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political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Major geopolitical trends and structural drivers of the North-South divide

Report of the Independent Expert on the promotion of a democratic and equitable international order

Summary

In the report, the Independent Expert on the promotion of a democratic and equitable international order highlights the structural and geopolitical drivers deepening the global North-South divide.

The report identifies key factors at play, such as resurging territorial ambitions, protectionist trade policies, climate injustice, unsustainable debt burdens, and persistent digital and knowledge gaps. Multipolarity is portrayed as an opportunity for renewed multilateralism rooted in inclusivity, redistribution and human rights.

The report stresses the urgent need to democratize global governance and recommends structural reforms in climate finance, international taxation, debt restructuring and digital equity.



I. Introduction

1. The present report, submitted pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 54/4, examines the impact of current geopolitical trends on the North-South divide and explores pathways towards bridging this persistent gap.

II. Activities

2. During the reporting period, the Independent Expert participated in a number of events, including:

- (a) International Fair Trial Day, Manila (14 June 2024);
- (b) The International Association of Constitutional Law Round Table on the Crisis of Democracy, Rome (4 and 5 October 2024);
- (c) The International Symposium on Multilateralism and International Rule of Law, Beijing (3 and 4 November 2024);
- (d) The Democracy Forum of the Council of Europe, Strasbourg, France (6–8 November 2024);
- (e) The Hernán Santa Cruz Dialogue, Workshop on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Beijing (2–4 December 2024);
- (f) The seventeenth Verona Eurasian Economic Forum, Ra's al-Khaymah, United Arab Emirates (5 and 6 December 2024);
- (g) European Parliament event on human rights and discrimination against Palestinians, Strasbourg, France (18 December 2024);
- (h) The sixth International Conference for World Balance, Havana (28–31 January 2025);
- (i) International Public Interest event: Stop the War on Palestine, Oslo (8 and 9 February 2025);
- (j) The Freedom Marathon: Shaping a Global Coalition for Freedom, Milan, Italy (15 March 2025);
- (k) European Parliament event entitled “The European Union and Irish Unity – What Next?”, Brussels (8 April 2025).

3. In September and October 2024, the Independent Expert held a series of bilateral meetings with Member States in Geneva and New York. In addition, he engaged in exchanges with the South Centre in Geneva, the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe and representatives of several non-governmental organizations.

III. Impact of current geopolitical trends on the North-South divide

4. Some commentators frame the current geopolitical moment as a watershed, akin to 1918, 1939 or 1989. However, it is more accurately understood as a stage within a protracted process: the reaction to a gradual shift of the global balance of power.¹ True, the intention for a fundamental reshaping of international relations has been openly and clearly declared by the Government of the United States of America. The incumbent Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, in his opening remarks before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said: “At the end of the Second World War, the United States was, in the words of the then Secretary of State, tasked with creating an order, a world order – a free half – as he quoted, in his quote, out of chaos, without blowing to pieces – without blowing the whole of the world into pieces

¹ Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World* (New York and London, W.W. Norton and Company, 2011).

in the process. And in the decades that followed, that global order served us quite well. Americans' incomes rose and communities flourished ... The post-war global order is not just obsolete, it is now a weapon being used against us.”² The President of the United States, Donald Trump, has withdrawn the United States from the Paris Agreement on climate change and several entities of the United Nations system, including the World Health Organization and the Human Rights Council, and the participation of the United States in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is under review. In subsequent statements, the President challenged several aspects of the current international order.

5. The post-Second World War international order, fundamentally shaped by United States power, initially saw the liberal internationalist paradigm prevail, despite cold war rivalry. This dominance faced a transformative challenge from the anti-colonial movements in the 1960s and, to a lesser degree, the economic ascendance of Japan and Europe in the 1970s and 1980s. The collapse of socialist regimes appeared to validate the paradigm, yet the anticipated “end of history” failed to materialize. Instead, globalization exacerbated existing North-South divisions and precipitated a decline in United States economic hegemony.

6. We live in a multipolar international order, following the brief unipolar Pax Americana. The emergence of many middle powers, but above all the meteoric rise of China, define this era. However, even during the bipolarity of the cold war, United States hegemony experienced gradual erosion, as decolonization movements disrupted the Western-dominated equilibrium. The transformative role of the global South precipitated a conceptual revolution in human rights discourse. The recognition of a right to development and the advocacy for a new international economic order represented a logical progression in the reconceptualization of human rights, with a focus on national and collective self-determination. Reflecting on this evolution, the American diplomat Philip Jessup observed that until established and newly independent States achieved consensus, the universalist aspirations of international law remained untenable.³ Accordingly, the erosion of the undisputed hegemonic position of the United States led it to a unilateralist foreign policy and a partial withdrawal from the United Nations human rights system, through reluctance to join treaties, frequent use of reservations in ratified treaties and a readiness to disregard inconvenient legal rules.

7. Consistent with this pattern, the United States frequently voted against significant General Assembly resolutions, often as the sole opposing nation, addressing nuclear and non-nuclear disarmament, social and economic equity, more balance in trade between the North and the South, and even gender-based human rights.⁴ Progressive advancements in these critical domains were interpreted as jeopardizing sovereign and geopolitical prerogatives of the United States and the market-driven interests of capitalist economies.⁵ This strategy resulted in a “weak” regime of human rights protection without judicial remedies or sanctions.⁶ (Interestingly, the vast majority of Americans – 88 per cent in a poll conducted in 2016 – support active engagement in the United Nations.⁷)

8. The Carter Administration's integration of human rights into United States foreign policy, though a notable shift, was subsequently reinterpreted and instrumentalized by the Reagan Administration, in the guise of “democracy promotion”. Critically, both

² Opening remarks by the Secretary of State-designate, Marco Rubio, to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, United States Department of State, 15 January 2025, available at <https://www.state.gov/opening-remarks-by-secretary-of-state-designate-marco-rubio-before-the-senate-foreign-relations-committee>.

³ Philip Jessup, “Non-universal international law”, *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law*, vol. 12, No. 1 (1973), p. 429; and Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 270.

⁴ The United States occupies the last position in the 2023 index, by Jeffrey Sachs and Guillaume Lafortune et al., of countries' support for United Nations-based multilateralism.

⁵ Richard Falk and Hans von Sponeck, *Liberating the United Nations: Realism with Hope* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2024), p. 291.

⁶ Tony Evans, *US Hegemony and the Project of Universal Human Rights* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1996).

⁷ Public Opinion Strategies poll – see <https://unfoundation.org/blog/post/new-poll-88-percent-of-americans-support-active-engagement-at-the-united-nations/>.

administrations largely operated outside the established United Nations framework, pursuing a nascent neoconservative agenda that prioritized the advancement of United States interests abroad, often through direct interventions and attempts at regime change. This approach signalled a departure from multilateralism and a preference for unilateral action, as a United States prerogative, deriving from its manifest destiny. Subsequent administrations, especially after 1989, put renewed emphasis on American exceptionalism, often sidelining the United Nations in favour of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or “coalitions of the willing”.

9. Even the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), while partially engaged in humanitarian and disaster relief, was also strategically instrumentalized to serve United States foreign policy objectives. The Secretary of State’s recent assertion that “foreign aid is not charity. It exists for the purpose of advancing the national interest of the United States”⁸ merely reflects a long-standing reality. The 1990 incident at the United Nations involving a “No” vote by Yemen to the United States-led coalition against Iraq vividly illustrates this point: the retaliatory remark by the Ambassador of the United States, “That was the most expensive ‘No’ vote you ever cast”, was followed by the abrupt cessation of USAID operations in the country.⁹ This episode exemplifies a broader trend – the use of aid as a tool of global competition and a lever for political influence.

10. Moreover, the recent withdrawal of the United States from various United Nations entities is far from being unprecedented. It was the Reagan Administration that pulled the United States out of UNESCO in 1983, claiming that it “has extraneously politicized virtually every subject it deals with. It has exhibited hostility toward a free society, especially a free market and a free press, and it has demonstrated unrestrained budgetary expansion.” In 2017, it was the turn of the Obama Administration to cut off funding for the same agency, after it had approved the membership of the State of Palestine, following a long-standing congressional ban on United States funding for United Nations bodies that recognize Palestine as a State.

11. This recurring behaviour underscores a consistent thread in United States foreign policy: a willingness to leverage participation in international organizations, and a readiness to withdraw or withhold funding when perceived national interests are challenged or when ideological disagreements arise. It corresponds to a more generalized, historical pattern of “instrumentalization and withdrawal”¹⁰ – during their hegemonic phase, powerful States tend to use international law as a means of regulation and stabilization of their dominance; when the hegemony wanes, they tend to withdraw from it. Hence, Britain in the nineteenth century was a defender of the sanctity of treaties, just as Spain was 300 years earlier.¹¹ Of course, even in the phase of instrumentalization, institutions may not appear as mere tools of the dominant power, otherwise they would not produce authority and legitimacy.

A. Resurgence of territorial ambitions

12. While the foreign policy of the President of the United States, Mr. Trump, draws on familiar themes, such as “peace through strength”, a direct echo of Ronald Reagan’s rhetoric, which in turn was borrowed from an aphorism of Hadrian, and is framed by proponents as “a

⁸ Joint press availability of the United States Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, and the President of Costa Rica, Rodrigo Chaves Robles, 4 February 2025 – see <https://www.state.gov/secretary-of-state-marco-rubio-and-costa-rican-president-rodrigo-chaves-robles-at-a-joint-press-availability>.

⁹ Randall Amster, “Broken news: ‘Yes men’ purchase Yemen, rename it ‘Yesmen’”, *Huffington Post*, 29 December 2009 – see https://www.huffpost.com/entry/broken-news-yes-men-purch_b_405800.

¹⁰ Nico Krisch, “More equal than the rest? Hierarchy, equality and US predominance in international law”, in Michael Byers and Georg Nolte (eds.), *United States Hegemony and the Foundations of International Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹¹ Nico Krisch, “International law in times of hegemony: unequal power and the shaping of the international legal order”, *European Journal of International Law*, vol. 16, No. 3 (2005), pp. 369–408.

reaction to neoliberal internationalism” and “a return to Jacksonian realism”,¹² it introduces an alarming uniqueness: the explicit threat of territorial conquest. Beyond anti-globalist ideology and transactional pragmatism, this marks a departure from the established principle of non-conquest. Although the United States has a long history of interventionism,¹³ including the Panama Canal takeover, the Cuban occupations and numerous Latin American interventions, it traditionally adhered to a Wilsonian doctrine that distinguished between interference and permanent territorial acquisition.¹⁴

13. Following this doctrine, military interventions have facilitated the expansion and protection of United States economic interests abroad, prioritizing the profitability of American corporations and access to resource-rich regions. Still, this policy, while justifying temporary occupations such as that of Iraq, maintained a taboo against outright conquest (at least, formal conquest; the United States continues, for instance, to retain its “coaling station” in Guantanamo Bay in perpetuity).¹⁵ Mr. Trump’s policy breaks this taboo, which is evident not only in his rhetoric about Panama and Greenland, but also in the recognition in 2019 of the annexation by Israel of the Golan Heights and his recent pronouncements on Gaza. This shift signals a dangerous erosion of the fundamental United Nations principles of sovereignty and no use of force.

B. Tariffs and the reshaping of the international economic order

14. The spearhead of the new administration is the massive tariffs announced in April 2025 that affect almost every country, but developing countries more severely. In addition to reciprocal countermeasures on a few dozen States, the United States has imposed a 10 per cent universal tariff on all imported goods as well as additional levies based on a formula correlating trade deficit and imports, which effectively punishes the poor.¹⁶ As a result, Lesotho, one of the poorest nations, faced a tariff of 50 per cent, Cambodia 49 per cent, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic 48 per cent, Viet Nam 46 per cent and Sri Lanka 44 per cent. Some of these measures have subsequently been mitigated. However, their inequitable and disproportionate character is underscored by the fact that the United States trade deficit in similar States results from the unaffordability of United States goods for their customers rather than from protectionist trade barriers.

15. Furthermore, the targeting of South Asian countries may also reflect an attempt to counter Chinese influence, given the relocation of Chinese manufacturers to countries such as Viet Nam and Cambodia to capitalize on reduced operational expenses and avoid tariff barriers. These “connector” economies linking the huge Chinese factory floor to the United States market have been targeted in order to create a “tariff wall around China”.¹⁷ The total level for import taxes on Chinese goods, including levies from previous administrations, reached 145 per cent – to be alleviated later after negotiations between the two countries.

16. This lurking trade war clearly carries a geopolitical dimension, beyond its economic underpinnings, directly addressing the United States rivalry with the other leading global economy, China. This strategic intent is reflected both in the 90-day suspension of reciprocal

¹² Robert C. O’Brien, National Security Adviser to the President of the United States, Donald Trump, from 2019 to 2021, “The return of peace through strength”, *Foreign Affairs*, 18 June 2024 – see <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/return-peace-strength-trump-obrien>.

¹³ The United States has undertaken around 400 military interventions, half of which have been between 1950 and 2019. See Sidita Kushi and Monica Duffy Toft, “The military intervention project: a new dataset on US military interventions, 1776–2019”, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 67, No. 4 (2022), pp. 752–779.

¹⁴ Tanisha Fazal, “Conquest is back”, *Foreign Affairs*, 21 March 2025 – see <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/conquest-back>.

¹⁵ Kal Raustiala, “More territory, more trouble: can Trump seize Greenland?”, University of California, Los Angeles, Public Law Research Paper No. 25, February 2025.

¹⁶ Mark John (Reuters), “Trump’s tariff formula confounds the world, punishes the poor”, 4 April 2025, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/trumps-tariff-formula-confounds-world-punishes-poor-2025-04-03/>.

¹⁷ See <https://www.wsj.com/podcasts/whats-news/china-vows-to-fight-us-tariffs-to-the-end/26e8e17f-a2a4-4912-a03a-43a01fb66de7>.

tariffs on other nations and in the excessive sanctions on “connectors”. Despite the amplified risks, however, a recent survey highlights the enduring appeal of China in terms of its expansive market, its well-established supply and manufacturing ecosystem and its qualified workforce, which are leading the majority of the companies surveyed to maintain their engagement.¹⁸ After all, China is, today, the top trading partner of about 120 States, whereas the United States, with a share of global demand for imports of only 15 per cent, does not dominate trade the way it dominates global finance or military spending. Moreover, the American share of Chinese exports has dropped from 19.2 per cent to 14.7 per cent since the first presidency of Mr. Trump.

17. Again, trade wars are not without precedent. Generally, dominant States have always exerted a determinant influence over trade agreements, and their institutional environment. They have also demonstrated a tendency to bend, revise or violate rules when these cease to serve their strategic objectives, provided that their power allows it. The case of Britain is illustrative: it initially implemented protective industrial policies to ensure a leading position in the global economy, and subsequently promoted liberalism, advocating for rules that would impede the ability of less advanced nations to narrow the competitive divide, in other words, “kicking away the ladder from them”.¹⁹

18. In the same vein, the United States has several times restructured the entire global economy around its interests: initially through the establishment of the Bretton Woods system in 1944, then by unilaterally departing from its gold standard anchor in 1971, and later by actively promoting the creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in the 1990s to institutionalize trade liberalization under rules favourable to advanced economies. More broadly, in WTO, throughout successive rounds of negotiations, the global North has consistently resisted the principal demands of the global South – notably, calls for a significant reduction of agricultural subsidies in developed countries and for the dismantling of barriers that disadvantage exports from developing economies.

19. However, the “Liberation Day” measures constitute a rupture, a radical shift – even more profound than the Nixon Administration’s imposition of a 10 per cent universal import charge which, together with the withdrawal by the United States from the gold standard, effectively dismantled the Bretton Woods monetary system. They diverge significantly from the Reagan Administration’s strategy, which favoured multilateral negotiations (the Uruguay Round) to redefine access to the United States market, and resulted in the establishment of the World Trade Organization. It is true that this multilateral approach was underpinned by a confluence of interests with neoliberal ideology, particularly evident in the focus on intellectual property rights. Developing nations, confronted with the prospect of unilateral United States trade interventions, ultimately deemed participation in this system preferable, despite its potential drawbacks for their development trajectories.²⁰

20. Beyond the severity and sweeping scope of the current tariffs, two systemic and consequential distinctions mark these reforms. Firstly, as they represent a clear breach of trust, frequently violating free trade treaties signed by the United States, they could spark an intra-Western challenge to United States economic hegemony. Throughout the post-war era, Western States have generally perceived the United States as the ultimate guarantor of a liberal economic order, adapting to its shifts rather than contesting its dominance.²¹ In contrast to the Nixon and Reagan Administrations, which fostered deeper integration of European, Japanese and American capital and promoted intensive cooperation between States,²² Mr. Trump’s policies contrast starkly with the established norms of multilateral liberal internationalism and they gravely erode the transatlantic partnership.

¹⁸ See <https://www.wsj.com/world/china/many-u-s-companies-plan-to-keep-china-ties-survey-finds-906481c9>.

¹⁹ Ha-Joon Chang, *Kicking Away the Ladder: Development Strategy in Historical Perspective* (London, Anthem Press, 2002).

²⁰ Rob Howse, “Trump tariffs and the legal order of world trade”, 3 April 2025 – see <https://t.co/3ush2nlQHO>.

²¹ Nicos Poulantzas, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* (London, New Left Books, 1976), p. 87.

²² Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire* (Toronto, Verso, 2012), p. 134.

21. Secondly, these reforms mark a fatal erosion of the neoliberal ideology that underpinned hyperglobalization.²³ The 2008 financial crisis had already severely undermined the premise of inherent market self-regulation, triggering a systemic crisis that had remained unresolved since then. Even prior to Mr. Trump's second term, the National Security Adviser to the previous President, Joe Biden, had acknowledged the limitations of neoliberal orthodoxy, emphasizing its instrumentalization by powerful States. He also indicated that the United States would seek to reshape rules that no longer aligned with its strategic objectives.²⁴ The intrinsic flaws of neoliberal-driven globalization, such as escalating income inequality, and a growing disparity between developed and developing nations, have rendered the current international financial order untenable. The lack of a significant, successful round of international trade negotiations since the 1994 Uruguay Round – a span of thirty years – underscores this systemic failure. By embedding neoliberal market assumptions and entrenching structural inequalities through biased tariff and subsidy rules, the World Trade Organization's framework served to reproduce global capitalist hierarchies rather than to genuinely enable development in the global South. The tariff structure embedded within its rules hindered the ability of developing countries to progress along the value chain. In addition, the unequal application of subsidy restrictions, notably the allowance of agricultural subsidies, had a negative impact on developing nations.

22. Moreover, trade wars represent more than just international conflicts; they embody a class struggle between capital and labour in both developed and developing countries. The neoliberal emphasis on “competitiveness” has functioned as a euphemism for wage compression, achieved through direct cuts, privatizations, currency devaluation and the dismantling of social safety nets. The persistent surpluses, especially in core European countries, are often a direct result of highly concentrated income distributions that benefit businesses and the wealthy.²⁵ In Mr. Trump's rhetoric, tariffs – taxing consumption to subsidize production – would redirect a portion of United States demand towards increasing the total amount of goods and services produced at home. However, their basic aim is different: financing massive tax cuts for the richer part of the population. As such, tariffs are a sales tax, of a particularly regressive sort.²⁶

23. The Trump Administration's declared intention to significantly alter the terms of United States engagement with the international trade system has already triggered a wide spectrum of reactions. With the exception of China and the European Union, most States have not opted for immediate reprisals. It is easy to understand this restraint: in terms of asymmetric interdependence and power, the United States is in a favourable bargaining position with all its most important trading partners, except China. The United States could also leverage United States dollar-denominated debts or security agreements as countermeasures to any retaliation. Still, with the World Trade Organization unable to respond institutionally due to the paralysis of its Appellate Body, a systemic erosion of confidence could exacerbate financial instability – manifesting itself in a sharp depreciation of the United States dollar, consistent with Triffin's dilemma analysis from the 1960s. Moreover, the high level of global integration means that full-scale economic warfare will be especially damaging and disruptive, and will also mark the definitive disenfranchisement of the World Trade Organization.

²³ Dani Rodrik, “What's next for globalization?”, 9 March 2023, available at <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/failure-of-hyper-globalization-creates-need-for-new-economic-narrative-by-dani-rodrik-2023-03>.

²⁴ Remarks by the United States National Security Adviser on renewing American economic leadership – see <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/04/27/remarks-by-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-on-renewing-american-economic-leadership-at-the-brookings-institution/>; cf. Martin M. Guzman and Joseph E. Stiglitz, “Post-neoliberal globalization: international trade rules for global prosperity”, National Bureau of Economic Research working paper No. 32533, available at <http://www.nber.org/papers/w32533>.

²⁵ Matthew Klein and Michael Pettis, *Trade Wars Are Class Wars: How Rising Inequality Distorts the Global Economy and Threatens International Peace* (Yale University Press, 2020).

²⁶ Marshall Steinbaum, *Trump's Trade War is also a Class War*, available at <https://www.thenation.com/podcast/archive/ttom-042525>.

24. The critical question for the survival of multilateralism is whether international cooperation can persist in the face of a United States determined to reverse unilaterally its rules. In any case, the anticipated trade war will disproportionately affect developing nations, deepening the existing economic and political inequalities between the global North and South.

IV. Structural drivers of the North-South divide

A. International economic order

25. The year 2025 marks 70 years since the Bandung Conference, where nations of the global South aspired to establish a new international economic order. Nearly half a century has elapsed since the first – and only – North-South Summit, which was held in Cancún, Mexico, in 1981, and was intended to advance North-South cooperation. However, the summit concluded without a joint declaration, effectively hijacked by the agendas of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, its most visible participants. As a result, a new international economic order emerged after Cancún, but it was the exact antithesis of neoliberal hyperglobalization.

26. The subsequent formation of the Group of 20 (G20),²⁷ although a positive step, served primarily to integrate leading developing economies into the G20, rather than to democratize international financial governance.²⁸ The demand for a new international economic order has been substituted by the development discourse, considered less threatening to the North/West.²⁹ This integration facilitated a system where developing nations, while gaining a degree of influence, remained subject to the overarching strategic and economic priorities of dominant, developed nations. In essence, the G20 became a platform for managed inclusion, thereby perpetuating the existing power asymmetries rather than fundamentally altering them. The rise of BRICS Plus and the successive presidency of the G20 by South Africa, Brazil and India are challenging this situation.

27. Consistent with historical precedent, developed countries promote free trade in sectors where they excel, while employing protectionist measures in less competitive industries. According to data from a report commissioned by the G20, 17,583 trade-damaging interventions have been enacted globally since 2008, with 2019 as the peak year. The volume of trade restrictions has witnessed a further increase, from approximately 2,300 in 2019 to 2,600 in 2022, reaching a maximum of 4,500 in 2020, which highlights a permanent trend.³⁰ More than 80 per cent of the aforementioned discriminatory and protectionist measures approved in the period from 2009 to 2021 originated in developed countries. The United States, with 1,435 regulations, was the country that approved the biggest number of protectionist regulations.³¹

28. The contemporary international economic order bears the enduring imprint of colonial legacies, when the core European countries acquired unprecedented foreign wealth from the rest of the world. While several developing countries, especially in Asia, benefited from globalization, many countries, particularly in Africa, experienced stagnation. Latin America's notorious "lost decade" of the 1980s entailed a 9 per cent fall in gross domestic

²⁷ Originating from a previous informal group – the Group of 22 (G22) – the G20, formally announced at the Group of Seven (G7) summit in Cologne, Germany, in June 1999, included Indonesia, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, as "systemically important countries". Malaysia, penalized for its implementation of capital controls to deal with the Asian crisis, was excluded. In addition, Hong Kong, China was excluded, as were Singapore and Thailand, and Poland, the other member of the defunct G22.

²⁸ Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire*, p. 278.

²⁹ Richard Falk and Hans von Sponeck, *Liberating the United Nations: Realism with Hope*, p. 210.

³⁰ Centre for Economic Policy Research, Global Trade Alert, available at <https://globaltradealert.org/data-center>.

³¹ Collective of Authors, *The Current International Economic Order: An Obstacle for Development* (Havana, Editorial José Martí, 2023), available at https://www.g77.org/doc/G77-The_Current_International_Economic_Order.pdf, p. 44.

product (GDP) per capita alongside unprecedented increases in class inequality. Nevertheless, notwithstanding these regional disparities, a significant gap persists – and in some regions is widening – between the per capita income of North America and Europe and that of the majority of the global population. This outcome is attributable to a complex interplay of asymmetric relations, including multilateral, bilateral and regional agreements stemming from the Uruguay Round of Multilateral Trade Negotiations. Furthermore, countries that control the dominant currency and leading financial institutions benefit from lower borrowing rates and higher returns on their foreign investments.

29. Scholarly estimates from the global South suggest that contemporary resource extraction from the periphery surpasses that of the early postcolonial era. During the 1960s, unequal trade relations resulted in annual losses for the peripheral countries approximating \$38 billion, exceeding 1 per cent of their combined GDP. This resource drain escalated significantly from 2005, reaching nearly \$3 trillion annually, equivalent to 9 per cent of their combined GDP. By 2017, this cumulative extraction, measured in constant 2011 dollars, exceeded \$62 trillion, representing approximately 97 per cent of their combined GDP. These processes effectively marginalized the norms advocated by developing nations, within the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and in the General Assembly resolutions establishing the New International Economic Order.

30. In essence, most global hierarchical structures within the international division of labour and capital remain entrenched. At the onset of the twentieth century, the global North accounted for nearly 80 per cent of global manufactured goods production and approximately 90 per cent of manufactured exports. The remainder of the world served primarily as a supplier of natural resources and a consumer of manufactured goods. Although China has since emerged as the factory of the world, strategic activities such as research, development, engineering, and capital-intensive, high-value-added production remain concentrated in Western nations (and, increasingly, China), particularly in emerging knowledge-intensive sectors and with regard to major innovations, such as artificial intelligence. Nowadays, the 10 largest exporters of services account for 58 per cent of total global sales; among them, there are no members of the Group of 77 (G-77), except China, which occupies fourth place. Furthermore, financialization in the global South has facilitated the outward flow of capital from developing economies. Notably, nine of the top ten global financial services corporations are American, representing a level of dominance unparalleled in other sectors.³²

31. In the context of escalating concentration of international commodity production within global value chains, commodity-dependent developing countries are reliant on demand-driven chains, dominated by multinational corporations. Consequently, the potential of international trade to serve as a catalyst for poverty reduction is undermined by the structural organization of these global value chains. For example, five multinational corporations, holding dominant control over the supply chain linking commodity production, trading firms and consumer markets, command between 50 and 70 per cent of the global agricultural commodity trade. Furthermore, these corporations are identified as major contributors to deforestation in Argentina, Brazil, Indonesia and Paraguay.³³

32. Hence, economic inequality is a reflection of deeply entrenched structural forces, is dependent on historical paths and is embedded in global and national institutions. According to the World Inequality Report 2024, the richest 10 per cent of the global population currently receive 52 per cent of global income, while the poorest half earn just 8.5 per cent.³⁴ In 2021, 2,153 billionaires had more wealth than 4.6 billion people, that is, than the majority of the population of Earth.³⁵ In countries such as the United States, the top 1 per cent now command 21 per cent of national income, while in South Africa, the top 1 per cent earn more than 20 times the national average. This concentration of income is mirrored acutely in the accumulation of wealth, as the wealthiest individuals wield financial instruments, tax havens and deregulated markets in order to shield and grow their assets. The result is not only an

³² Ibid., p. 38.

³³ Trase, *Trase Yearbook 2020* – see <https://trase.earth/media/press-release/trase-yearbook-2020>.

³⁴ Lucas Chancel et al., *World Inequality Report 2024* (World Inequality Lab, 2024).

See <https://wid.world/news-article/10-facts-on-global-inequality-in-2024/>.

³⁵ Richard Falk and Hans von Sponeck, *Liberating the United Nations: Realism with Hope*, p. 234.

uneven distribution of economic resources but a profound asymmetry in access to opportunities and to representation in governance.

33. These disparities are perpetuated by policy choices and global economic rules that reward capital to the detriment of labour. The World Bank's 2024 report in what was formerly known as the Poverty and Shared Prosperity series highlights how unequal access to infrastructure, credit and education continues to trap developing economies in a cycle of low productivity and limited upward mobility.³⁶ At the same time, evidence suggests that corporate concentration and monopolistic practices are on the rise. A recent study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) observed that market dominance by a handful of multinational corporations has grown sharply in sectors such as pharmaceuticals, digital platforms and agribusiness, contributing to wage stagnation and reducing the bargaining power of workers across both high-income and low-income countries. Countries caught in the so-called "middle-income trap" find themselves especially vulnerable, as they cannot compete with low-wage economies but are also unable to ascend the technological value chain due to lack of investment, infrastructure and institutional capacity.

34. Inequality is further reinforced by regressive tax regimes and fiscal austerity policies which systematically underfund public goods. Many developing countries are locked into pro-cyclical fiscal frameworks that restrict social spending when it is most needed, risking political backlash and long-term developmental harm. Simultaneously, illicit financial flows and aggressive tax avoidance – which cost low-income countries an estimated \$88.6 billion per year – drain national budgets and corrode trust in governance.³⁷ These patterns reveal a sobering paradox: while global GDP continues to rise, so does the gap between the world's economic winners and those left behind. Without structural reforms – redistributive tax systems, stronger labour protection and meaningful global financial governance – inequality will not only persist but deepen, threatening the stability of the international system itself.

35. In the following paragraphs, the Independent Expert examines some of the main structural drivers of the global North-South divide, excluding the international financial architecture and related issues, which are addressed in a separate report.

B. Nexus of climate injustice, environmental degradation, and depletion of natural resources

36. The existential threat posed by the climate crisis is a direct consequence of the unsustainable overexploitation of resources. The World Economic Forum identifies environmental dangers as comprising over half of the top ten global risks for the next decade.³⁸ An assessment by the World Wide Fund for Nature International (WWF) of the global ecological footprint reveals that human consumption exceeds planetary capacity by 75 per cent, signifying the use of 1.75 Earths.³⁹ This unsustainable consumption is primarily attributable to the global North. Statistical evidence from WWF and the Global Footprint Network indicates that the average United States resident's resource consumption requires the equivalent of five Earths. The G-7's per capita consumption surpasses the global average by 2.7 times, the African average by 14.3 times, the Indian average by 8.2 times and the Chinese average by 1.9 times. The top 10 countries in the 2015 human development index

³⁶ World Bank, *Poverty, Prosperity and Planet Report 2024: Pathways Out of the Polycrisis*, available from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/poverty-prosperity-and-planet>.

³⁷ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), *Economic Development in Africa Report 2023*, available from <https://unctad.org/publication/economic-development-africa-report-2023>.

³⁸ World Economic Forum, *Global Risks Report 2025*, available from <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2025/>.

³⁹ WWF, *Living Planet Report 2022*, available from <https://www.worldwildlife.org/pages/living-planet-report-2022>.

exhibit an average ecological footprint 5.1 times beyond sustainability limits and a per capita carbon dioxide emissions footprint 7.9 times beyond sustainable levels.⁴⁰

37. The climate crisis is a fundamental driver of poverty and income inequality, disproportionately affecting least developed countries, and the most vulnerable populations within all societies, both in the North and the South.⁴¹ Least developed countries, often located in some of the warmest regions, are particularly susceptible to the adverse effects of additional climate variability. This vulnerability is compounded by their limited resources for adaptation, their fragile economies and their weak institutional capacity. Moreover, climate change disproportionately affects rural populations and has a greater adverse effect on income distribution; a 1 per cent temperature increase in areas with a high share of rural populations is associated with a three-fold increase in the Gini index compared to urban areas.

38. The simultaneous increase in global temperatures and extreme weather events is producing cascading impacts that expose millions to critical food and water insecurity, especially in Africa, the Caribbean and the Arctic. An estimated 1.3 billion people depend on degraded agricultural land. Data from 2000–2019 reveal that eight of the top ten countries with the highest economic losses relative to GDP were island nations, seven of them in the Caribbean.⁴² Pre-existing inequalities, including those related to gender, ethnicity and class, amplify these vulnerabilities, with a disproportionate impact on Indigenous Peoples and local communities.

39. Ecological and social exploitation go hand in hand. Natural resources remain one of the most persistent paradoxes in global development, insofar as countries endowed with oil, minerals, forests and fertile land often find themselves entrenched in poverty and dependence – a dynamic referred to as the “resource curse”. In sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, over 50 per cent of the workforce remains employed in agriculture, yet productivity remains among the lowest globally due to limited domestic processing and an overreliance on primary commodity exports.⁴³ In this region, where 53.4 per cent of people are affected by multidimensional poverty and 18.8 per cent are vulnerable, these poor populations often have no other option than to deteriorate some components of the natural environment in order to barely survive. The intensification of climate change, for its part, tends to exacerbate extreme poverty through reduced agricultural yields, which generates upward pressure on food prices and worsens food and water insecurity. The poorest families, where food represents more than 50 per cent of the family budget, are affected the most by the increase in energy and food prices.⁴⁴ However, the impact of climate change extends beyond vulnerable populations, as rising food prices negatively affect the real wages and consumption patterns of all workers.

40. On the other hand, the extractive sectors are dominated by multinational corporations, which reap substantial profits while the environmental and social costs are externalized to local populations. From cobalt extraction in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to large-scale lithium mining in the Andes, communities are often displaced, poorly compensated and exposed to extremely hazardous conditions. At the same time, large-scale land acquisitions have intensified, as testified by the fact that millions of hectares of land in low- and middle-income countries have been transferred to foreign investors, often without adequate safeguards or benefit-sharing mechanisms. Disrupting traditional land tenure

⁴⁰ Jason Hickel, “The sustainable development index: measuring the ecological efficiency of human development in the anthropocene”, *Ecological Economics*, vol. 167, issue C (2020) – see https://econpapers.repec.org/article/eeecolec/v_3a167_3ay_3a2020_3ai_3ac_3as0921800919303386.htm.

⁴¹ Noah S. Diffenbaugh and Marshall Burke, “Global warming has increased global economic inequality”, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 116, No. 20 (May 2019), pp. 9808–9813, available at <http://www.pnas.org/lookup/doi/10.1073/pnas.1816020116>.

⁴² Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report of the Sixth Assessment Report*; and Collective of Authors, *The Current International Economic Order: An Obstacle for Development*, pp. 104 ff.

⁴³ UNCTAD, “Revitalizing African agriculture: time for bold action”, 30 September 2022, available at <https://unctad.org/news/blog-revitalizing-african-agriculture-time-bold-action>.

⁴⁴ Collective of Authors, *The Current International Economic Order: An Obstacle for Development*, p. 99.

systems and displacing smallholder farmers, these agreements typically favour export-oriented agribusiness over development and food sovereignty.

41. The consequences for food security are severe. Environmental degradation, through deforestation, topsoil depletion, and pollution from agrochemicals, continues to erode the ecological basis of agriculture. Combined with global price shocks and climate stressors, these pressures heighten food insecurity, especially in fragile regions. In December 2024, it was reported that maize and rice prices were 14 per cent and 26 per cent higher, respectively, than in January 2020,⁴⁵ while food price inflation today remains elevated in more than 50 low- and middle-income countries, with domestic staples seeing the most volatility.⁴⁶

42. Finally, climate policies implemented without redistribution mechanisms are likely to exacerbate existing inequalities, even in wealthier countries. A recent comparative study of more than 150 countries has revealed that climate change worsens income distribution, significantly increasing income disparities within a given country.⁴⁷ For instance, climate mitigation policies, such as carbon taxes or energy pricing reforms, have frequently demonstrated regressive effects, disproportionately increasing the financial burden on lower-income households due to the higher proportion of their income spent on essential goods such as energy.⁴⁸ This regressivity raises significant concerns regarding justice and may undermine public support for climate policies. Conversely, ambitious climate action, when integrated with robust social measures such as targeted subsidies, social safety nets, or investments in public services, has the potential to enhance the well-being of approximately 58 per cent of the global population by 2030.⁴⁹

C. Interplay of the debt and climate crises

43. Developing countries are facing an accelerating and unsustainable foreign debt crisis, significantly amplified by new obligations incurred during the pandemic, layered upon existing, unmanageable debts. Global public debt reached an all-time high of \$102 trillion in 2024, up from \$97 trillion in 2023. Developing countries' net interest payments on public debt reached \$921 billion in 2024, a 10 per cent increase compared to 2023, while a record 61 developing countries were allocating 10 per cent or more of government revenues for interest payments.⁵⁰

44. In many States in sub-Saharan Africa, external debt servicing exceeds government spending on health or education. Africa's debt-to-GDP ratio has soared from 20 per cent in 1980 to more than 70 per cent today, and annual growth rates have accelerated from 8.5 per cent (2008–2018) to 13 per cent (2018–2021), culminating in \$9.3 trillion in total debt. The rapid accumulation of short-term debt, now nearly 30 per cent of the total debt (2008–2021), adds further instability.⁵¹ In countries ravaged by war, the debt burden has reached even more catastrophic proportions, with the Sudan (256 per cent), Eritrea

⁴⁵ World Bank, Food Security Update, 13 December 2024, available at <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/40ebbf38f5a6b68bfc11e5273e1405d4-0090012022/related/Food-Security-Update-111-December-13-2024.pdf>.

⁴⁶ World Bank, Food Security Update, 14 March 2025, available at <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/40ebbf38f5a6b68bfc11e5273e1405d4-0090012022/related/Food-Security-Update-114-March-14-2025.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Elena Pagliarlunga, Andrea Coveri and Antonello Zanfei, "Climate change and within-country inequality: new evidence from a global perspective", *World Development*, vol. 159 (November 2022) – see <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X22002200#b0185>.

⁴⁸ Stephane Hallegatte and Julie Rozenberg, "Climate change through a poverty lens", *Nature Climate Change*, vol. 7 (April 2017), pp. 250–256 – see <http://www.nature.com/nclimate/journal/v7/n4/full/nclimate3253.html>.

⁴⁹ Johannes Emmerling, Pietro Andreoni and Massimo Tavoni, "Global inequality consequences of climate policies when accounting for avoided climate impacts", available at [https://www.cell.com/cell-reports-sustainability/pdfExtended/S2949-7906\(23\)00008-3](https://www.cell.com/cell-reports-sustainability/pdfExtended/S2949-7906(23)00008-3).

⁵⁰ UNCTAD, "A world of debt" (2025), available at <https://unctad.org/publication/world-of-debt>.

⁵¹ Collective of Authors, *The Current International Economic Order: An Obstacle for Development*, pp. 59 ff. and p. 100.

(164 per cent) and the Republic of the Congo (96.46 per cent) serving as stark indicators of this.⁵²

45. This increasing debt burden is significantly amplified by systemic deficiencies within the international financial architecture. Despite their ostensible commitment to development, evidence suggests that the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have frequently adopted procyclical policy prescriptions, including reductions in public investment during economic contractions and austerity measures. Moreover, the very nature of this crisis continues to isolate indebted nations of the global South, while creditor nations in the global North maintain a permanent and coordinated approach to their strategies and actions. The guiding principles on foreign debt and human rights⁵³ – an equitable and lasting solution consistent with States’ human rights obligations – have generally been sidelined. Countries in debt distress are thus subjected to neoliberal conditionalities that limit their capacity to formulate independent policy on infrastructure, industrial strategy or climate adaptation – areas crucial for long-term development. Further constraints are imposed by credit rating agencies, whose assessments can deter investment and raise borrowing costs, often on the basis of opaque or procyclical criteria.

46. The compounding burdens of climate change and debt are critically increasing the fragility of numerous countries across the global South. The international community’s mobilized resources fall far short of what is required. As the Independent Expert on the effects of foreign debt and other related international financial obligations of States on the full enjoyment of all human rights, particularly economic, social and cultural rights pointedly noted in 2025, African nations – contributing minimally to global emissions (under 5 per cent) and already powered by a remarkable 95 per cent average of clean energy – are projected to spend \$163 billion on debt servicing, dwarfing the combined pledges for climate finance.⁵⁴ The estimated annual investment needs of developing countries for a just transition, climate adaptation and ecosystem restoration by 2030 stand at a staggering \$2.4 trillion, with a \$1 trillion external financing gap. This contrasts starkly with the \$100 billion annual climate finance goal by 2020 agreed upon in the Paris Agreement, a commitment that developed nations have consistently failed to meet.⁵⁵

D. Knowledge and the digital divide

47. The 2003 World Summit on the Information Society, with 175 countries participating, identified the “digital divide” as a major factor deepening the global North-South gap. While digital technologies continue their rapid and transformative impact on economic, social and political structures, this impact is far from uniform. According to the International Telecommunication Union, in 2023, Internet usage reached 95 per cent in high-income countries but only 27 per cent in low-income countries. The cost of a smartphone in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa exceeds 40 per cent of the average monthly income, and African users pay more than three times the global average for mobile data.⁵⁶ This persistent digital divide continues to impede inclusive development, limiting access to vital services such as education, healthcare and financial systems. It is simultaneously exacerbating pre-existing inequalities by concentrating the advantages of connectivity and innovation in already privileged regions. Furthermore, globally, 34 per cent of the population shows an education completion rate; for the richest 20 per cent, the figure is 79 per cent.⁵⁷

48. These disparities are evident also within advanced economies, where access to digital infrastructure is stratified by income. For instance, in the United States, 43 per cent of adults

⁵² See <https://tradingeconomics.com/country-list/government-debt-to-gdp?continent=africa>.

⁵³ Presented to the Human Rights Council in June 2012. See <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Development/IEDebt/Pages/GuidingPrinciples.aspx>.

⁵⁴ See A/HRC/58/51.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ International Telecommunication Union, *Measuring Digital Development: Facts and Figures 2023*, (Geneva, December 2023), available at <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/FactsFigures2023.pdf>.

⁵⁷ Richard Falk and Hans von Sponeck, *Liberating the United Nations: Realism with Hope*, p. 234.

earning less than \$30,000 per year lack home broadband access, an impediment that disproportionately affects rural and marginalized communities.⁵⁸ Addressing this divide demands not only investment in infrastructure but also the implementation of affordability policies and digital literacy programmes.

49. In parallel, the rapid proliferation of artificial intelligence technologies has heightened the urgency of efficient governance that ensures ethical, transparent and equitable deployment. The adoption by the European Union of the landmark Artificial Intelligence Act, in 2024, which establishes a risk-based classification system prioritizing safety, human rights and accountability, represents a notable step.⁵⁹ Globally, the Global Digital Compact, put forward by the United Nations, seeks to align national artificial intelligence strategies with shared principles of fairness, data protection and non-discrimination. However, despite an increasing understanding that a lack of proactive regulatory coordination risks further entrenching inequalities and embedding biases within decision-making systems, the translation of this understanding into tangible action and substantial funding remains critically insufficient, highlighting a significant gap between awareness and implementation.⁶⁰

50. Globalization and the regulation of knowledge through World Trade Organization agreements deeply link the digital and knowledge divides. Mechanisms such as Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), including patents, copyrights and trademarks, coupled with enduring transnationalized central-peripheral global value chains, actively worsen existing knowledge inequalities. Developing economies tend to engage in international trade by specializing in the supply of goods and services requiring minimal scientific input, thereby creating weak backward linkages to their domestic production base. There are important differences among them. China has now become a key hub in international value chains and a leading player in the technological race (especially in green energy, electric vehicles, nanoelectronics, robotics and artificial intelligence). On the contrary, Africa starkly illustrates the aforementioned pattern, with commodities constituting an average of 80 per cent of its total merchandise exports. Notably, between 2018 and 2020, 83 per cent of African nations (45 out of 54), including all countries in Central and West Africa, were reliant on commodities. As a result, the peripheral integration of these economies within increasingly intricate global value chains is a clear indicator of their technological dependence.⁶¹

51. Consequently, the global distribution of cognitive, scientific and technological capabilities is asymmetric and highly concentrated in a small group of countries, and often owned by large transnational corporations, which control around 80 per cent of global value chains. Hence, the export of manufacturing to low-wage countries generates capital flows from them to developed countries. The iPhone value chain is an eloquent example. Across every new iPhone launch between 2010 and 2018, Apple earned 56 per cent of the final retail price without actually producing or assembling any of the components; 1.5 per cent of the final retail price went to the most labour-intensive part of the production stage – assembly – which took place primarily in China.⁶²

52. These profound transformations in the geopolitics of world trade threaten further marginalization of developing countries and require a coordinated and united strategy. It is unacceptable, for example, that around 770 million people still lack access to electricity, a nineteenth-century technology. More than evidence of the technological gap, this is an

⁵⁸ Pew Research Center, Internet/Broadband Fact Sheet, 13 November 2024 – see <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/>.

⁵⁹ European Commission, Proposal for a regulation laying down harmonized rules on artificial intelligence, available at <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/proposal-regulation-laying-down-harmonised-rules-artificial-intelligence>.

⁶⁰ United Nations, Our Common Agenda: policy brief 8 – information integrity on digital platforms, available at <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4012857?ln=en&v=pdf>.

⁶¹ Collective of Authors, *The Current International Economic Order: An Obstacle for Development*, pp. 43 and 44.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 40 ff.

example of the enormous social debt accumulated under the conditions of the current world order.

V. Emerging economic order

53. The 1990s was the decade of a shift from geopolitics to geoeconomics. The then Secretary-General, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, observed that the United Nations was “no longer paralysed by the bipolar struggle to fulfil its historic Charter mission” and that “the age of the United Nations had come”. The world stands now at a completely different critical juncture.⁶³ Left unchecked, the turn to unilateralism could destabilize the international order. In any case, the international order would not be the same anymore. Already in 2022, the chief economist of the International Monetary Fund described as imminent a geopolitical shift due to hidden underlying fault lines, leading to a world fragmenting into “distinct economic blocs with different ideologies, political systems, technology standards, cross-border payments and trade systems, and reserve currencies”.⁶⁴

54. Contrary to much speculation, the new international arrangement will not be bipolar, with the United States versus China, or democracies versus autocracies, or even a Eurasian alliance versus Western Atlanticism.⁶⁵ The reason is simple: no country or bloc of countries can carve up the world into spheres of influence in a modern equivalent of the Yalta Conference or the Congress of Vienna of 1815. It is not “great States” that will define the new international order, but the balance of power among them and the emerging nations, especially China. The developing countries do not look forward to replacing an old hegemon with a new one. Moreover, China declares that it does not have ambitions to become a superpower, and it is not forging military alliances like NATO.⁶⁶ Finally, a world order modelled on the post-Napoleonic Concert of Europe is not possible, because a similar consensus cannot emerge among the new global players, due to the vast divergence of interests and values. As the President of France, Emmanuel Macron, stated during his 2025 visit to India: “It would be a strange approach to popular sovereignty to say that we support democracy except when it allows the rise to power of values differing from ours.”

55. The nascent international order is not defined primarily by civilizational fault lines.⁶⁷ Huntington’s predictions have been demonstrably incorrect, not least for Ukraine, where he predicted that the real “fault line” was not a geopolitical or security one, but the civilizational fault line that divides Orthodox eastern Ukraine from Uniate western Ukraine.⁶⁸ The composition of BRICS further challenges his thesis, as each one of its founding members represents a different Huntingtonian civilization. The emerging multipolar order is shaped by fluid blocs, of variable geometry, practising “multipartnerships”, as Hillary Clinton described.⁶⁹ This new type of variable, non-exclusive engagement is aptly demonstrated by the foreign policy evolution of India from non-alignment to “multialignment”, evidenced by its simultaneous membership in BRICS and in the Quad alliance (with Australia, Japan and the United States).

56. Hence, the contemporary international landscape transcends simplistic notions of a modern “great game” or grand bargains among regional hegemonies. These outdated frameworks fail to adequately capture the intricate web of interdependencies and diverse

⁶³ See <https://www.imf.org/-/media/Files/Publications/WEO/2025/April/English/execsum.ashx>.

⁶⁴ Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas, “Shifting geopolitical tectonic plates”, June 2022, available at <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2022/06/shifting-geopolitical-tectonic-plates-straight-talk>.

⁶⁵ Aleksandr Dugin, *The Great Awakening vs. the Great Reset* (Arktos Media, 2021).

⁶⁶ Wang Yi elaborates on an equal and orderly multipolar world and a universally beneficial and inclusive economic globalization, 7 March 2024, available at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbzhd/202403/t20240308_11256418.html.

⁶⁷ Nils Gilman, “Samuel Huntington is getting his revenge”, *Foreign Policy* (February 2025), available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/02/21/samuel-huntington-fukuyama-clash-of-civilizations/>.

⁶⁸ Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 2011), Kindle locations 502 and 3147.

⁶⁹ Quoted by Joseph S. Nye, Jr. in “Understanding twenty-first century power shifts”, *The European Financial Review*, 24 June 2011.

agency shaping global affairs today. A significant trend in the multiplicity of relations is the proliferation of bilateral and multilateral trade agreements, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. These agreements signify a move towards deeper regional integration. Still, the establishment of new economic blocs is also taking on an interregional character. The European Union and South American countries recently created one of the world's largest trade zones. A new European Union-China trade agreement should not be ruled out. Furthermore, cooperation and solidarity between nations of the global South are gaining significant momentum, representing an increasingly influential force in international relations. Global South-South trade is growing faster than global North-South trade.

57. Crucially, multipolarity necessitates multilateralism, particularly the United Nations framework of rules and institutions, to ensure a stable equilibrium among the emerging “large spaces” (Grossräume) of State coalitions, in Karl Schmitt’s terminology.⁷⁰ A fractured global landscape, as the President of Singapore, Tharman Shanmugaratnam, points out, renders greater investment in global public goods even more critical.⁷¹ Although signs of this renewed multilateralism are limited, they are not entirely lacking: the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Agreement, of 2022, and the more recent Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction stand as examples. Obviously, the multipolar era will also be characterized by competition between the two major economic powers, the United States and China. However, as the former Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd, has contended, the goal of such great-power rivalry should be managed strategic competition, not outright victory over an existential threat.⁷² The conflict could also be moderated if the European Union succeeds in gaining strategic autonomy vis-à-vis the United States, and, especially, if it develops better relations with the global South. It is not just about signing more trade deals to offset United States protectionism, but designing together new patterns of partnership.

VI. Recommendations

58. **The survival of multilateralism depends on adapting to new power realities. The ongoing exclusion of Brazil, India, the African Union and the Muslim world from key roles in major institutions is unsustainable. Without Security Council reform or updated voting shares at the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, these bodies will lose influence and legitimacy, accelerating currency multipolarity and decentralized trade. There is an urgent need for comprehensive policy reform at both the national and the global levels. Without such reforms, coupled with concerted efforts to place a check on corporate power, regulate extractive industries, enforce environmental standards and tackle poverty and inequalities, the current disruptive trends will be exacerbated and will further destabilize the international order. Climate change adaptation policies must be intentionally designed to strengthen the linkages between development and redistribution, addressing historic injustices through measures such as a systemic approach to sovereign debt restructuring. In this vein, Mia Mottley’s Bridgetown Agenda offers a novel strategy for green finance in developing countries. Ultimately, addressing these multifaceted challenges demands a holistic and robustly multilateral approach, within the United Nations system.**

59. **A truly effective multilateralism necessitates the inclusion of actors beyond just nation States. Non-governmental organizations and sub-State entities are vital complements to governmental action. The “We Are Still In” movement, which arose in 2017 when the United States first withdrew from the Paris Agreement, demonstrates**

⁷⁰ Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum* (New York, Telos Press, 2003), pp. 42 ff.

⁷¹ Tharman Shanmugaratnam, “Confronting a perfect long storm”, June 2022, available at <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2022/06/confronting-a-perfect-long-storm-tharman-shanmugaratnam>.

⁷² Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “Cold war with China is avoidable”, *Wall Street Journal*, 30 December 2020, available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/cold-war-with-china-is-avoidable-11609347643>.

this powerfully; United States cities, states and businesses mobilized to maintain climate commitments under this banner. The “America Is All In” coalition now represents a substantial majority of the United States, accounting for 65 per cent of the population and 68 per cent of the country’s GDP. Worldwide, an expanding network of proactive subnational entities could act as a crucial buffer when national governments fail to deliver. These synergies combine human rights advocacy and human rights activism, both as catastrophe prevention and as utopian politics.

60. While the energy of human rights activism is crucial, its effectiveness can be amplified by integrating rigorous epistemic and technocratic insights. The notion of “good governance”, often a conditionality imposed by international financial organizations, has frequently functioned as a conduit for a neoliberal agenda. The sheer volume of International Monetary Fund reports by early 2002 – 165 assessments of developing States’ regulatory adherence – underscores this trend. To address the regulatory deficit concerning human rights and development, a novel United Nations global regulatory delivery index – developed and owned by global South nations to reflect their priorities, interests and values – could be instrumental. This index should move beyond mere compliance tracking to monitor real-world outcomes such as reduced inequality and improved enforcement, harmonizing regulatory delivery to transform systemic disparities into opportunities for equitable collaboration.⁷³

61. The Pact for the Future offers a chance for the new multilateralism. Addressing the General Assembly, the Foreign Secretary of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland underscored its perspectives, admitting also the grievances of developing nations: “As I know all too well, countries of the global South suffered great injustices in the past. And I have heard repeatedly how frustrated partners are by the unfairness of the global system. We cannot ignore these frustrations. We must act.”

A. Multilateralism and democratic global governance

62. The Independent Expert recommends that:

- (a) The reform of the Security Council include permanent representation from India, Africa, Latin America and the Muslim world;
- (b) The launch of a second North-South Summit, with binding commitments from developed nations on cooperation, debt and climate finance, take place in the near future;
- (c) A United Nations global regulatory delivery index be created, led by the global South, to monitor real-world social and economic outcomes – not just formal compliance;
- (d) The World Trade Organization be reformed to democratize rule-making and enforcement, ensuring that trade rules promote developmental needs;
- (e) Plurilateral blocs (e.g. BRICS Plus, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and the African Continental Free Trade Area) be integrated into a multipolar United Nations framework;
- (f) Subsidy transparency be mandated and the gradual elimination of trade-distorting subsidies in the global North be pursued;
- (g) A development impact assessment be introduced for major trade policy shifts (e.g. tariffs), evaluating their effects on vulnerable economies;
- (h) Binding accountability for International Court of Justice and International Criminal Court decisions be reinforced and that access for developing nations to international legal remedies be expanded;

⁷³ The idea for a global regulatory delivery index was developed by George Kalpadakis, senior researcher at the Academy of Athens.

- (i) Extensive use be made of the Arrria formula informal Security Council meetings to include global South voices and non-governmental organizations in peace and rights discussions.

B. Global justice and redistribution

63. The Independent Expert recommends that:

- (a) The United Nations Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation be concluded to impose global minimum corporate tax rates and crack down on tax havens and illicit financial flows;
- (b) A multilateral sovereign debt resolution mechanism be established under United Nations auspices to enable fair and transparent debt restructuring;
- (c) Debt restructuring be linked with climate and development goals, rewarding investments in adaptation, green energy and education;
- (d) Interest rates on sovereign loans to low-income countries be capped and a shift to grant-based assistance be pursued where possible;
- (e) Binding guidelines be imposed on credit rating agencies, ensuring objective and development-sensitive assessments;
- (f) A global climate justice fund be created, funded by progressive carbon taxes in high-income nations, to support adaptation and loss-and-damage compensation in the least developed countries;
- (g) Additional financing be ensured through the issuance of special drawing rights by the International Monetary Fund;
- (h) Climate finance be made additional to existing official development assistance commitments to avoid crowding out other priorities;
- (i) Land-grabbing practices by foreign investors be banned and the free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous and rural communities be enforced;
- (j) Due diligence on environmental and labour issues be mandated for multinational corporations;
- (k) Green industrial policy in the global South be promoted with technology access, infrastructure investment and concessional finance;
- (l) Local adaptation strategies be supported with global climate finance that is needs-based and community-led;
- (m) Agroecological practices and food sovereignty be incentivized to reduce dependence on volatile commodity markets;
- (n) Feminist and Indigenous leadership in climate decision-making be advanced.

C. Digital equity

64. The Independent Expert recommends that:

- (a) A global digital solidarity initiative be launched, focusing on low-cost connectivity, local language content creation and digital literacy training;
- (b) Artificial intelligence be regulated as an international public good;
- (c) Intellectual property regimes be reformed to allow for waivers or/and flexible licensing of essential digital, climate and health technologies in low-income countries;
- (d) The development of regional research centres in Africa, Latin America and Asia focused on applied technology for development be supported;

(e) Technology transfer clauses be mandated in trade and investment agreements;

(f) Anti-monopoly regulations be expanded globally, especially in sectors such as big tech, agribusiness and pharmaceuticals.
