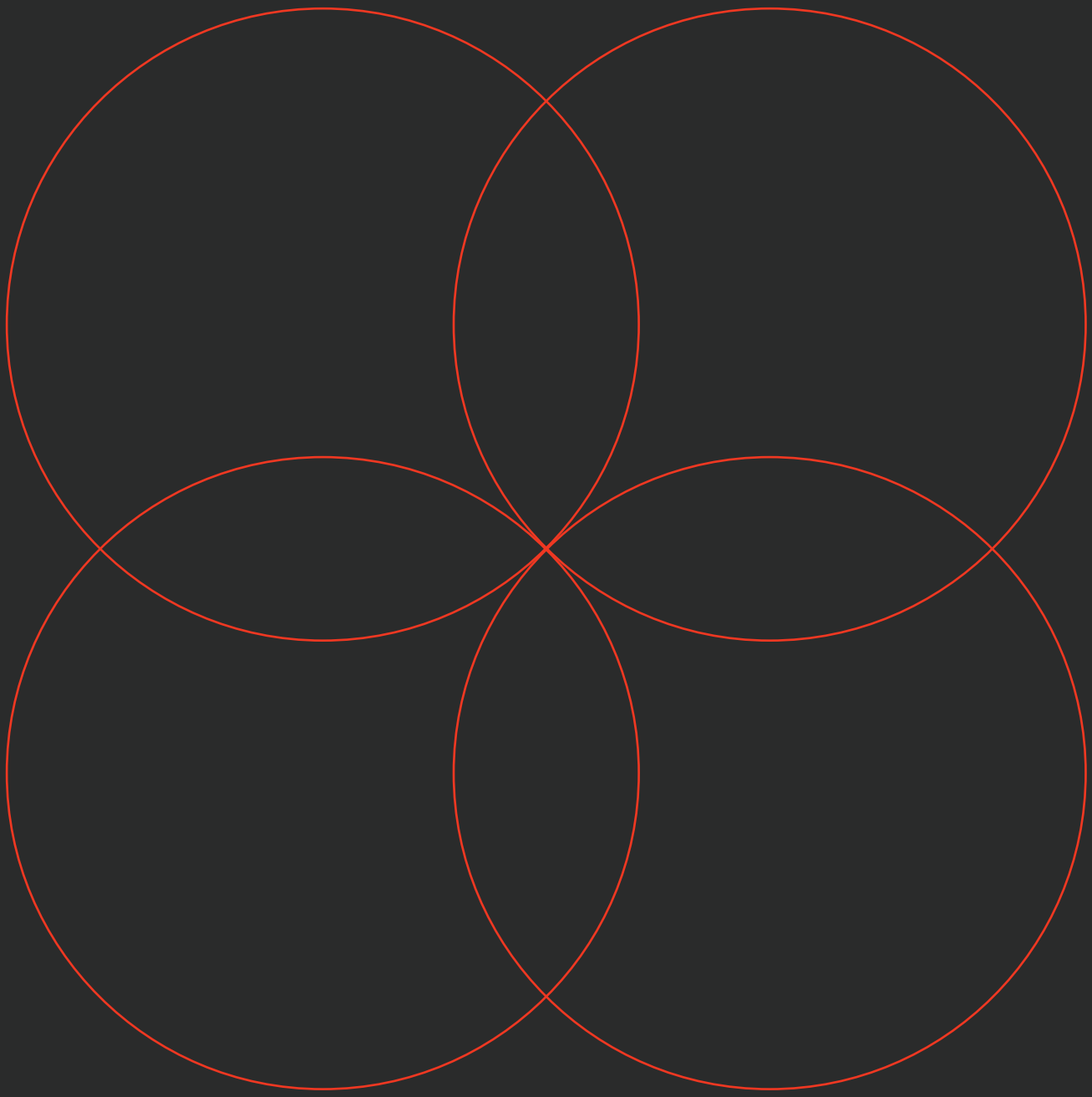
Special Report



The Quadripolar World

Understanding Twenty-First-Century Geopolitics

S. Yash Kalash

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67 Erb Street West
Waterloo, ON, Canada N2L 6C2
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About the Author

S. Yash Kalash is research director of digital economy at CIGI. He is an expert in strategy, public policy, digital technology and financial services. He has experience in emerging markets across India, MENA (Middle East and North Africa) and the Asia-Pacific and a distinguished track record advising governments and the private sector on emerging technologies. His expertise spans various industries, including fintech, AI and digital assets, and their impact on geopolitics. His career includes key roles at Roland Berger, the Government of India, Adani Group and KPMG, where he spearheaded strategic digital projects, advised clients on their digital assets and AI strategy, and informed policy and regulatory developments. With an M.Sc. in management from Imperial College London and a B.Sc. in international relations and politics from the University of Bath, Yash combines deep strategic insight with strong training, making him a versatile and impactful leader in the field of digital economy.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

AI	artificial intelligence
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS+	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates
DFFT	data free flow with trust
DPI	digital public infrastructure
G7	Group of Seven
G20	Group of Twenty
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
IPEF	Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
QGF	quadripolar geopolitical framework
Quad	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
UAE	United Arab Emirates
WTO	World Trade Organization

Executive Summary

The twenty-first-century international system is increasingly defined by fragmentation, fluidity and strategic ambiguity. Traditional geopolitical models — bipolarity, unipolarity and generalized multipolarity — are no longer sufficient to explain the complex, multidimensional dynamics of global power. In this context, this special report introduces the quadripolar geopolitical framework (QGF) to interpret the evolving international order, in which four powers — the United States, China, India and Russia — serve as autonomous strategic poles. The framework seeks to capture the fluid, multidimensional nature of twenty-first-century geopolitics, where states simultaneously compete, cooperate and hedge across domains.

Drawing on game theory, the QGF maps bilateral relationships across two axes: ideological alignment versus strategic autonomy, and systemic rivalry versus economic interdependence. Through case studies, the special report illustrates how contemporary power dynamics defy linear alliances and demand new interpretive tools.

The framework also highlights the rising agency of middle powers and the growing significance of modular, issue-based coalitions. While not without limitations, the QGF offers a flexible, analytically rigorous structure to understand and navigate global power amid systemic volatility and realignment.

Introduction: A Fluid and Fragmented Geopolitical Landscape

The global geopolitical order is undergoing a profound transformation — one that defies the linear trajectories of the past century. In the second half of the twentieth century, the world was shaped by the rigid contours of bipolarity, defined by the ideological and strategic competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. Following the Cold War, this structure gave way to a brief and highly consequential era of unipolarity, characterized by the predominance of the United States in military, economic and institutional terms. During this period, global governance frameworks, liberal international norms and open markets became the dominant architecture through which global order was mediated.

However, the post-Cold War moment of Western strategic primacy has not persisted in a linear fashion. Instead, what has emerged over the past two decades is an increasingly fluid, fragmented and contested geopolitical landscape. Power is becoming more diffused, institutions are under strain and international cooperation is increasingly transactional. We are witnessing the return of hard-power politics, the reassertion of state sovereignty and the weakening of consensus-based multilateralism. A growing number of states are seeking to revise or circumvent Western-led rules and institutions, while non-state actors and digital technologies are disrupting traditional levers of statecraft.

The result is a world that cannot be adequately explained through the dominant analytical frameworks of the past. The unipolarity thesis, now increasingly obsolete, fails to capture the strategic agency of rising powers and the constraints on US leadership. The bipolar lens, recently revived in debates around the US-China rivalry, oversimplifies a world where multiple poles — not just two — shape outcomes. Meanwhile, the multipolarity discourse, particularly that advanced through institutions such as BRICS+ (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates [UAE]), suffers from an absence of analytical specificity; it identifies the presence of multiple actors but lacks a cohesive framework for understanding their interactions.

In this context, the author proposes a new analytical lens: the QGF. This framework identifies four strategic poles — the United States, China, India and Russia — as the principal actors whose interactions, alignments and divergences will shape the architecture of the twenty-first-century international order. Crucially, this is not a return to bloc politics or a fixed alliance system. Rather, it is a model designed to capture the fluid permutations of cooperation, competition and conditional alignment that increasingly define global geopolitics. It moves beyond ideological binaries and static hierarchies, offering instead a dynamic matrix that reflects the interest-based, situational and multidimensional logic of state behaviour in the current era.

This behavioural complexity can be more formally understood through the lens of game theory, which models how rational actors interact under conditions of interdependence, competition and uncertainty (Nax 2015). In this framework, each quadrant of the matrix can be interpreted as a stylized strategic "game" in which state actors pursue different equilibria depending on their preferences, constraints and expectations about others' actions.

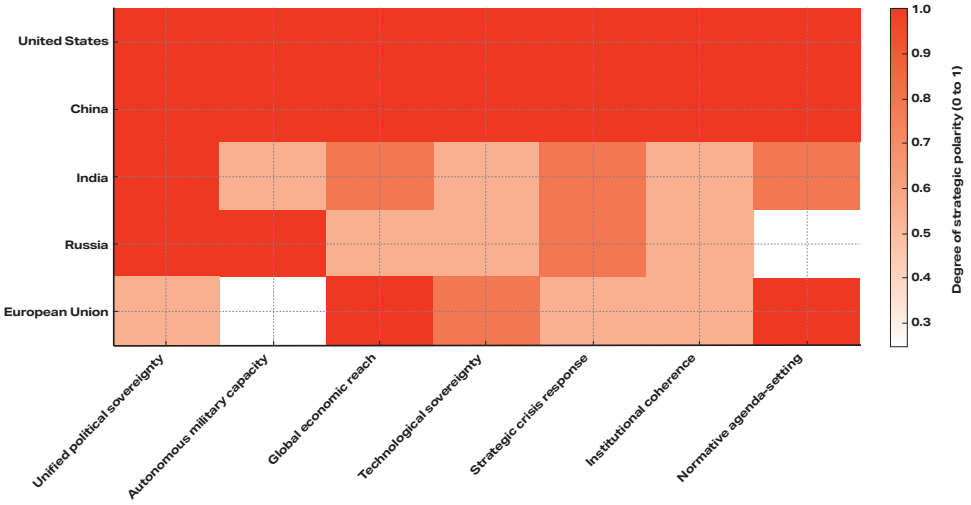
This framework employs strategic archetypes derived from game theory, such as coordination dilemmas, repeated bargaining and rivalry under interdependence — not to predict outcomes, but to clarify the incentive structures and recurring constraints in great-power interactions. These heuristic models serve as analytical lenses, not formal solutions, and are intended to reveal how power asymmetries, trust deficits and transactional behaviour vary across different configurations of rivalry, interdependence, alignment and autonomy.

Using this framework, one can understand why India can deepen strategic cooperation with the United States while maintaining defence ties with Russia; why China and Russia can align tactically against Western powers despite historical distrust; and why the United States and China remain economically interdependent even as they engage in strategic rivalry. In doing so, this framework provides a more realistic, nuanced and actionable approach to analyzing how global power is exercised, negotiated and contested.

The Four Poles: Why the United States, China, India and Russia Will Define the Twenty-First Century

The emerging global order is no longer defined solely by the pre-eminence of a single superpower, nor is it reducible to a binary contest between rival ideological blocs. Instead, four states — the United States, China, India and Russia — stand out as enduring and autonomous centres of strategic influence. Each of these nations possesses a unique combination of military, economic, demographic and technological capabilities, underpinned by distinct strategic cultures and geopolitical aspirations. Their bilateral and multilateral interactions — sometimes cooperative, often competitive and frequently ambiguous — are central to understanding the dynamics of twenty-first-century global politics (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Polarity Criteria Matrix: Assessing Major Global Actors



Source: Author.

The United States: Resilient Hegemon with Global Reach

Despite predictions of decline, the United States remains the world's most comprehensive power. It continues to lead in the global distribution of hard and soft power, sustaining unmatched capabilities across military, financial and technological domains. With more than 750 military bases in 80 countries and formal alliances with 30 states, the United States maintains the world's most expansive security architecture (O'Dell 2023). It accounts for approximately 40 percent of global defence spending and retains qualitative superiority in power-projection capabilities, including strategic deterrence, naval dominance and intelligence assets (Peter G. Peterson Foundation 2024).

Economically, the United States is still the largest single-country economy and home to the world's reserve currency (the US dollar), which underpins its financial leverage. Its capacity to impose sanctions, control cross-border capital flows, and dominate technological standards via platforms and protocols gives it extraordinary systemic influence.

Moreover, American leadership in innovation ecosystems from Silicon Valley to the artificial intelligence (AI) industrial complex ensures its centrality in shaping the rules and frontiers of emerging technologies. The resilience of its democratic institutions, while tested, continues to provide a normative foundation for global partnerships.

China: Ascendant Challenger and Systemic Architect

China represents the most consequential strategic competitor to the United States in the post-Cold War era. Since the launch of its "Reform and Opening" in 1978, and especially following its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 (Tan 2021), China has emerged as a global economic powerhouse, now ranking second globally in nominal GDP and first in purchasing-power parity.[1]

Under President Xi Jinping, China has moved from integration into Western-led institutions toward the construction of alternative governance structures. Initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank reflect Beijing's ambition to shape parallel institutions with global influence.

Technologically, China is rapidly closing the innovation gap through state-led industrial policies, dominance in rare earths, and global leadership in telecommunications (for example, Huawei), digital payments and surveillance technologies. Militarily, the People's Liberation Army has been modernized to project regional and increasingly global power, with a growing blue-water navy and advanced missile systems.

Strategically, China combines economic statecraft with assertive regional posture as seen in the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait and its border disputes with India, thus positioning itself as both a systemic rival and a revisionist power challenging the liberal international order.

India: Ancient Civilization, Strategic Swing Power and Democratic Outlier

India is uniquely positioned within the QGF as both a rising power and a strategic balancer. It is the world's most populous country, a fast-growing economy and a nuclear-armed democracy with global aspirations. Its demographic dividend, expanding consumer market and growing digital infrastructure make it a central actor in the future of global economic growth.

India's strategic culture is shaped by non-alignment, strategic autonomy and a commitment to a multipolar world order. It maintains close defence ties with Russia, deepens economic relations with the West and pursues strategic convergence with the United States through mechanisms such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) while resisting entanglement in formal alliances.

India is also a normative outlier: a democratic polity that engages with both liberal and illiberal states and participates in Western-led initiatives (such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity [IPEF]) (Manak 2023) while also shaping South-South cooperation through BRICS+ and the Global South agenda. Its leadership in digital public infrastructure (DPI) (for example, India Stack [Khanna, Raina and Chawla 2023]) and its prominent Group of Twenty (G20) presidency underscore its ambition to shape global norms and institutions.

India's central location in the Indo-Pacific, its contested border with China and its technological aspirations further reinforce its position as a swing pole, capable of influencing alignments across multiple domains.

1 See https://tradingeconomics.com/china/gdp.

Russia: Disruptive Power with Strategic Leverage

Russia's role as a global power is not defined by economic scale but by its military capabilities, energy endowments and geopolitical assertiveness. Despite Western sanctions and demographic decline, Russia retains one of the world's largest nuclear arsenals, advanced military-industrial capacity and a proven willingness to project force beyond its borders, as seen in Ukraine, Syria, the Caucasus and the Sahel region of Africa.

Moscow's foreign policy is rooted in a realist world view, seeking to disrupt Western dominance and reassert influence in the near abroad and beyond. It positions itself as a civilizational counterweight to the West, with close alignment with China and growing ties with revisionist or non-aligned powers across Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Russia exercises considerable influence through energy diplomacy, especially in Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East, and through asymmetric tools such as cyberwarfare, mercenary deployments and disinformation campaigns. Its institutional influence extends through the Collective Security Treaty Organization, BRICS+ and the Eurasian Economic Union.

While constrained by sanctions and economic isolation, Russia remains a strategic disruptor and a permanent pole in any realist assessment of global power, particularly given its veto power at the UN Security Council and enduring bilateral leverage with multiple middle powers.

These four states — the United States, China, India and Russia, each with distinctive interests, ideologies and capabilities — represent the functional poles of the contemporary geopolitical order. Their relationships are neither linear nor fixed. Instead, their interactions generate multiple overlapping spheres of influence and interest-driven alignments, which traditional frameworks struggle to capture.

It is not the dominance of any one pole, but the shifting constellations of cooperation, competition and hedging among them, that will shape the contours of the international system in the decades to come.

Why the European Union Is *Not* a Geopolitical Pole — *Yet*

The exclusion of the European Union from the list of four strategic poles within this framework is neither an oversight nor a dismissal of its economic or diplomatic influence. Rather, it is an acknowledgment of the current structural realities of global power: the European Union, with all its economic heft and normative influence, remains a fragmented political actor unable to project unified geopolitical will or strategic autonomy at a systemic level. In contrast, the four poles outlined in this framework possess the defining characteristics of independent state actors: cohesive national decision making; strategic sovereignty across all domains (military, economic, demographic and technological); and the ability to act autonomously and decisively in crisis scenarios.

The European Union is undeniably a major economic bloc — larger than India and Russia in aggregate GDP and comparable to the United States.[2] It is also a normative power in many global regulatory domains, particularly in digital governance, competition policy and climate diplomacy. However, economic scale alone does not qualify an entity as a geopolitical pole. The European Union

2 See www.worldeconomics.com/Thoughts/Europes-Combined-GDP-is-far-Larger-than-Russias.aspx.

lacks unified control over foreign policy, military posture and strategic resource allocation — domains that are essential for acting as a singular pole in global politics.

The structural barrier here is sovereignty. Deep political integration, particularly in foreign policy and defence, would require member states, notably France and Germany, to relinquish substantial national authority. The idea of a fully integrated "United States of Europe" remains politically controversial and institutionally underdeveloped (Konzelmann and Fovargue-Davies 2021). Past efforts to forge common defence and foreign policy mechanisms (such as the European External Action Service or the Permanent Structured Cooperation within the European Union [Noel 2025]) have consistently revealed the limitations of consensus-based governance and the primacy of national interests during strategic crises (Bence Gát 2024).

The European Union's performance in recent systemic shocks, whether during the euro-zone debt crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic or Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has demonstrated its value as a multilateral economic and regulatory actor. But in each case, strategic leadership and coercive instruments (sanctions, defence posture, energy resilience) were driven by national capitals such as Berlin, Paris and Warsaw — not Brussels. Even in the context of the Ukraine war, the European Union's cohesion has been reactive and uneven, reliant on US security guarantees through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and hindered by internal disagreements over sanctions, migration and energy policy (Di Sario 2025).

If strategic polarity requires the capacity to act autonomously in defining and shaping the international order, then the European Union does not yet meet this threshold. It remains a meta-power: influential through its aggregated economic clout, normative diplomacy and regional integration, but not yet a coherent sovereign actor capable of functioning as a singular pole.

It is possible, though not inevitable, that the European Union may evolve into a full-fledged geopolitical pole. A sustained US retrenchment from NATO; a deepening of internal threats (for example, Russian aggression, economic decoupling from China); and political alignment among core EU states could accelerate integration in defence and foreign affairs. If this trajectory materializes, the European Union could transform into a *sui generis* superstate capable of acting cohesively across domains. But this would require structural reforms tantamount to a constitutional leap: shared fiscal sovereignty, integrated command and control of armed forces, and a federalized foreign policy apparatus. The United States of Europe, long a theoretical aspiration, would need to move from abstraction to institutional reality.

Until then, the European Union remains a powerful coalition of middle powers, not a singular strategic pole. Its influence is profound, particularly in trade, regulation and global norm-setting, but its systemic role in strategic affairs is contingent upon internal coherence that does not yet exist.

The QGF: Concept and Analytical Utility

At its core, the QGF posits that these four states are not just powerful actors but also independent poles — each with the capacity to project influence globally, act autonomously in key domains and shape systemic outcomes. This includes the ability to shift multilateral dynamics, redefine regional balances, and recalibrate international norms and institutions.

Unlike traditional alliance systems or ideological blocs, today's geopolitics is not organized around enduring loyalties or clear-cut fault lines (Saran 2021). Instead, it is increasingly characterized by

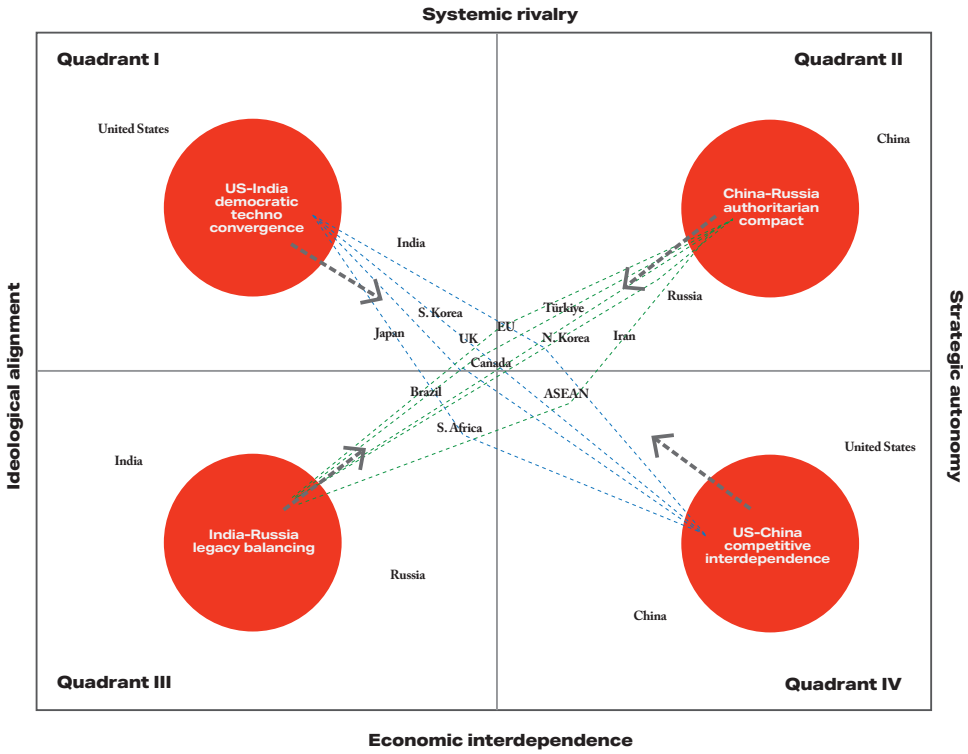
fluid permutations of cooperation and competition, driven by intersecting and often conflicting interests across security, economic and normative domains. The same dyads may cooperate in one area while competing in another, and alliances often manifest as short-term or issue-specific coalitions rather than comprehensive strategic partnerships.

Matrix Structure: The Four-Quadrant Model

The framework is operationalized through a four-quadrant matrix that maps bilateral interactions among the four poles across two key dimensions (see Figure 2):

- ***x*-axis: ideological alignment → strategic autonomy**
  - This axis measures the normative or systemic orientation of cooperation: whether states align on the basis of shared political values and governance models (for example, liberal democracy, authoritarianism), or whether they pursue interest-based autonomy, avoiding normative convergence.
- ***y*-axis: systemic rivalry → economic interdependence**
  - This axis captures the functional nature of the relationship: whether cooperation occurs in the context of systemic rivalry and strategic competition, or amid economic interdependence and mutual institutional entanglement.

Figure 2: The QGF



Source: Author.

Note: ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

The result is a matrix that classifies major-power interactions not as fixed alliances but as contextual alignments shaped by shifting variables. This provides an analytical tool to map the strategic logic behind seemingly paradoxical relationships, such as those combining military partnerships with economic rivalries or political divergences with pragmatic cooperation.
It is also important to note that the QGF is not designed as a system of opposing poles (for example, ideology versus autonomy or rivalry versus interdependence), but rather as a framework that maps distinct axes of tension and alignment that coexist in contemporary geopolitics. These axes are not mutually exclusive or inversely correlated but orthogonal dimensions that often intersect in complex, non-linear ways.

The four most distinctive analytical contributions of the QGF are examined below.

Captures Non-Linear Alignments and Strategic Ambiguities

In classical theories of international relations, particularly those rooted in the Cold War paradigm, strategic behaviour was interpreted through clear binary oppositions: allies versus adversaries, capitalist versus communist, East versus West (Kristinsson 2012). These distinctions allowed for easy classification but offered little explanatory power in contexts where states engage in simultaneous cooperation and competition across different domains.

The QGF addresses this gap by recognizing that strategic ambiguity is not an exception; it is a central feature of the current system. Take, for instance, the case of India. It participates in the Quad and collaborates on defence production and digital governance with the West, yet continues to maintain robust defence, energy and diplomatic ties with Russia, a country increasingly ostracized by the United States and its allies. This is not a contradiction; it is a deliberate strategy of hedging and diversification.

Both India and Russia routinely operate outside of this binary configuration. India, for instance, actively partners with the United States in Indo-Pacific security arrangements while maintaining energy, defence and multilateral cooperation with Russia and BRICS+. It resists being subsumed into any one bloc and asserts an independent foreign policy rooted in strategic autonomy. Similarly, Russia, despite its deepening alignment with China, pursues its own global agenda, including in the Middle East, Africa and Eurasia, and leverages its veto power, energy exports and military capacity to assert itself as a distinct pole in global affairs.

The framework also explains how China and the United States, despite being principal strategic rivals, remain deeply economically interdependent. Their rivalry spans semiconductors, AI governance and maritime security, yet both countries are tightly integrated in global supply chains and capital markets. Strategic rivalry does not preclude systemic codependence.

This capacity to map such non-linear, cross-domain alignments gives the quadripolar framework a level of granularity and realism that conventional models lack. It enables policy makers and analysts to understand not only *who* is aligned with whom, but also *in what domain*, *to what degree* and *under what conditions.*

Accommodates Hybrid Coalitions and Modular Multilateralism

The current global order is marked by the emergence of hybrid coalitions and partnerships that are functional rather than ideological, and that often operate without formal institutions or long-term commitments. These coalitions are modular: states join based on issue-specific interests (for example, technology, security, trade, development), and participation is not mutually exclusive.

Consider the simultaneous existence and functionality of groupings such as BRICS+, the Quad, the G20, the SCO and the IPEF. A country such as India is a founding member of BRICS+, a key player in the Quad and an active participant in the IPEF. These groupings serve different strategic functions and operate according to different normative logics: BRICS+ as a counterweight to Western financial institutions, the Quad as a maritime security platform, and the IPEF as a digital trade and supply chain framework.

Traditional models cannot account for these overlapping institutional memberships without labelling them incoherent or contradictory. The quadripolar framework provides that missing analytical granularity. By categorizing alignments based on axes of ideological convergence versus strategic autonomy, and systemic rivalry versus economic interdependence, it allows for the mapping of relationships not as static memberships but as rational expressions of multi-vector strategy of states seeking to optimize their leverage by participating in parallel regimes based on evolving interests.

Highlights Transactional Diplomacy and Middle-Power Agency

The third and perhaps most critical contribution of the QGF lies in its capacity to elevate the role of middle powers and make sense of their strategic choices. In a quadripolar system, middle and small powers are not passive actors balancing between two giants; they are active agents shaping the alignment landscape through transactional diplomacy.

Countries such as Brazil, Indonesia, South Africa, Türkiye, the UAE and Vietnam increasingly employ multi-alignment strategies, engaging with multiple poles for different purposes (Ben Hammouda 2024): security guarantees from one, trade access from another and technology transfers from a third. These strategies are rational responses to a world where great-power competition creates both constraints and opportunities for strategic manoeuvring.

For example:

- **Türkiye**, a NATO member, purchases Russian S-400 missile systems while also cooperating with the United States on defence and engaging China through BRI partnerships (*Al Jazeera* 2021).
- **Brazil**, under different administrations, has alternated between aligning with Western-led environmental and trade frameworks and championing Global South solidarity through BRICS+ (Vinjamuri et al. 2025).
- **Indonesia** manages strategic ties with both the United States and China, participating in Quad-plus dialogues while resisting alignment pressures in the South China Sea (Jayawant 2024).

The QGF provides a conceptual basis to analyze these multi-vector strategies not as outliers but as emerging norms. It recognizes that transactional, issue-based diplomacy is becoming the dominant mode of engagement, not only for middle powers but also increasingly for the poles themselves.

It also restores analytical agency to middle powers by recognizing that they are not merely subjects of great-power influence but also shapers of regional alignments, norm entrepreneurs and brokers of multilateral cooperation. In a fragmented global order, the ability of these actors to manoeuvre and build flexible coalitions will be central to determining the outcomes of major global challenges, from AI governance to climate finance.

Integrates Ideological, Economic and Security Variables Simultaneously

Many traditional international relations theories tend to privilege a single variable in explaining state behaviour:

- **Realism** centres on military power and security competition.
- **Liberalism** emphasizes international institutions, a rules-based order and economic interdependence.
- **Constructivism** focuses on norms, identities and ideational factors.

While each of these theories offers valuable insights, they often fail to account for the concurrent influence of competing variables in state decision making. In practice, states do not choose between acting according to norms, interests or institutions — they navigate all three simultaneously.

The QGF overcomes this limitation by enabling multi-variable analysis within a single structure. For example:

- **The US-India relationship** combines ideological convergence (democracy), economic opportunity (tech and supply chains) and strategic alignment (Indo-Pacific security).
- **The China-Russia relationship** is primarily driven by shared geopolitical interests and security alignment, rather than ideology or deep economic integration.
- **The US-China relationship** represents economic interdependence coexisting with systemic rivalry, highlighting the paradoxical nature of great-power engagement.

In sum, the QGF distinguishes itself by offering a more accurate, flexible and comprehensive method for interpreting global dynamics. It transcends the limitations of bipolarity by recognizing autonomous strategic behaviour beyond the US-China dyad; improves on multipolarity by structuring interactional logic among key actors; and synthesizes core explanatory variables — ideology, interest and power — in a manner grounded in observable behaviour. As such, it constitutes a necessary and timely evolution in the analytical tools available to scholars, policy makers and strategists navigating the complexity of twenty-first-century international relations.

Case Studies and Scenarios: Applying the Framework

Quadrant I: The India-US Techno Convergence: The Strategic Coordination Game

In the evolving quadripolar landscape, the India-US relationship exemplifies a deepening alignment that is multidimensional, strategically significant and increasingly institutionalized. Once marked by mutual distrust during the Cold War and India's long-standing non-alignment, the bilateral

trajectory has, over the past two decades, shifted toward robust convergence across three core dimensions: ideology, security and economic-technological interdependence. This dynamic places the India-US relationship squarely within Quadrant I of the QGF, defined by high ideological alignment and high economic interdependence.

At its core, this alignment is not merely transactional or defensive. It is strategic and long-term, grounded in a shared vision of a democratic, rules-based international order; mutual concerns over the assertiveness of revisionist powers (notably China); and a joint ambition to shape emerging global governance norms, particularly in digital technology, supply chains and defence.

Strategic Logic and Game-Theoretic Interpretation

From a game-theoretic perspective, India-US cooperation in this quadrant mirrors the logic of a stag hunt (coordination game) (Kim and Palfrey 2023). In such games, actors derive the highest possible payoff when they coordinate their actions around shared goals, but they also face strategic risk: if one actor defects or hesitates, due to uncertainty, domestic politics or mistrust, the other's cooperation may result in suboptimal outcomes (see Table 1). Thus, the challenge lies not in shared intent but in maintaining credibility, consistency and mutual trust.

Table 1: India-US Game Theoretic Interpretation

Strategic Action	Cooperate (Build Trust and Joint Frameworks)	Defect (Act Unilaterally)
Cooperate	High payoff for both (economic and strategic)	Moderate payoff for cooperator, high cost for defector
Defect	High cost (missed opportunity, reputational damage)	Low payoff equilibrium (fragmentation, inefficiency)

Source: Author.

To realize the Pareto-optimal equilibrium, defined by joint technological standards, secure supply chains, defence collaboration and interoperable governance frameworks, both actors must overcome several barriers: asymmetry of capabilities (US global reach versus India's regional priorities); historical distrust (legacy of strategic autonomy); and divergent political cycles or domestic veto players (for example, trade protectionism or non-alignment sentiment).

Dimensions of Convergence: Norms, Security and Technology

Ideological Affinity and Democratic Norms

While India and the United States operate within distinct democratic traditions, both frame their partnership in terms of shared values: pluralism, rule of law, open societies and democratic governance. This normative alignment forms the ideational foundation of the Quad (with Japan and Australia), which, though not a formal alliance, serves as a strategic platform for reinforcing rules-based maritime and technological orders in the Indo-Pacific.

This ideological dimension plays a dual role. First, it legitimizes strategic cooperation in politically sensitive areas such as defence and technology transfer. Second, it facilitates trust-building mechanisms, which are essential for sustained engagement in cybersecurity, digital governance and cross-border data flows.

Security Cooperation and Strategic Alignment

India and the United States have significantly strengthened their defence partnership, underpinned by landmark agreements such as the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (Panda 2018), the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (Som 2020) and the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (Pillai Rajagopalan 2016), which enable secure communications, geospatial intelligence sharing and logistics interoperability. Joint military exercises such as Yudh Abhyas (Ministry of Defence 2024) and Malabar (Haldar 2024) further enhance operational synergy.

These developments are driven by a shared perception of China as a strategic competitor for India and a direct military challenge at its northern border (for example, the Galwan Valley clashes); and for the United States, a systemic rival contesting global primacy. In this context, Quadrant I becomes a strategic convergence zone where cooperation is driven by mutual threat perception but institutionalized through rules-based defence arrangements.

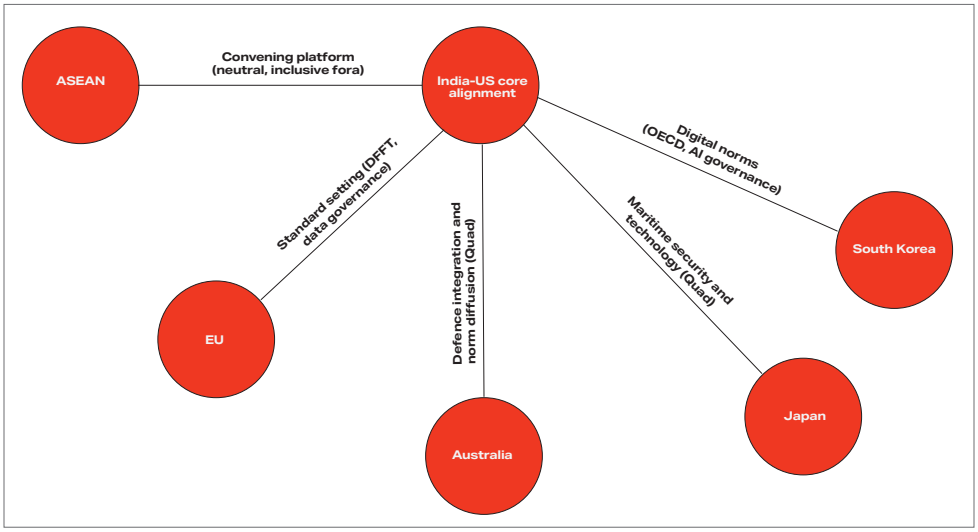
Economic and Technological Interdependence

The bilateral economic relationship has evolved from traditional trade to include strategic collaboration in emerging technologies such as semiconductors, quantum computing, AI and DPI. The US-India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology is a flagship platform that exemplifies technostrategic convergence. Initiatives under this framework aim to diversify semiconductor supply chains; promote open digital ecosystems; and enhance India's capacity as a trusted technology hub, reducing dependencies on Chinese platforms (Chaudhuri and Bhandari 2024).

India's experience with DPI through initiatives such as Aadhaar, the Unified Payments Interface and India Stack has attracted US interest in interoperable, inclusive and open-source digital models. The cooperation is thus not purely market-driven but embedded within a geo-economic strategy to build resilient and values-aligned technological ecosystems.

In this Quadrant I environment, middle powers (including Australia, Japan, South Korea and the European Union) and select member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) play a critical stabilizing and amplifying role (see Figure 3). Their involvement transforms bilateral alignment into multilateral coordination and helps mitigate coordination risk.

Figure 3: Strategic Ecosystem Map: Middle-Power Engagement with India-US (Quadrant I)



Source: Author.

Notes: DFFT = data free flow with trust; OECD = Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

The Role of Middle Powers: Strategic Anchoring and Ecosystem Amplification

Middle powers function as third-party stabilizers or alignment amplifiers, expanding the strategic payoff structure and providing institutional ballast. They perform the following roles:

- reducing strategic ambiguity by reinforcing convergent behaviour (for example, Japan's role in the Quad);
- extending cooperation dividends through regional and sectoral partnerships (for example, the European Union's role in standardizing data governance via DFFT);
- institutionalizing norms and continuity, especially when major powers face political or strategic disruption (for example, South Korea's contributions to digital governance frameworks led by the OECD); and
- providing political cover or convening platforms for inclusive norm-setting (for example, ASEAN hosting digital economy dialogues and AI governance fora).

These dynamics result in a form of nested minilateralism, where middle powers align selectively on issues such as digital trade, cyber norms and secure supply chains while maintaining strategic flexibility to hedge against risks in other quadrants.

The India-US democratic techno convergence illustrates the potential of Quadrant I as the locus of global rule-shaping. It demonstrates that in a fragmented, multipolar world, deep convergence is possible not through formal alliances but through issue-specific coordination, value-based institutionalization and strategic trust building. In this scenario, strategic convergence is not automatic — it must be cultivated through institutional design, repeated engagement and shared purpose. Middle powers, acting as systemic anchors and policy entrepreneurs, are vital to sustaining this equilibrium and expanding its normative reach beyond the Group of Seven (G7).

Quadrant II: China-Russia Authoritarian Compact — Deepening Ties amid Western Sanctions

In the emerging quadripolar world, the China-Russia relationship exemplifies a form of alignment not based on shared ideology or deep economic integration, but rather on the synergizing of strategic interests in opposition to a dominant external actor: the United States and its Western allies. This relationship is best situated within Quadrant II of the QGF, defined by low ideological alignment but strong security and geopolitical convergence around mutual threat perception. Unlike traditional alliances formed through enduring values or formal treaties, the China-Russia axis reflects an instrumental coalition, structured to confront a shared adversary while maintaining distinct and often divergent national goals. This is a coalition of convenience, shaped by necessity rather than by conviction.

The transformation of the China-Russia relationship began in earnest after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014,[3] which catalyzed its diplomatic and economic decoupling from the West. Facing sweeping sanctions and NATO's eastern posture, Moscow pivoted eastward, deepening ties with Beijing as a strategic hedge and economic lifeline. This alignment accelerated following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which further entrenched Russia's isolation and strategic dependence on China.

3 See https://chinapower.csis.org/history-china-russia-relations/.

Concurrently, China's global ambitions have grown more assertive, reflected in its approach to Taiwan, expansion through the BRI and its pursuit of influence in multilateral institutions. Beijing views Washington as a long-term strategic competitor impeding its ascent. Aligning with Russia provides China with a geopolitical buffer, a narrative partner in multilateral fora and a tactical counterweight to US dominance, particularly in Eurasia.

Game-Theoretic Interpretation: The Anti-Coalition Game

The China-Russia relationship is best understood through a minimum effort game or "balancing against" game (Cartwright 2018), where the lowest common denominator of cooperation is sustained by mutual threat perception, namely, the United States and the Western liberal order. As long as both perceive the Western system as adversarial, cooperation remains stable. However, asymmetries in power and ambition introduce incentives to defect, particularly as China's dominance grows (see Table 2).

Table 2: China-Russia Game Theoretic Interpretation

Strategic Action	Cooperate (Align against West)	Defect (Pursue Own Strategy)
Cooperate	Moderate tactical gain for both	Higher short-term gain for the defector but strategic exposure
Defect	Strategic isolation or marginalization	Mutual irrelevance or vulnerability

Source: Author.

Key Dimensions of Convergence

Shared Opposition to Western Dominance

China and Russia are united by a desire to challenge the liberal international order, particularly US-led structures such as NATO, the International Monetary Fund and the UN Security Council's Western-led agenda. While they differ in ambition — Russia seeks to disrupt the system, China aims to reshape it — their messaging converges on sovereignty, non-interference and multipolarity.

This opposition is visible in joint diplomatic statements, coordinated vetoes at the United Nations, and a sustained push to undermine Western normative influence in areas such as democracy promotion, human rights and internet governance.

Deepening Security and Military Cooperation

Military-to-military ties have grown significantly:

- Joint naval and air exercises, including over the Sea of Japan and East China Sea, demonstrate tactical interoperability and strategic signalling.
- Russia continues to supply China with advanced defence systems such as the S-400 missile system, fighter jets and submarine technologies. China has also emerged as a strategic supplier of armaments (albeit through third parties) to Russia, especially bolstering Russia's growing need for spare parts during the ongoing Ukraine war.
- High-level defence coordination fora support strategic contingency planning, albeit with limited integration.

This cooperation, while lacking a formal alliance structure, reflects a functional defence alignment grounded in deterrence signalling and operational messaging against US-aligned forces in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific.

Energy and Economic Pragmatism

China is now Russia's largest energy customer, importing oil and gas through projects such as the Power of Siberia pipeline (Xu, Liang and Zhou 2024), and conducting trade in renminbi and rubles to circumvent US dollar-based sanctions imposed via the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (Nikoladze and Bhusari 2023). While trade volumes have hit record highs, the relationship remains asymmetrical. Russia is increasingly dependent on Chinese demand, pricing and market access.

This economic cooperation is pragmatic, providing China with energy security and Russia with fiscal continuity. However, it lacks the structural depth, innovation synergy or institutional coherence that would constitute true economic interdependence.

Cyberspace and Digital Sovereignty Coordination

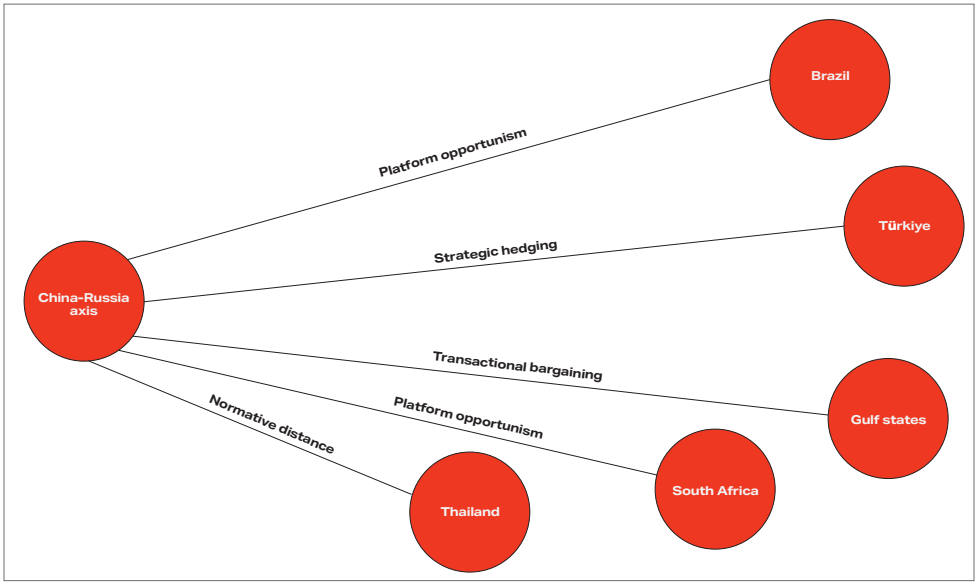
Both states reject the open, decentralized vision of the internet promoted by liberal democracies. Instead, they champion "cyber sovereignty," promoting state control over data, infrastructure and narratives. They cooperate on surveillance technologies, censorship frameworks and the export of digital authoritarianism to third countries.

This non-kinetic cooperation serves as an insurance mechanism for regime stability and narrative control, reinforcing strategic cooperation in information warfare and digital governance.

Middle Powers in Quadrant II: Strategic Hedging and Tactical Engagement

Middle powers engage adversarial alignments with caution, pragmatism and flexibility. Their goal is not full membership in an illiberal coalition but tactical engagement, extracting benefits without compromising sovereignty or triggering sanctions (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Strategic Ecosystem Map: Middle-Power Engagement with China-Russia (Quadrant II)



Source: Author.

Modes of Middle-Power Engagement:

- **Strategic hedging:** Countries such as Iran or Türkiye engage China and Russia economically or militarily while avoiding full political alignment.
- **Transactional bargaining:** Gulf states balance US security guarantees with Chinese tech partnerships and Russian energy deals.
- **Normative distance with material convergence:** ASEAN or African states accept BRI infrastructure or surveillance tools without adopting Beijing's political model.
- **Platform opportunism:** Countries such as Ethiopia, Indonesia and Iran have joined fora such as the SCO or BRICS+ to increase negotiating leverage but with minimal institutional commitment — a strategy akin to a "limited entrant" in game theory.

The risks for middle powers include:

- dependency on illiberal infrastructure and erosion of policy autonomy;
- secondary sanctions and reputational costs in liberal markets; and
- strategic entrapment in a rigid bloc system as polarization intensifies.

Quadrant II reflects the emergence of adversarial alignments formed out of necessity rather than shared vision. The China-Russia axis serves as a tactical buffer against Western dominance, yet its long-term stability is uncertain due to structural asymmetries, diverging institutional ambitions and weak ideological coherence.

For middle powers, this quadrant demands a highly calibrated strategy — engaging tactically, avoiding entanglement and preserving flexibility. For global governance institutions, it underscores the urgency of offering credible, inclusive alternatives to prevent further drift into parallel, fragmented global orders. The future of Quadrant II will hinge on the persistence of Western pressure, the resilience of tactical cooperation and the degree to which both powers can manage asymmetry without rupture. In a volatile multipolar world, this quadrant remains one of fluid risk and strategic ambiguity.

Quadrant III: India-Russia Legacy Balancing — Autonomous Engagement and the Repeated Bargaining Game

In the evolving quadripolar geopolitical landscape, Quadrant III captures a mode of engagement defined by strategic pragmatism, low interdependence and historical path dependency. It represents a form of long-term, interest-based cooperation that does not rely on deep ideological affinity or expansive economic integration. Instead, it is built upon legacy trust, mutual convenience and strategic autonomy. The India-Russia relationship exemplifies this configuration, resisting the gravitational pull of rigid bloc politics while sustaining a durable, sectoral partnership shaped by Cold War-era legacies and current multipolar realities.

Strategic Context: From Cold War Solidarity to Multipolar Pragmatism

India's strategic partnership with Russia (and formerly the Soviet Union) has deep roots. During the Cold War, India's policy of non-alignment found strategic complementarity with the Soviet Union's

willingness to support India diplomatically and militarily, particularly during critical junctures such as the 1971 India-Pakistan war (Athale 2021). This period created enduring defence, diplomatic and political linkages that continued post-1991, even as the ideological ballast of the relationship diminished.

In today's world marked by India's increasing proximity to the United States and Russia's deepening ties with China, this relationship persists not out of alignment but due to strategic inertia, sectoral utility and shared resistance to Western-dominated normative agendas. India leverages its ties with Russia to hedge against overdependence on the West, while Russia, in turn, avoids complete subordination to China by maintaining bilateral engagements with powers such as India.

Game-Theoretic Interpretation: The Repeated Bargaining Game

The India-Russia dynamic is best understood through the lens of a repeated bargaining game, akin to a low-stakes iterated prisoner's dilemma (Levin 2002). Cooperation here is sustained not by high costs of exit or structural dependence but by the expectation of future transactions, reputational credibility and the value of keeping options open (see Table 3). Each engagement, be it arms trade, energy negotiation or multilateral diplomacy, is a stand-alone exchange but within a cumulative logic of minimal but persistent trust.

Table 3: India-Russia Game Theoretic Interpretation

Strategic Action	Cooperate (Maintain Functional Ties)	Defect (Break/Delay Engagement)
Cooperate	Stable, incremental gain for both	Short-term asymmetry; reputational loss for defector
Defect	Minimal cost due to weak interdependence	Long-term erosion of trust; strategic drift

Source: Author.

Key Dimensions of the India-Russia Relationship

Defence Cooperation and Technological Interdependence

Russia remains India's most significant defence partner, accounting for an estimated 72 percent of India's arms imports from 2010 to 2014, which then dropped to 55 percent in 2015–2019 and further declined to 36–38 percent in 2020–2024 (Maktoob Staff 2025). Notable engagements include:

- strategic platforms such as the S-400 missile system, Su-30 MKI fighter jets and T-90 tanks;
- co-development ventures such as the BrahMos cruise missile, symbolizing joint innovation and trust; and
- established supply chains, joint exercises and maintenance frameworks that give Russia a unique role in India's defence ecosystem.

India has strategically maintained this relationship to diversify its arms portfolio, resisting pressures to align fully with the United States or any single defence bloc.

Energy Partnership and Strategic Resources

India-Russia energy ties are increasingly significant:

- India has ramped up crude oil imports from Russia, especially after 2022, often at discounted prices (*The Hindu* 2025).
- Indian companies have planned to hold equity stakes in Russian oil and gas fields (for example, Vankor, Sakhalin), ensuring upstream access (Verma 2022).
- Russia contributes to India's civil nuclear program, including the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant and uranium supply (Gorchakov and Pareek 2024).

These deals are largely risk-calibrated and transactional, yet resilient due to mutual benefit and geopolitical insulation from Western sanctions regimes.

Diplomatic Convergence on Sovereignty and Multipolarity

At the normative level, both countries share a strong preference for state sovereignty, non-interventionism and reformed multilateralism. Their shared interests include:

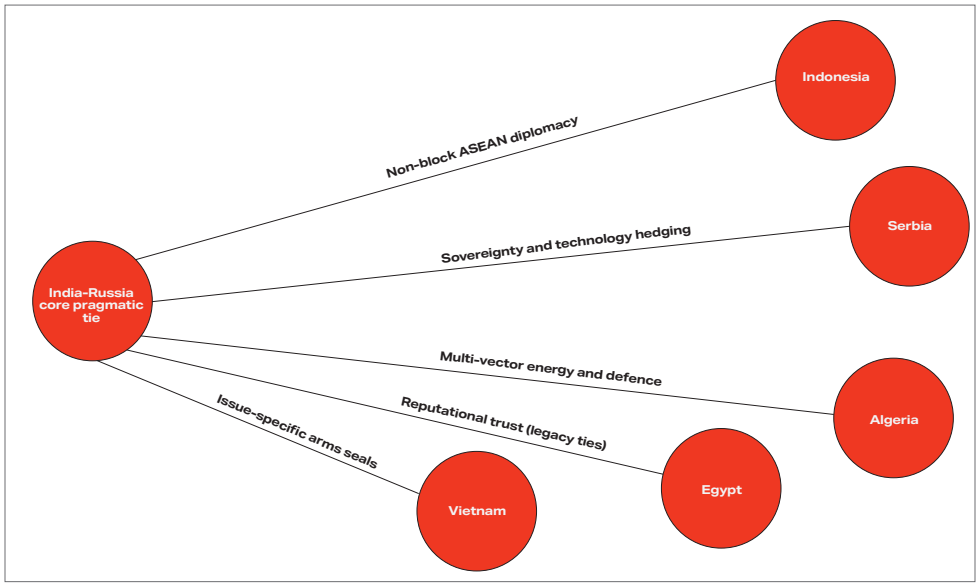
- opposing Western-led regime-change agendas;
- promoting multipolarity and greater balance in global institutions (for example, UN Security Council reform); and
- cooperating through BRICS+, SCO and Russia-India-China frameworks, not as ideological alliances but as platforms of convenience.

India's consistent abstentions on anti-Russia resolutions reflect this world view, rooted in strategic independence, not endorsement of Russian actions.

Middle Powers in Quadrant III: Navigators of Sovereign Pragmatism

For middle powers, Quadrant III offers a strategic refuge, a space where countries can engage pragmatically without ideological commitment or bloc affiliation. These actors often mirror the behaviour of India and Russia by preserving diplomatic manoeuvrability and engaging in multi-vector foreign policy (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Strategic Ecosystem Map — Middle-Power Engagement with India-Russia (Quadrant III)



Source: Author.

Patterns of Middle-Power Engagement:

- **Issue-specific alignment:** Countries such as Algeria, Egypt, Indonesia, Serbia and Vietnam engage with India or Russia based on niche interests (for example, arms, infrastructure, technology).
- **Reputational trust networks:** Historical ties or Cold War-era partnerships still inform diplomatic behaviour. These countries prioritize long-term reliability over short-term alignment shifts.
- **Non-block participation:** Middle powers avoid fixed ideological groupings, opting for plurilateral diplomacy (for example, ASEAN, the African Union, the Non-Aligned Movement) that preserves sovereignty.
- **Strategic flexibility:** These states often pursue "strategic hedging," simultaneously deepening relations with China, the European Union, Russia and the United States without overcommitting to any pole.

Quadrant III illustrates that alignment is not a prerequisite for strategic stability. The India-Russia relationship demonstrates how cooperation can be recurrent, calibrated and resilient, even in the absence of ideological or economic integration. Legacy trust, mutual utility and commitment to strategic autonomy have preserved this relationship across systemic ruptures and shifting alignments.

For middle powers, Quadrant III offers a viable model of autonomous engagement sustained by historical credibility, sectoral complementarity and reputational capital. In an era of contested global order and shifting poles, the logic of sovereign pragmatism may well be the most durable force in international politics.

Quadrant IV: US-China Competitive Interdependence: The Strategic Dilemma Game

Among the defining geopolitical relationships of the twenty-first century, none is more structurally complex, strategically consequential or globally impactful than that between the United States and China. Their relationship defies traditional categorizations of alliance or antagonism and is best understood through Quadrant IV of the QGF: a domain marked by strategic rivalry, normative divergence and deep material interdependence. This duality creates a condition of enduring strategic tension, where neither complete decoupling nor full cooperation is viable — only managed confrontation.

Strategic Context: Rivalry with Entanglement

The initial phase of US-China engagement, especially following China's accession to the WTO in 2001, was guided by the belief that economic integration would eventually induce political liberalization (CFR.org Editors 2025). The assumption, prevalent in Western policy circles during the 1990s and early 2000s, was that integrating authoritarian states into global markets and multilateral institutions would generate internal pressures for democratization through the growth of middle classes, exposure to liberal norms and the spread of information technologies. In the context of the US-China relationship, this hypothesis has not only failed but also arguably produced the opposite effect. Rather than liberalizing politically, China has hardened authoritarian governance while deepening its participation in global trade, finance and technology systems. Its model of state-led capitalism and technological centralization has been exported through initiatives such as the Digital Silk Road, challenging assumptions that openness in markets would naturally align with liberal political values. What the China case illustrates is that authoritarian regimes can co-opt global economic interdependence to consolidate power, develop coercive surveillance capacity and insulate themselves from liberalizing pressures. This experience should serve as a cautionary tale for policy makers and theorists who continue to equate market openness with political convergence.

It can thus be argued that a new doctrine has emerged that defines the US-China relationship: strategic competition under asymmetric interdependence. The United States increasingly views China as a systemic competitor threatening liberal international norms and regional balances of power. China, in turn, perceives the United States as pursuing containment through alliances, export controls and ideological confrontation. Yet, despite deteriorating trust, bilateral trade exceeded US$750 billion in 2023 (Brannon 2023), and both countries remain tethered through financial markets, supply chains and technological ecosystems.

Game-Theoretic Logic: The Strategic Dilemma Game

This relationship approximates a chicken game or hawk-dove model, where both actors benefit from restraint but are incentivized to test the other's resolve in pursuit of unilateral advantage. Each action — whether it be a military buildup, a technology ban or sanctions — risks escalation (see Table 4). The optimal outcome is mutual de-escalation and continued interdependence. The worst-case scenario is simultaneous defection, leading to decoupling, crisis and systemic instability.

Table 4: US-China Game Theoretic Interpretation

Strategic Action	Cooperate (Mutual Restraint)	Defect (Escalate or Decouple Unilaterally)
Cooperate	Sustained interdependence; reduced tension	Strategic gain for defector; reputational loss for the cooperator
Defect	Competitive escalation; economic and security costs	Entrenched rivalry; risk of systemic fragmentation

Source: Author.

Key Dimensions of the Relationship

Strategic and Ideological Rivalry

At the core lies a fundamental contest over global order:

- The United States advances a liberal international order centred on democracy, human rights and multilateralism.
- China promotes techno-authoritarianism, state-led capitalism and non-interference, asserting alternative norms at the United Nations and among developing nations.

Flashpoints include:

- Taiwan, where strategic ambiguity is under stress;
- the South China Sea, where freedom of navigation confronts Chinese militarization; and
- human rights and digital surveillance, where the normative divergence is most acute.

Deep Economic Interdependence

Despite strategic rivalry:

- China is a top trade partner for the United States, especially in electronics and manufacturing.
- US firms are deeply embedded in Chinese markets, and China holds large positions in US Treasury bonds.
- Efforts to decouple are sectoral and security-specific, targeting semiconductors, AI, quantum computing and fifth-generation technology, but broad-based disengagement remains economically unviable.

This leads to "managed strategic competition": both sides firewall sensitive technologies while preserving commercial ties.

Technological Arms Race and Regulatory Divergence

Technology is the central axis of contestation:

- The United States has restricted chip exports and foreign investment in Chinese tech firms, targeting China's rise in defence and dual-use technologies.

- China has doubled down on self-reliance, investing in strategic sectors under initiatives such as Made in China 2025 (McBride and Chatzky 2019) and the Dual Circulation Strategy (García-Herrero 2021).

Digital governance diverges:

- The United States favours a relatively open, rules-based internet.
- China advances "cyber sovereignty," prioritizing censorship, surveillance and localization.

These models are globalized through international standard-setting bodies (for example, the International Telecommunication Union, the International Organization for Standardization and the WTO), forcing third countries to navigate incompatible infrastructures and regulatory regimes.

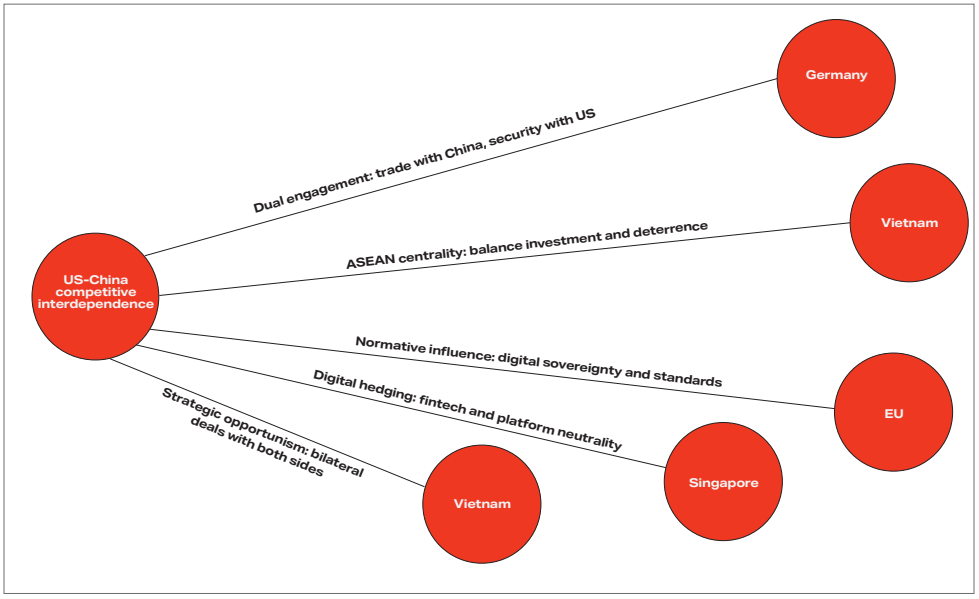
Geopolitical Volatility and Institutional Gaps

The absence of crisis communication mechanisms increases the risk of accidental escalation, especially in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. Meanwhile, domestic volatility in both countries' trade, nationalism in the United States, tech crackdowns and demographic slowdowns in China further destabilize engagement strategies.

Middle Powers in Quadrant IV: Navigating Strategic Crossfire

Middle powers face acute dilemmas in this quadrant. Economically integrated with China and politically aligned with the United States, they seek to avoid binary choices while preserving strategic autonomy (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Strategic Ecosystem Map — Middle-Power Engagement with US-China (Quadrant IV)



Source: Author.

Four Modes of Engagement

Dual Engagement with Derisking

- Countries such as Australia, Germany, Japan and South Korea combine economic ties with China and security cooperation with the United States.
- Strategy: diversify supply chains (for example, the Chip 4 Alliance between Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and the United States), build domestic capacity and avoid overt confrontation.

Economic Balancing with Political Caution

- ASEAN members (for example, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam) welcome Chinese investment while backing US presence.
- Strategy: maintain ASEAN centrality, support the IPEF or the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, and balance maritime and economic interests.

Normative Middle Grounding

- Canada, the European Union and New Zealand seek to shape global digital norms while maintaining policy independence from both powers.
- Strategy: promote data protection, platform accountability and privacy-enhancing standards at the WTO and the G7/G20.

Strategic Opportunism

- States such as Brazil, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye leverage the US-China rivalry for infrastructure, defence and diplomatic rents.
- Strategy: engage multilaterally, pursue bilateral windfalls and resist entanglement in values-driven blocs.

Risks and Tradeoffs

- exposure to secondary sanctions or coercive trade measures;
- accelerated technological bifurcation, creating infrastructure fragmentation; and
- erosion of strategic autonomy in the face of great-power pressure.

Quadrant IV is the most structurally unstable and globally consequential dyad in the QGF. The US-China relationship is not a Cold War revival but a strategic dilemma without a clean exit defined by dual imperatives to contain and engage, compete and codepend.

The global order depends on the ability of these two powers to compartmentalize rivalry, preserve cooperation in critical domains and avoid catastrophic miscalculations. For middle powers, navigating this quadrant will require unprecedented diplomatic agility, regulatory sovereignty and strategic resilience. Ultimately, managing this paradox — not resolving it — will define the trajectory of global stability in the twenty-first century.

Unlikely, Yet Significant: Peripheral but Pivotal Dyads

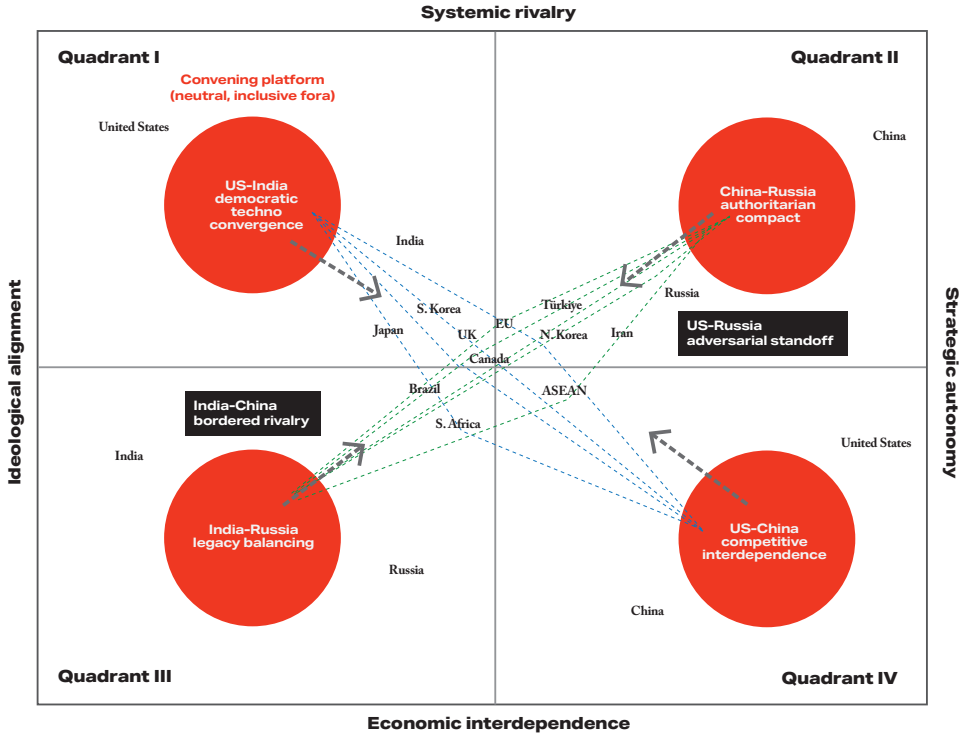
In the QGF, much of the strategic focus lies in the dyads where overlapping values, economic interdependence or aligned security interests foster pathways to deeper cooperation. These include relationships such as between the United States and India or China and Russia, which fit more comfortably within familiar strategic paradigms — alliances, alignments or adversarial balancing.

However, the most volatile and structurally consequential relationships may, in fact, lie at the edges of convergence — in dyads that are highly unlikely to cooperate but impossible to ignore. These "peripheral but pivotal" pairings are characterized not by the promise of integration but by the risk of disruption. Their relevance stems not from the probability of alignment but from their latent capacity to destabilize, recalibrate or reroute the strategic equilibrium of the global order.

Two such dyads merit special attention (see Figure 7):

- **US-Russia:** This historically entrenched adversarial relationship is defined by enduring nuclear deterrence, incompatible strategic cultures and an almost complete breakdown of institutional engagement. While the Cold War may have ended in form, the underlying logic of zero-sum competition — especially after the Ukraine invasion — persists, now filtered through new theatres of conflict, including cyberwarfare, energy weaponization and disinformation.
- **India-China:** This complex and fluid rivalry is marked by territorial disputes, asymmetric power trajectories and regional competition for influence across the Indo-Pacific, Himalayas and multilateral fora. Despite intermittent economic engagement, the strategic mistrust runs deep, and the absence of a shared ideological framework or conflict resolution mechanism makes this dyad uniquely volatile.

Figure 7: The QGF and the Two Dyads



Source: Author.

These relationships inhabit the least cooperative quadrants of the framework (Quadrants II and III) zones of strategic ambiguity, transactional interaction and latent conflict potential. Their significance is magnified not by alignment potential but by their ability to trigger systemic realignments under conditions of crisis, shock or external realignment by third-party powers.

Furthermore, both dyads test the limits of middle-power diplomacy, multilateral crisis management and global governance structures. They reveal the boundaries of the post-Cold War order and the fragility of cooperation in an era of strategic nationalism and institutional erosion. Thus, while not central to the gravitational dynamics of global convergence, these dyads are critical stress points in the global system. Understanding their logic, dynamics and interaction scenarios is essential not for predicting harmony but for anticipating rupture, managing escalation and crafting contingencies for strategic restraint in an increasingly contested multipolar world.

US-Russia Relationship: Adversarial Standoff

The US-Russia relationship represents a paradigmatic case of structural antagonism that has endured across ideological eras. From the Cold War's zero-sum competition to the post-Soviet unipolar interregnum and now the resurgence of great-power rivalry, this dyad remains frozen in a strategic standoff.

What distinguishes the current phase is the erosion of institutionalized guardrails, including arms control treaties, diplomatic channels and crisis management mechanisms that previously maintained a semblance of predictability. The annexation of Crimea (in 2014) (Merezhko 2015), the Syrian proxy contest (Douglas 2021), alleged electoral interference (Cummings 2020) and especially the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (in 2022) (Chotiner 2022) have entrenched mistrust and reinforced mutual threat perceptions. Sanctions, information warfare and diplomatic expulsions have further diminished the scope for engagement.

This is not merely a bilateral impasse; it is a structural axis of global instability, capable of influencing security dynamics across Europe, the Arctic, cyberspace and multilateral fora.

Strategic Logic and Game-Theoretic Interpretation

The US-Russia dyad can be modelled as a stag hunt under asymmetric trust or, in more acute conditions, as a deadlock game, where mutual defection is the default strategy and cooperation is only viable under extraordinary conditions (for example, nuclear arms negotiations or shared threats such as terrorism or pandemics) (see Table 5).

Table 5: US-Russia Game Theoretic Interpretation

Strategic Action	US Cooperates	US Defects
Russia cooperates	Stalemated detente	Exploit strategic gain (Russia defects)
Russia defects	Exploit strategic gain (US defects)	Mutual hostility and escalation

Source: Author.

- Pareto-optimal cooperation (arms control, space governance) requires high levels of trust and verification — conditions that are virtually absent today.
- The dominant strategy in most circumstances is defection, reinforced by domestic political incentives, normative divergence and external provocations.

- Cooperation, when it occurs, is often transactional, narrow and bounded to crisis management or mutual existential risks (for example, nuclear stability, space deconfliction).

Dimensions of Convergence

Despite structural antagonism, there remain narrow policy domains where convergence is not only possible but also occasionally necessary.

Arms Control and Strategic Stability:

- Renewal of the New Strategic Arms Reductions Treaty (2021) (Russell 2021) was a rare episode of continuity, though its future remains uncertain amid mutual accusations of non-compliance.
- Dialogue on hypersonic missile systems, nuclear posture and strategic deterrence remains urgent but increasingly rare.
- Absence of a successor arms control framework could lead to an unconstrained nuclear competition.

Space Governance:

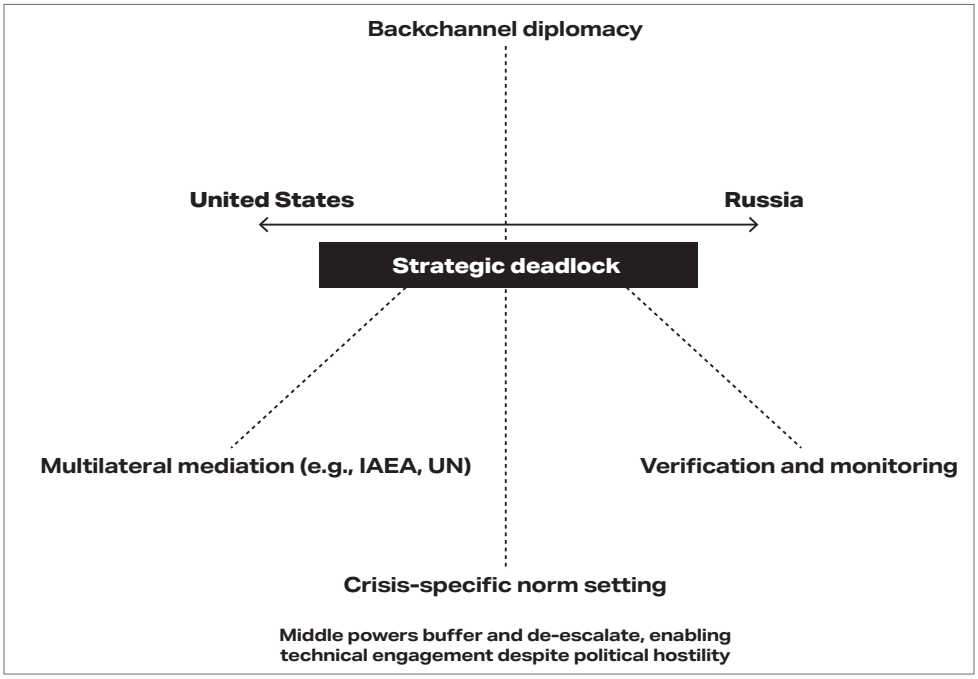
- Both countries are signatories to the Outer Space Treaty and share interests in avoiding kinetic conflict in orbit.
- Russia's alignment with China on anti-satellite weapons testing complicates this convergence, but space deconfliction remains a shared interest (Cohen and Liebermann 2025).

Non-proliferation and Counterterrorism:

- Joint efforts in the Iran nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) framework (Bernstein 2015) and past cooperation in counterterrorism (for example, post-September 11 intelligence sharing) (Hill 2013) indicate areas where shared threats can override rivalry.
- However, these initiatives are highly conditional and vulnerable to political shifts.

In this frozen dyad, middle powers play a critical buffering and mediating role. Their strategic utility lies in three core functions (see Figure 8):

Figure 8: Middle-Power Engagement in the US-Russia Dyad



Source: Author.

The Role of Middle Powers

Backchannel Diplomacy and Confidence Building

- Countries such as Brazil, France and Türkiye have engaged both sides, offering informal platforms for de-escalation, prisoner exchanges or humanitarian coordination.
- Switzerland has historically played this role, though its neutrality is increasingly strained.

Normative Mediation in Multilateral Arenas

- Institutions such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and UN frameworks offer depoliticized platforms for technical dialogue (for example, nuclear safety at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant) (IAEA 2024).
- Middle powers within these structures help depersonalize conflict narratives and uphold procedural legitimacy.

Third-Party Monitoring and Verification

- Middle powers contribute to verification regimes and transparency mechanisms (for example, the Open Skies Treaty prior to US withdrawal) (Jones 2021).
- Canada and Nordic states have also played a role in promoting confidence-building measures (Prime Minister of Canada 2025) in cyber and Arctic domains (O'Dwyer 2023; Hutagalung 2025).

The US-Russia relationship exemplifies the logic of a mutually adversarial equilibrium — not frozen due to lack of interest but due to excess mutual suspicion and incompatible strategic identities. This dyad, while unlikely to yield breakthroughs in the short term, is essential to watch because of its escalatory potential and the systemic consequences of miscalculation.

The QGF identifies this relationship not as a site of cooperative innovation but as a strategic red line where even minimal convergence (for example, arms control renewal) may yield disproportionate global benefits in terms of stability. Future engagement must be crisis-focused, time-bound and led by middle-power coalitions and multilateral institutions committed to preserving strategic equilibrium rather than restoring strategic trust.

India-China Bordered Rivalry

India-China relations exemplify a historically burdened, strategically sensitive and territorially contested dyad. Though both countries are members of rising-power coalitions such as BRICS+ and possess strong civilizational legacies, their bilateral ties are defined more by competition than by convergence, especially in the strategic and geopolitical domains.

The 1962 border war, followed by recurrent military standoffs, most notably the Doklam crisis (in 2017) (Joseph 2018) and the Galwan Valley clash (in 2020) (ET Online 2024), have reinforced deep mutual distrust. These military confrontations, coupled with competing ambitions in the Indo-Pacific, fuel a condition of high friction and low institutionalization. While economic engagement was robust for much of the 2000s, strategic concerns have increasingly overridden commercial logic, especially in sensitive sectors such as telecommunications, infrastructure and digital platforms.

The India-China dyad thus falls within Quadrant III (autonomous engagement) but veers toward Quadrant II (adversarial alignment) when crises escalate. Despite being neighbours, the countries' regional strategies are often orthogonal, and institutional buffers remain thin.

Strategic Logic and Game-Theoretic Interpretation

This relationship best models an iterated prisoner's dilemma with low trust and high salience of security dilemmas. Cooperation yields marginal benefits and is vulnerable to sudden breakdowns. Mutual defections, particularly in border and infrastructure domains, are common due to low institutional trust, historical grievances and domestic political pressures (see Table 6).

Table 6: India-China Game Theoretic Interpretation

Strategic Action	India Cooperates	India Defects
China cooperates	Cold cooperation	Strategic undercut (India gains)
China defects	Strategic undercut (China gains)	Escalatory competition

Source: Author.

Dimensions of Convergence

Trade and Economic Engagement:

- Before 2020, China was India's largest trading partner, with significant Indian dependence on Chinese electronics, application programming interfaces and capital equipment (360tf, n.d.).

- Post-Galwan, India imposed bans on Chinese apps (for example, TikTok, WeChat), tightened foreign direct investment rules and encouraged supply chain diversification under the "Make in India" initiative (Sunilkumar 2023).
- Trade volumes remain high, but the quality of engagement has shifted from interdependence to cautious transactionality.

Multilateral Fora and Functional Co-Presence:

- Both countries are members of BRICS+, the SCO and the G20, but their agendas often diverge.
- India positions itself as a democratic counterweight and sovereign digital actor, while China promotes state-centric multilateralism and the BRI.
- Cooperation in these fora is often minimal, symbolic or transactional.

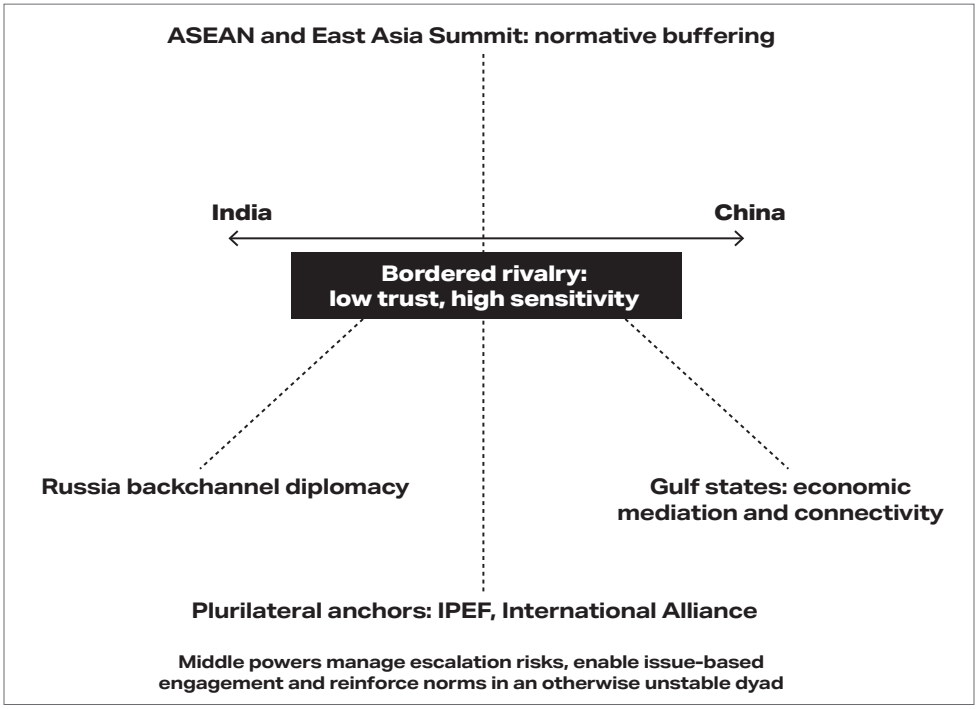
Climate Diplomacy and Global South Coordination:

- Temporary convergence on climate finance, equity in carbon transition and developmental rights of emerging economies or the Global South.
- Yet China's willingness to take on leadership roles (for example, via the BRI green energy agenda) often sidelines India's preferences for decentralized national models.

The Role of Middle Powers

Middle powers play a crucial stabilizing and hedging role in this dyad by helping to manage volatility, reducing escalation incentives and encouraging issue-specific cooperation (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: Middle-Power Engagement in the India-China Dyad



Source: Author.

Middle-Power Engagement Roles

Normative Buffers and Plurilateral Anchors

- ASEAN countries, particularly Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam, uphold principles of regional order and maritime neutrality.
- Fora such as the East Asia Summit and ASEAN Regional Forum help dilute bilateral antagonism.

Diplomatic Intermediaries

- Russia, while closer to China in recent years, has historically been a backchannel for India-China engagement, particularly in defence and trilateral dialogue (for example, the Russia-India-China format) (Parmar 2024).
- The UAE and Saudi Arabia, due to rising strategic partnerships with both India and China, could emerge as commercial or infrastructure diplomacy mediators.

Coalition Management and Trust Networks

- Entities such as the International Solar Alliance, co-led by India, offer non-security platforms for Chinese engagement on global goods.
- Participation in the IPEF (the Quad [India] versus the BRI [China]) exemplifies how middle powers are increasingly choosing issue-specific alignments, not bloc loyalties.

India-China relations are likely to remain adversarial but stable, marked by border volatility, economic risk management and multilateral ambivalence. This is a competitive coexistence, not a Cold War-style decoupling nor a convergence trajectory.

Under the QGF, this dyad is seen as a latent fault line — one that is not always in crisis but that is structurally predisposed to sudden shifts. It underscores the need for crisis architecture, confidence-building measures and normative stabilization by middle powers, especially as the Indo-Pacific becomes the central theatre of twenty-first-century geopolitics.

Limitations of the QGF

While the QGF offers a powerful lens through which to understand the structure and behaviour of the international system in an era marked by fragmentation and fluidity, it is essential to recognize its analytical constraints. As with any conceptual model, the QGF relies on simplifications that allow it to generate explanatory clarity, but those simplifications also impose certain limitations in terms of scope, granularity and adaptability.

Overemphasis on Four Poles

At the heart of the framework lies the assumption that the four states — the United States, China, India and Russia — constitute the principal strategic poles of the global order. While this construct captures much of the high-level geopolitical activity and accurately reflects the behaviour of states with global military, economic or normative influence, it may inadvertently understate the growing

role of other actors, particularly regional powers, supranational institutions and coalition-based entities.

The European Union, for example, wields significant normative power in domains such as digital regulation, competition law and climate governance. Its ability to shape global standards, influence third-party states and act cohesively in areas of external policy (though uneven), makes it a strategic actor whose influence transcends its lack of traditional hard power. Similarly, Brazil, as Latin America's largest economy and a prominent BRICS+ member, plays a leading role in advancing the Global South's development, energy and sustainability agenda. The African Union and regional leaders such as Egypt, Nigeria and South Africa are also increasingly shaping political and economic alignments within Africa and beyond, often through South-South cooperation and multilateral diplomacy.

This observation does not invalidate the framework but highlights the need to complement it with regional or issue-specific analytical models that account for a broader distribution of agency.

State-Centric Bias

A second limitation stems from the framework's inherent state-centric orientation. By structuring analysis around the foreign policy behaviour of sovereign states, the framework privileges the nation-state as the primary unit of international interaction. This lens is indispensable for understanding high-level diplomatic, military and strategic alignments, yet it can underrepresent the influence of non-state actors that increasingly shape global politics.

Multinational corporations, for instance, exert enormous influence over global supply chains, data flows and financial systems (Kim and Milner 2019). Technology companies such as Apple, Google, Huawei and Meta are not only economic actors but also geopolitical instruments, shaping narratives, controlling infrastructure and influencing policy outcomes. Transnational movements from climate justice coalitions to diasporic networks and human rights organizations are also reshaping international legitimacy discourses and domestic policy environments in ways that transcend national borders.

Moreover, the rise of networked governance in domains such as cybersecurity, climate change and public health reveals a diffusion of authority that the QGF is not fully equipped to model. This limitation underscores the need to supplement state-centric analysis with network theories, private governance literature and multi-actor models to fully capture the complexity of global governance.

Assumption of Relative Continuity

Another challenge inherent in the framework is its assumption of continuity in the identity and systemic relevance of the four strategic poles. It presumes that the United States, China, India and Russia will continue to act as relatively stable and autonomous centres of influence over time. While this assumption holds under conditions of geopolitical inertia, it may falter in the face of disruptive events or structural shocks.

Potential disruptions include regime change, such as political upheaval in China or Russia, which could alter the foreign policy trajectory and normative posture of these states or the rise of a united European Union (however unlikely it may be in today's context). Likewise, technological discontinuities, including transformative advances in AI, biotechnology or quantum technologies, could restructure global power hierarchies, elevating new actors or shifting the strategic calculus of existing ones. Additionally, environmental and public health shocks, including pandemics, climate-induced resource scarcities or mass migration, could reprioritize state behaviour in ways that render traditional strategic alignments less salient.

In this sense, the framework must be understood as a mid-range model sufficiently robust for analyzing patterns under conditions of continuity but requiring periodic recalibration to remain valid in conditions of volatility or transformation.

Conclusion: Navigating Strategic Fluidity in a Fragmented World

The international system is undergoing a profound structural transformation. The certainties that once defined the post-Second World War global order — whether the stability of bipolar deterrence, the institutional coherence of liberal internationalism or the strategic predictability of unipolar dominance — have given way to a more ambiguous, multidimensional and conflict-prone landscape. In this environment, conventional frameworks that attempt to classify global dynamics into binaries or broad multipolar generalizations are no longer sufficient to explain how power is distributed, contested and operationalized.

In response to this analytical void, the QGF offers a targeted yet flexible model that captures the core structural dynamics of today's geopolitics. It does so by identifying four principal poles — the United States, China, India and Russia — as the states with the greatest capacity to act autonomously, influence systemic outcomes and reshape the global strategic environment. More importantly, it moves beyond a static categorization of power to focus on the relational logic between these poles, capturing the paradoxes of contemporary geopolitics and emphasizing how strategic behaviour is shaped by varying degrees of ideological alignment, economic interdependence and geopolitical rivalry.

The strength of the QGF lies in its ability to reflect the situational logic of modern statecraft — a logic defined not by loyalty to permanent alliances but by pragmatic, multi-vector engagements, regional hedging and issue-based coalitions. It foregrounds the agency of middle powers, accommodates modular multilateralism and provides conceptual space for hybrid forms of alignment that are often misunderstood or misclassified by older theories.

As we move further into a world of geopolitical fragmentation, technological bifurcation and normative contestation, the capacity to understand, anticipate and strategically navigate fluid alignments will become increasingly vital. In this respect, the framework offers more than an academic model; it serves as a strategic compass — a way to understand the current disorder not as an absence of structure but as the emergence of a new, complex configuration of global power. As new poles rise, old ones recalibrate and novel coalitions emerge, the QGF can evolve alongside the very order it seeks to explain, thus remaining a relevant and adaptive tool for policy makers, scholars and strategists seeking clarity amid the turbulence of a reshaped world.

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