



Academic Paper

The Problem of Managing International Relations in the Contemporary International System



Prof. Dr. Walid 'Abd al-Hay

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The Problem of Managing International Relations in the Contemporary International System

Prof. Dr. Walid Abd al-Hay¹

Introduction

Three concepts are being circulated in the literature of international relations, whose meaning and uses must be controlled, and by understanding their intra-relationship, international action can be addressed.



First: The Concept of the International System

International relations literature uses sub-concepts related to the “international”² system, they are:³

- ▶ **1. International Regime:** It is the customs and legal boundaries within which the units of the system operate and interact, as they represent the “constitution of international relations.”
- ▶ **2. International Order:** It is the position of the state in the hierarchy of the international system; is it a super or major power, a regional center, a small country, or a mini-state, and accordingly the state’s position on the international scale of power is determined.
- ▶ **3. International System:** This concept is primarily concerned with the interaction of actors, based on the number of central powers in the international system. It may be unipolar, bipolar, a balance of power system, multipolar or nonpolar, with Richard Haass being the most famous theorist on the nonpolarity issue. Then the question would be, is this system dominated by peaceful or military interaction.⁴
- ▶ **4. International Structure:**⁵ It includes all of the above rules regulating international relations, the hierarchy of powers and their interactions. Accordingly, the structural change of the international system means radical change in the rules of interaction among the units of the international system, or a change in the position of the state on the scale of power or a general change in the interaction between peace and war.



Second: The Concept of Zero- and Non-Zero-Sum Perspective

Based on the interests of the international community, the network of international relations is characterized by three types:

- ▶ 1. Conflicting interests; where the parties do not meet at any level of consensus.
- ▶ 2. Common interests; which are beneficial to both parties.
- ▶ 3. Mixed interests; those which combine contradictions in certain aspects, and harmony in others.



The management of this network of interests is evaluated on two bases:⁶

- ▶ 1. The zero-sum game: It means that what one side gains is an equal loss to the other side. For example, every Jewish immigrant to Palestine is a direct loss to the Palestinian side. Thus, the equation is +1 for one side and -1 for the other, so the result is zero.
- ▶ 2. The non-zero-sum game: It is based on how to reconcile the contradiction in certain interests with the harmony in common interests. For example, China has conflicting interests with the US in Taiwan, but they have common interests of being the first business partner.

Third: Managing Relations in the Contemporary International System

The units of the contemporary international system are the territorial or national state, then supra-state units (such as international governmental and non-governmental organizations, multinational corporations, or cross-border political organizations (whether armed or unarmed), and finally sub-state units (such as minorities, sub-cultures and local armed groups). The relationship and the overlap between the units of this huge network might be partially responsible for the difficulty of managing international relations, given the huge number of parties having conflicting or common interests. This requires the establishment of research bodies that would set scientific models for dealing with this overlap and the interdependence of interests,



values, natural environment and cognitive methods. To be aware of this overlap and its complexities, it is sufficient to identify some indicators:

1. Managing Relations in Light of Interdependence and the Common and Overlapping Interests

Globalization is manifested in the growth of political, social, economic and technical interdependence among the units of the international community, which makes drawing the boundaries of common and conflicting interests very complicated, especially since this interdependence is increasing in a clear and accelerating manner. Here, it is necessary to consider the following indicators for the year 2021:⁷

- a. The number of countries involved in globalization has increased as clearly shown in the table below. In 1970, the number of countries that scored more than 60 points on the globalization index was 14, while the number increased to 98 countries in 2021.

Table 1: Number of Countries by Globalization Index Score⁸

Year	Globalization index score			
	<40	40 – <60	60 – <80	80 – 90
1970	116	63	14	0
2021	11	84	66	32

- b. The size of interdependence of interests, i.e., the average globalization score of all countries in all the central political, economic and social globalization indicators and sub-indicators. Available data indicate the following:
 - The correlation rate in 1970 was 38.47 points, and it became 62.23 points, which means an increase in the annual globalization rate by more than one point.
 - The number of bank mergers increased from 247 in 1985 to 1,316 in 2020.
 - The volume of international trade in 2021 reached \$28.5 trillion. Global exports, which accounted for 13.30% of global GDP in 1985, rose to 29.49% in 2020, more than the double.
 - Around 80% of trade agreements concluded among world countries since 230 BC until now took place during the past 30 years.



- There are 338 major American companies currently operating in China, of which 90 companies sell all their production in China. In return, there are 2,400 companies in the US controlled by Chinese capital.



- 19% of the US debt is Chinese at \$1.17 trillion, and 2.6 million American employees work in companies that produce their goods to cover the need of the Chinese market.
- There are 4.65 billion people around the world connected to the Internet.
- There are about 60 thousand multinational companies, with about half a million branches, and controlling around half of the world's trade, including trade among the branches of these companies.
- The value of the activities of private security companies operating at the global level increased from \$78 billion in 2011 to \$132 billion in 2020.



Accordingly, this interdependence will increase the overlap of common interests, thus making international relations proceed at an accelerating pace towards the non-zero-sum perspective. Hence, the management of international relations will be more complex in terms of calculating losses and profits or the method of calculation. Also, the application of the cross-impact matrix in international relations becomes necessary for every country seeking to identify the changes that have the most negative or positive impact on its international relations, and for drawing up its strategies based on the outcome of the matrix.⁹

2. Managing Relations in Light of the Complexities of the Current International Scene

The current international scene can be described as one in which the central powers seek “to ward off evil more than to bring about gain,” which is evident in the following:

- ▶ a. There is an empire which has disintegrated and wants to prevent disintegration from penetrating into its heart; this is the Soviet Union after its transformation into the Russian Federation.¹⁰
- ▶ b. There is a second empire, whose position on the international scale of power is deteriorating, and is seeking to stop or slow this decline; this is the US.¹¹



- c. There is a country that invokes its nationalism to build an economic rather than a political empire and to achieve “peaceful development or peaceful rise”; this is China.¹²
- d. There is a great neo-mercantilist state that does not have the ambitions of the international pole and is content with its new mercantilism; this is Japan.¹³
- e. There is a region that is confused; on one hand, it has its political history and ethnic and sectarian diversity, on the other hand, it tends to complete its integration and post-functional integration, and at the same time, it seeks autonomy, which is interrupted by the pressures of the polar forces; this is Europe.¹⁴
- f. As for the remaining regions, these live between their conflict and social fragmentation on the one hand, and their inability to adapt to the accelerating technical, economic and social interdependence in light of globalization on the other hand.¹⁵
- g. Overlap and mutual influence between each of the previous dimensions, which is described by the cross-impact matrix.



3. Managing Relations in Light of the Problem of Power Measurement

International relations scholars have discussed various models of the international system, but most of them were more concerned with the behavior of polar states than with measuring the bases for determining the nature of the polar system. Kaplan Morton discussed six models of the international system and focused



on the coherence of the structure of the system; loose, tight, balance of power, etc. George Modelski linked the international system with the dominant mode of production; agricultural or industrial, etc. For his part, David Singer developed an equation that measures power concentration in a particular international system to determine the structure of the polar system based on this equation, which is:¹⁶



$$\text{Concentration}_t = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{i=1}^{N_t} (S_{it})^2 - \frac{1}{N_t}}{1 - \frac{1}{N_t}}}$$

t = the time at which the concentration of resources (i.e. power) is being calculated

i = the state of which the proportion of control over the system's power is being measured

N_t = the number of states in the great power system at time t

S = the proportion of power possessed. Hence, S_{it} = the proportion of power possessed by state i at time t .

The expression $\sum_{i=1}^n (S_{it})^2$ represents the sum of the squares of the proportion of power possessed by all states in the great power system.

The closer the resulting concentration is to zero, the more evenly divided power is. The closer to 1, the more concentrated power is. There is a general but not strict correlation between concentration and polarity. It is rare to find a result over 0.5, but a result between 0.4 and 0.5 usually indicates a unipolar system, while a result between 0.2 and 0.4 usually indicated a bipolar or multipolar system. Concentration can be plotted over time, so that the fluctuations and trends in concentration can be observed.

Such a formula means there is need for continuous measurement to observe fluctuations and trends in power concentration rates and thus determine polarity in the international system.

The other aspect worth of attention is the role of the middle or nonpolar powers in determining the polar structure of the international system, which was studied by Edward Mansfield in his article, "Concentration, Polarity and Distribution of Power."¹⁷ Chinese scholar Yang Jiemian believes that the shift from a certain polar system to another is achieved by economic rather than military factors, which is what he considers the basis of his theory that the world is moving towards multipolarity. He believes that the 2008 economic crisis constituted a turning point in the international system and produced what he called the four groups: the first is those benefitting from the crisis which is China and the countries defending the status quo; the second are the US and the ones weakened by the crisis; the third is most of the developing countries and the fourth is the losing ones, which are the European Union, Russia and Japan. All of this has restructured the international system towards multipolarity, according to the Chinese perspective.¹⁸



The other aspect regarding polarity is the transitional stages between one polar system and another. Here, several questions arise that deal with the length of the transitional period, its characteristics and the determination of the forces of decline and forces of ascent, and whether the indicators of rise and decline remain the same at all historical stages.¹⁹

A final aspect is when the unit of analysis of the futures study is change, then the pace of change (acceleration) determines the results of the race between international forces. It is noted here that the interval between each technological invention and the

next one is shrinking, as well as the period between the invention and its transformation into a traded commodity. For example, China laid out in 2015 the Made in China plan to spend \$1.68 trillion in the field of artificial intelligence in 2025 to achieve dominance in this sector by 2030. The result will be that the GDP by Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) in 2030 will be in “trillion dollars” as follows:

- China: \$64.2 trillion
- India: \$46.3 trillion
- America: \$31 trillion

Taking a sample of 10% of the highest-cited journals to measure the competition in artificial intelligence, has showed that 26.5% of citations were from studies by Chinese scholars and 29% of them were from American scholars’ studies. This is while noting that the US share has been declining since 2011, while the Chinese one has been increasing since 2009, which means that China will prevail by 2026.²⁰

4. Identifying Mega-Trends in the Management of International Relations

Despite the detailed differences among researchers in defining the mega-trend, the components of these definitions indicate that it is a pivotal tendency in a particular phenomenon to change negatively or positively over time. If this tendency extends from the narrow level of the phenomenon to the broader level globally, we will be facing a mega-trend. There is no guarantee for a trend observed in the past to continue into the future.²¹

The mega-trends in international relations that are most agreed upon among researchers can be summarized in the following:²²

- **a. The global shift in economic power:** The most prominent of these shifts is the class shift, as the global middle class constituted 27% in 2009 but tends to be about 60% in 2030, according to available estimates.

As for debt at the global level, estimates indicate that the size of debt to GDP in 2035 will be 133% in Europe, 213% in the US and 385% in Japan.

Most studies indicate that 25% of global GDP will be in India and China in 2030. Asian progress is evident in the development of Asia’s share of global GDP from 20% in 2010 to 28% in 2017, while being expected to reach 35% in 2030.

- **b. Change in the population pyramid:** The demographic pyramid in the world indicates that 8% of the world’s population is over 65 years old, and this percentage is projected to



rise in 2030 to 13% because of the declining number of births. Around 35% of the world's population in 2030 will be in China and India only.

- **c. Overcrowding in cities:** In 2013, 50% of the world's population lived in cities, but the percentage will rise to 60% in 2030 while 80% of the increase in urban congestion in cities will be in two continents: Africa and Asia.



- **d. Acceleration of technological development:** Most researchers agree that technology in its broad sense represents the central variable in contemporary international life. The recent developments in artificial intelligence, Internet, mobile phones and computers will continue to have a profound impact on the political, social and economic structures and within a short period up to 25 years, which is the average of the logistic curve. This is so while the time difference between animal domestication for transport and the invention of the wheel took centuries.



- **e. Climate change:** Specialized studies reveal that an increase in temperature with the year 2050 by 2 degrees will need from \$70 to \$100 billion annually for adaptation and will cause the displacement of about 240 million people.
- **f. Scarcity of resources:** The world is living in a state of depletion of its natural resources. For example, the difference between supply and demand for water will be about 40% in 2030, and the demand for various energy resources will increase at 40% compared to the present time, due to the increase in population, economic growth and technological development, which may result in the depletion of many raw materials.



Determining the Repercussions of Interdependence and Mega-Trends on the International Community

The interdependence of societies due to globalization and mega-trends in international life has led to several repercussions, most notably:

1. The Decline of Interstate Wars and the Continuation of Intrastate Wars

Table 2: The Percentage of Interstate and Intrastate Wars 1945-2020²³

Year	1950	1970	1990	2010	2020
Intrastate Wars	3.9	8.3	16	7.9	7.5
Interstate Wars	3.7	3.3	1.5	0.5	0.3

Quantitative studies of international conflicts “wars” indicate that, from 1946 to 2020, there were 285 military conflicts including 122 intrastate wars, 35 interstate wars, 45 wars against an external organization and 83 interstate wars that turned into an international war. What matters in these indicators is that:

- ▶ a. Wars against an organization outside the country’s borders are decreasing.
- ▶ b. Wars between two states are decreasing.
- ▶ c. Wars of external international intervention are slowly increasing.
- ▶ d. Intrastate wars are increasing in the general trend.

International relations literature indicates that the inability to adapt to rapid changes has led to an increase in intrastate wars, while the acceleration of globalization in a way that transformed international relations from zero to non-zero relations has made interdependence a factor in reducing the number of interstate wars.



2. Increasing the Economic Sanctions and International Guarantees Policies²⁴

During the period 1914–2012, i.e., for about 98 years, the economic sanctions policy was applied to change political regimes 165 times. In 40 cases it succeeded, about 24.3%.

The US participated with other countries in 115 cases of economic sanctions, succeeding in 26 cases, i.e., 22.4%. The US alone imposed economic sanctions in 50, succeeding in 14 cases, i.e., 28%. This means that chances of success increase by around 5.5% when the US pursues the measure alone. However, the most important indicator in this context is monitoring the historical trend of success, which shows a linear decline. If we divide the entire period, we find that in 1914–1945 the success rate of economic sanctions was higher than in the second period 1945–1969. Success rate continued to deteriorate in the third period 1970–1989 and in the fourth 1990–2012. This means that the success rate of economic sanctions in overthrowing regimes is declining, which is something I believe to be caused mainly, but not solely, by globalization that has made it extremely difficult, or perhaps impossible, to control the mechanisms of sanctions.

Another phenomenon that has significance in the same context is international guarantees given by a major country to a smaller one to protect it from other powers, especially the major ones.

Monitoring shows that the history of this phenomenon - international protection - is also no more tempting to rely on than the policies of economic blockade. During the period 1815-2014, i.e., in around two centuries, the major countries gave 116 international guarantees, whether individually or jointly, where only 20 of which, or 18%, were implemented.



Future Scene

In a study published in November 2020, we compared the US power with the Chinese one to determine the pattern of polarity prevailing in the current international system.²⁵ In this study, however, we added the Russian Federation to determine whether the structure of the international system is pluralistic or not. We also added four variables to the measurement



variables bringing the total of the comparison variables to 24 instead of 20. Then, we calculated the distribution of global power for the great powers based on the above Singer equation. The study covers the period 2018–Early 2021(see table 3). as shown in the table below.

**Table 3: Power Indicators in International Relations 2018–2020
for China, the US and Russia, and Measuring Power Difference Among Them
Based on International Measurement Indicators²⁶**

	Indicator		China	US	Russia	Comparison
1	GDP	Nominal	13.4 trillion	20.49 trillion	1.7	+2 (US)
		PPP	27.31 trillion	21.44 trillion	4.32	+1 (China)
2	Gini index		38.5	41.1	37.5	+1 (China) +2 (Russia)
3	Military spending (% of GDP)		%1.9	%3.4	4.5	+3 (US) +1 (Russia)
4	Scientific research spending		\$553.4 billion	\$511.1 billion	38.5	+1 (China)
5	Democracy		2.26	7.96	3.24	+3 (US)
6	Globalization		65.11	82.41	72.03	+1 (US) +1 (Russia)
7	Political stability		-0.24	-0.30	-0.73	-
8	Foreign trade		\$4,6 trillion	\$4.3 trillion	606 billion	+1 (China)
9	Trade balance deficit		+ \$359,3 billion	- \$946.1 billion	+ \$91.8 billion	+3 (China) +2 (Russia)
10	Global Militarization Index (GMI)		550	683	883	+1 (China) +1 (US)
11	Debt to GDP ratio		55.36%	106.70%	32%	+2 (China) +3 (Russia)
12	Crime rate (per 100 thousand)		31.18	47,7	30.14	+2 (Russia)
13	Number of universities ranked among the world's top 100		6	26	0	+3 (US)



	Indicator	China	US	Russia	Comparison
14	Firepower (military strength, military spending, market and geographic potential)	0.0511	0.0435	0.0501	+1 (US) +1 (Russia)
15	Foreign aid	\$38 billion	\$34.62 billion	1.14 billion	+1 (China) +1 (US)
16	Favorability by international public opinion of the country as a global leader	32%	33%	30	+1 (US)
17	Number of major companies ranked among the world's top 30	10	14	0	+1 (US)
18	Number of vetoes at UN Security Council since 2000	12	14	27	+1 (China)
19	Overseas military bases	4	55	8	+3 (US)
20	International organization membership	74	77	48	+1 (US)
21	Population	1.439 billion	331 million	146 million	+2 (China)
22	Area	9.388 million km ²	9.147 million km ²	16.367 million km ²	+3 (Russia)
23	Number of patents	1,441,086	496.123	3238	+2 (China)
24	Pace of change in GDP 2000-2020	6 times	2 times	0.7 times	+3 (China)
	Supremacy points for each side				US: 37.40 China: 34.50 Russia: 28.10

The previous table reveals a stable trend in international relations towards a multipolar international system, which makes the diplomatic realm more open to medium and small countries.



Conclusion and recommendations

The results of this analysis can be summarized as follows:

- ▶ 1. The extreme complexity in international relations requires from specialized think tanks to address more how the international community would act in a situation of non-zero-sum perspective rather than a zero-sum one, and where organic links grow at the expense of mechanical ones.
- ▶ 2. The increasing acceleration, the pressure of mega-trends in the international environment and their mutual impact require the development of a forward-looking culture to help find adaptation mechanisms before the occurrence of the future shock, in the words of Alvin Toffler.
- ▶ 3. The Asian shift towards a broader role in international relations is likely, given the growing international standing of this region. This would require from the Arab countries to strengthen their relations with the rising Asian powers, an issue we have addressed in a previous study.²⁷
- ▶ 4. The growing organic ties of Israel will make it less able to maintain its mechanical ties. Thus, the core of its Zionist ideology, which is based on the temptation of historical models, will be dismantled.
- ▶ 5. The policies of the major powers in the coming stage will be more defensive than offensive, and it is an opportunity for the middle powers to reap benefits by investing in multipolarity.
- ▶ 6. The shift in international relations from the billiard ball model to the cobweb model means a steady increase in the influence of external factors in policy-making at the expense of the weight of internal factors.²⁸ This makes medium and small countries more fragile and vulnerable to turmoil, which is gradually pushing towards building regional or even cross-border blocs, an issue the Arab political systems have not yet realized.



Endnotes

- ¹ An expert in futures studies, a former professor in the Department of Political Science at Yarmouk University in Jordan and a holder of Ph.D. in Political Science from Cairo University. He is also a former member of the Board of Trustees of Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan, Irbid National University, the National Center for Human Rights, the Board of Grievances and the Supreme Council of Media. He has authored 37 books, most of which are focused on future studies in both theoretical and practical terms, and published 120 research papers in peer-reviewed academic journals.
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