

# The Great Interregnum: A Comparative Analysis of Established and Emerging Geopolitical Theories in International Relations

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The discipline of International Relations (IR) is currently in a state of fundamental transition, a period scholars often describe as an "interregnum." In this era, established, empirically validated theories that dominated the second half of the twentieth century are increasingly challenged by the complex dynamics of a digitized, ecologically unstable, and multipolar world. While the traditional canon rests on robust historical datasets and a focus on the nation-state as the primary actor, emerging theories introduce new variables such as technological network centrality, geo-epistemological positioning, and the ontological shock of the Anthropocene. This report provides an analysis of these theoretical shifts, examining the deeper causal links between power, institutions, technology, and the environment to sketch an integrated picture of the future global order.

## The Canon: Empirical Validation of Established IR Theories

The strength of established IR theory lies in its ability to produce falsifiable claims that withstand extensive quantitative and qualitative analysis. These theories are rooted in a rational-deterministic worldview where states act based on measurable variables such as power, regime type, and institutional ties.

### Power Balance and Power Transition Theory

Power transition theory, documented by researchers such as Organski, Kugler, and Lemke, forms a solid foundation of the discipline. The core of this approach is that instability arises from power transitions rather than balances. Historical datasets since the 19th century show that the probability of conflict between a dominant power and a rising challenger peaks when the power gap between them narrows.<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon, often called the "Thucydides Trap," suggests that fear of relative decline by the established power and the impatience of the rising power increase the risks of miscalculation and preventive war.

Empirical research indicates this correlation is statistically significant, though not absolute. It involves not only military power but also economic growth rates that form the material basis for national strength. The stability of the international system depends on whether the dominant power can maintain the hierarchy or manage the transition peacefully. In the current U.S.-China rivalry, these historical patterns appear to manifest again, with relative power convergence serving as a primary driver of geopolitical tension.<sup>1</sup>

### Hegemonic Stability and Global Public Goods

Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST) argues that a stable international order requires a single dominant power to act as a provider of global public goods, such as security for shipping lanes, a stable reserve currency, and accepted trade rules.<sup>2</sup> Empirical support is found in long-term studies of British hegemony in the 19th century and American hegemony after 1945.

During these periods, high levels of trade openness and financial stability were attributed to the hegemon's willingness and ability to bear the costs of system management.<sup>1</sup> However, research notes that hegemony is a sufficient but not strictly necessary condition; collective regimes can also provide stability when a hegemon declines. Concerns about "hegemonic decline" stem from the idea that if a leader is no longer willing or able to play this role, global instability may follow, similar to the interwar period.<sup>2</sup>

Theory	Key Variable	Empirical Basis	Prediction
Power Transition	Relative power ratios	Data since 1815	War more likely during power convergence
Hegemonic Stability	Presence of a single leader	Pax Britannica, Pax Americana	Stability requires a provider of public goods.
Democratic Peace	Regime type (Democracy)	Cross-national datasets	Democracies do not go to war with each other.
Institutional Liberalism	International Institutions	WTO, IMF, EU, NATO	Institutions lower transaction costs and increase cooperation.

## Institutional Liberalism and the Democratic Peace

Beyond power-based theories, liberalism is a crucial component of established knowledge. Institutional liberalism has empirically shown that international organizations like the WTO and IMF reduce information asymmetry between states. By codifying rules, these institutions lower the transaction costs of cooperation and create conflict management mechanisms under anarchy.

The Democratic Peace Theory is considered one of the most robust claims in IR: mature democracies almost never go to war with one another. This pattern is consistent across different time periods and methodologies. While debate continues regarding whether this is due to democratic norms or institutional constraints on leaders, the statistical correlation remains firm.

## The Rise of 'Weaponized Interdependence' and Geoeconomic Power

While classical theories often viewed interdependence as a deterrent to conflict, the theory of "Weaponized Interdependence" (WI) introduces a darker perspective. Developed by scholars such as Farrell and Newman, WI posits that the structural architecture of global networks enables new forms of coercion.

## The Mechanics of Network Power: Panopticon and Chokepoint

WI shifts the focus from the state as a closed entity to the state as an actor within global networks of finance, communication, and technology. When these networks concentrate around central hubs, states with jurisdiction over these hubs gain asymmetric advantages. Two primary mechanisms are identified:

1. **The Panopticon Effect:** States controlling central hubs (like U.S. oversight of dollar payments or internet backbones) can gather vast amounts of strategic information by monitoring transactions.
2. **The Chokepoint Effect:** States can cut off rivals' access to essential networks. A prominent example is the exclusion of countries from the SWIFT system, a modern form of economic siege.<sup>3</sup>

This challenges the liberal view that economic integration automatically leads to peace. Instead, it suggests interdependence can be weaponized by those controlling the infrastructure of globalization.

## Decoupling and Governance Fragmentation

The use of WI leads to "governance decoupling." Targets of sanctions invest in institutional redundancy to shield themselves from future coercion.<sup>3</sup> China's development of the Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS) and the digital yuan are direct responses to vulnerabilities caused by U.S. financial dominance.<sup>3</sup>

Research suggests that while building these alternatives is costly, they steadily erode the hegemon's structural power.<sup>3</sup> Each wave of sanctions increases incentives for third countries, or "spoke states," to embrace "sanctions-proof" infrastructures based on their strategic interests.<sup>4</sup>

## Geo-epistemology and the Call for a Global IR

A major movement in contemporary IR is the shift toward "Global IR" and "Post-Western IR." These theories argue that the established discipline is not universal but is a product of Western historical experiences.<sup>5</sup>

## Critique of Eurocentrism and the "Native Informant"

Scholars like Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan argue that IR has long been an "American social science" designed to legitimize U.S. rise after WWII.<sup>5</sup> Established theories are viewed as tools that reinforce Western identities under the guise of universal rationality.<sup>5</sup>

A key insight is the identification of a hierarchical division of labor: Western scholars produce "theory," while scholars from the Global South are often relegated to being "native informants" who provide raw data or local expertise.<sup>5</sup> There is a growing movement to reject this "zero-point" epistemology and make the "locus of enunciation"—the geopolitical place from which one speaks—explicit.<sup>5</sup>

## The Chinese School and Local Traditions

In response, "national schools" of IR are emerging. The "Chinese School" attempts to synthesize Western concepts with indigenous philosophies like *Tianxia* (all under heaven), proposing a more relational vision of world order.<sup>6</sup> In India, the focus has shifted toward pre-colonial history and the agency of the Global South in shaping norms.<sup>5</sup> Empirical studies of publication patterns confirm a bifurcation: mainstream Western journals remain focused on quantitative-rationalist research, while regional journals often emphasize non-Western roots.<sup>8</sup>

## The Anthropocene: Ecological Geopolitics as Ontological Breach

The most radical challenge to established IR comes from the recognition of the Anthropocene—the era where human activity is a dominant geological force.<sup>9</sup>

### From Stationarity to Planetary Politics

Traditional geopolitics assumed a stable natural background. The Anthropocene introduces "non-stationarity": the past is no longer a reliable guide for future rainfall, temperature, or resource availability.<sup>9</sup> This undermines national security, as existential threats like climate change and biodiversity loss are transboundary and cannot be stopped by military force.<sup>9</sup>

Scholars advocate for a shift from a "geopolitics of protection" (defending territory) to a "geopolitics of production" (shaping future earth systems).<sup>9</sup> The current security dilemma is that protecting the fossil-fuel-based economic order actively destroys long-term global stability.

### The Crisis of Sovereignty

Traditional sovereignty relies on a separation between man and nature, with nature seen as a passive resource. The Anthropocene makes this separation untenable.<sup>9</sup> If human actions change the atmosphere, the boundary between "domestic affairs" and "international impact" becomes fluid. This has led to a post-humanist IR that recognizes the agency of non-human actors and the entanglement of social and ecological systems.<sup>10</sup>

Concept	Traditional IR	Anthropocene IR
Focus	Human rivalry (Anthropocentric)	Human as geological actor (Planetary)
Environment	Stable backdrop / Resource	Dynamic system / Foundation of survival
Security	Military force / Territorial integrity	Ecosystem resilience / Global cooperation
Time Horizon	Short-term strategy	Geological time / Future generations

# Cyber-realism and Technological Power Cycles

In the digital sphere, "cyber-realism" views cyberspace as the fifth domain of warfare, integrated with land, sea, air, and space.<sup>11</sup>

## AI and Semiconductors as Strategic Determinants

Technological power cycle theory posits that dominance shifts to states leading in innovative sectors like Artificial Intelligence (AI) and semiconductors. The struggle for control over chip supply chains is a modern manifestation of "lead economy" dynamics.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. uses its position in technological architecture to slow China's rise, while China responds by accelerating its pursuit of technological autonomy.

## Asymmetry and Denial in Cyberspace

Cyber-realism differs from traditional realism by emphasizing asymmetry and low costs of attribution. In the digital world, weak actors can inflict significant damage on the critical infrastructure of great powers.<sup>11</sup> Because traditional deterrence—relying on known actors and consequences—often fails in cyberspace, states are shifting toward "denial strategies" focused on technical resilience rather than threats of retaliation.<sup>13</sup>

## State Capacity and the U.S.-China Rivalry

A crucial element is how we measure power. Traditional metrics like GDP or military size are insufficient in a world of complex networks.

## Productivity-Adjusted Capacity

Recent research introduced multidimensional measures of state capacity that account for productivity. When capacity is adjusted for productivity, the U.S. maintains a lead in legal and institutional capacity to enforce global standards. China has shown strong cumulative growth but still lacks some institutional capacities outside its borders, explaining why it often uses "idiosyncratic" or informal forms of coercion rather than formal sanction mechanisms.

## Agency of the Global South

While power transition theory focuses on the top of the hierarchy, emerging theories emphasize the agency of the "Global South" and middle powers. Countries like India and Brazil act not just as "spokes" but attempt to become hubs through regional cooperation and strategic autonomy.<sup>4</sup> The rise of BRICS+ suggests a "multiplexity" where different orders coexist.

## Synthesis: The Confrontation Between Established and Emerging

Established IR theories remain essential for understanding the laws of power and peace, but they must be supplemented with emerging insights to address 21st-century challenges.

1. **Power is now structural and infrastructural:** Power lies in controlling network nodes. "Weaponized Interdependence" provides the framework for this.
2. **Geopolitics is no longer human-only:** The Anthropocene forces us to see natural processes as active agents. Security must be redefined as ecological resilience.<sup>9</sup>
3. **Knowledge production is a power tool:** The call for Global IR shows that those who define the theory determine the legitimacy of actions.<sup>5</sup>
4. **The state is transformed, not gone:** The state remains central but its effectiveness now depends on its position within technological and financial networks.

The current interregnum requires an approach that respects historical patterns while addressing the radical novelty of our time.