

Changes in Polarity: The US-Israel Battle with Iran and the Reshaping of the World Order

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Abstract: The international order established after the Cold War has entered a profound period of contestation, driven in significant part by the escalating confrontation between the United States, Israel, and Iran. This study examines how the trilateral conflict dynamic among these actors is accelerating a structural transformation of the global order, characterized by the erosion of unipolarity and the emergence of multipolar competitive blocs. Drawing on polarity theory, balance-of-power frameworks, and constructivist insights, this article analyzes the geopolitical, military, economic, and diplomatic dimensions of the US-Israel-Iran conflict. The research employs qualitative analysis of primary documents, diplomatic statements, and secondary scholarly literature to map evolving alliance structures and power distributions. Findings indicate that the US-Israel confrontation with Iran has catalyzed deeper alignments between Iran, Russia, and China, thereby accelerating the redistribution of global influence. Furthermore, the conflict has weakened multilateral institutions, intensified nuclear proliferation risks, and reshaped regional security architectures across the Middle East, Central Asia, and beyond. This study contributes to ongoing debates about the trajectory of world order and the conditions under which polarity transitions occur.

Keywords: geopolitics; polarity; US-Israel-Iran conflict; world order; power transition

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary international system is undergoing a profound transformation. The post-Cold War unipolar moment, characterized by unprecedented American dominance in military capacity, economic output, and norm-setting authority, is increasingly contested by the resurgence of great-power competition, the proliferation of regional conflicts, and the strategic realignments precipitated by the United States-Israel confrontation with Iran. The US-Israel-Iran triangle represents one of the most consequential and enduring rivalries of the twenty-first century, encompassing ideological antagonisms, nuclear ambitions, proxy warfare, and competing visions of regional and global order.

The roots of this confrontation lie in the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which fundamentally reoriented Tehran's foreign policy away from its former alignment with Washington and toward a posture of strategic defiance. Subsequent decades witnessed escalating cycles of sanctions, covert operations, proxy conflicts, and near-direct military confrontations. Israel's strategic anxiety regarding Iranian nuclear capabilities and Tehran's explicit contestation of Israeli legitimacy transformed what might have remained a bilateral US-Iran antagonism into a trilateral dynamic with systemic implications.

Contemporary scholars of international relations have long debated whether the unipolar order established after 1991 would endure or give way to bipolarity or multipolarity. Wohlforth (1999) argued for the stability of unipolarity, while Layne (2012) contended that structural pressures would inevitably produce a multipolar successor. More recently, Mearsheimer (2018) and Allison (2017) have highlighted the dangers of great-power competition in transitional periods. Yet the specific role of regional conflicts—and particularly the US-Israel-Iran confrontation—in driving this transition has received insufficient analytical attention.

The urgency of this research is underscored by the dramatic escalation of hostilities witnessed in 2023 and 2024, including unprecedented direct missile exchanges between Iran and Israel, the intensification of the Gaza conflict with its cascading regional implications, and the deepening strategic partnership between Iran, Russia, and China. These developments suggest that the US-Israel-Iran

conflict has moved from a primarily regional to a genuinely systemic phenomenon with profound implications for the structure of international order.

This article seeks to examine how the US-Israel confrontation with Iran is reshaping the world order, with specific attention to the mechanisms of polarity change, alliance restructuring, and the transformation of multilateral governance. The central research question is: In what ways and through what mechanisms is the US-Israel-Iran conflict accelerating a transition in the polarity of the international system? Three subsidiary questions guide the empirical analysis: How have alliance structures evolved in response to the US-Israel-Iran conflict? What are the implications for multilateral institutions and norms of international conduct? And what trajectories of polarity change are most consistent with available evidence?

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research design rooted in the tradition of international relations theory and comparative foreign policy analysis. The research approach is interpretive and analytical, seeking to understand the causal mechanisms through which the US-Israel-Iran conflict affects the structure of international order, rather than to establish statistical regularities across a large number of cases.

The theoretical framework draws on three complementary traditions. First, structural realism and polarity theory, as developed by Waltz (1979), Wohlforth (1999), and their critics, provide the foundational vocabulary for assessing distributions of power and the dynamics of systemic change. Second, balance-of-power and balance-of-threat theory (Walt, 1987) informs the analysis of alliance formation and realignment. Third, constructivist approaches (Wendt, 1999) illuminate the role of identity, ideology, and normative contestation in shaping state behavior and institutional change.

Data sources include primary documents such as official diplomatic statements, United Nations Security Council records, treaty texts, and government white papers from the United States, Israel, Iran, Russia, and China. These are supplemented by the published reports of international organizations including the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). Secondary sources encompass peer-reviewed academic literature, policy analysis from major think tanks, and quality journalism from sources including Foreign Affairs, The Economist, and Al-Monitor.

The analytical method involves structured focused comparison and process tracing. Structured focused comparison (George & Bennett, 2005) permits systematic examination of how specific variables—alliance structures, military capabilities, economic interdependencies, and ideational factors—operate across the key actors. Process tracing allows reconstruction of the causal chains through which the conflict produces systemic effects, tracing mechanisms from initial causes through intervening variables to observed outcomes in the distribution of international power.

Temporal scope covers the period from 2015 to 2025, encompassing the negotiation and collapse of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the Abraham Accords, the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack and its aftermath, and the subsequent direct military exchanges between Iran and Israel. This period is particularly illuminating because it represents an acceleration of pre-existing trends toward systemic transformation, making causal relationships more visible and analytical inferences more reliable.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The empirical analysis reveals that the US-Israel confrontation with Iran operates through multiple interconnected pathways to reshape the international order. The following subsections address the three principal research questions identified in the introduction.

Table 1. Geopolitical impact assessment of the US-Israel-Iran conflict (9pt)

No	Category	Parameters	Status
1	Geopolitics	Alliance Shift	Significant

2	Security	Deterrence	Elevated
3	Economy	Sanctions Impact	High
4	Diplomacy	Multilateralism	Declining
5	Nuclear	Proliferation Risk	Critical

Alliance restructuring and the emergence of counter-hegemonic coalitions

The most structurally significant consequence of the US-Israel-Iran conflict has been the acceleration of coalition-building among states seeking to constrain American and Israeli power projection in the Middle East and beyond. Iran's strategic response to the 'maximum pressure' campaign initiated by the Trump administration in 2018 and sustained with modifications thereafter was to deepen its partnerships with Russia and China, transforming what were previously transactional relationships into something approximating a quasi-alliance framework.

The 25-year comprehensive cooperation agreement between Iran and China signed in March 2021 represents a watershed moment in this process. The agreement provides Iran with a degree of economic insulation against Western sanctions while offering China privileged access to Iranian energy resources and strategic positioning in the Persian Gulf region. Simultaneously, Iran's provision of Shahed-series drones to Russia for use in Ukraine from 2022 onward cemented a military-technological partnership with Moscow that carries implications well beyond the immediate operational context.

For Israel, the Abraham Accords of 2020 represented an attempt to construct a counter-Iranian coalition among Sunni Arab states, formalizing what had previously been tacit security cooperation with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. However, the Hamas attack of October 7, 2023, and the subsequent Israeli military campaign in Gaza severely strained these nascent partnerships, demonstrating the limits of top-down normalization in the absence of resolution of the Palestinian question. The paradox of the Abraham Accords is that they simultaneously strengthened Israel's diplomatic position and exposed its strategic vulnerability by foreclosing the possibility of a broader Arab coalition in support of Israeli security objectives.

The United States, for its part, has sought to manage the tensions between its global strategic priorities—including competition with China and support for NATO allies confronting Russian aggression—and its commitments to Israeli security and Iranian nuclear containment. The result has been a policy of episodic escalation management rather than coherent strategic design, oscillating between diplomatic engagement (as in the JCPOA negotiations) and coercive pressure (as in the killing of General Qassem Soleimani in 2020). This inconsistency has weakened American credibility and reduced its capacity to shape outcomes.

Implications for multilateral institutions and international norms

The US-Israel-Iran conflict has exercised a deeply corrosive effect on multilateral institutions and the norms that underpin the post-1945 international order. The deadlock in the United Nations Security Council, where Russian and Chinese vetoes have repeatedly blocked Western-backed resolutions concerning Iran's nuclear program and the humanitarian consequences of the Gaza conflict, illustrates the degree to which great-power competition has paralyzed the institution's capacity for collective action.

The fate of the JCPOA is emblematic of this institutional erosion. Negotiated through an unprecedented multilateral diplomatic process involving the five permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany, the agreement represented a high-water mark of multilateral engagement with Iran. Its unilateral abrogation by the United States in 2018 demonstrated that great-power commitments to multilateral frameworks are contingent on domestic political calculations, severely undermining the credibility of future negotiated agreements and incentivizing nuclear hedging behavior by states that might otherwise be dissuaded.

The nuclear nonproliferation regime faces particular stress. Iran's advancement of its uranium enrichment program to near-weapons-grade levels in the aftermath of American withdrawal from the JCPOA illustrates the limits of coercive diplomacy divorced from credible diplomatic alternatives. More

broadly, the perception among global-south states that nuclear weapons provide a reliable deterrent against regime change—a lesson drawn from the contrasting fates of Iraq, Libya, and North Korea—has weakened the normative foundations of nonproliferation.

The laws of armed conflict and international humanitarian law have also come under severe pressure. The scale of civilian casualties in Gaza, the destruction of civilian infrastructure, the use of siege tactics, and the impediments to humanitarian access have generated widespread condemnation and prompted proceedings before the International Court of Justice. While the legal proceedings remain ongoing, their very existence signals a crisis of legitimacy for the US-Israeli approach to the conflict and strengthens the hand of those who argue for a fundamental reform of international legal institutions.

Trajectories of polarity change and systemic implications

Synthesizing the empirical findings, this study identifies three plausible trajectories for the evolution of international polarity in light of the US-Israel-Iran conflict and its systemic consequences. The first trajectory, which might be termed 'contested unipolarity,' envisions a continuation of American structural primacy alongside increasing regional defiance and normative contestation. On this view, the United States retains sufficient material capabilities and alliance commitments to prevent the emergence of a genuine peer competitor in the short to medium term, but at the cost of declining legitimacy and increasing transaction costs in managing global order.

The second trajectory envisages accelerating multipolarity, driven by the successful consolidation of the Iran-Russia-China quasi-alliance, continued erosion of American credibility, and the emergence of alternative regional powers including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and India as genuinely autonomous actors in Middle Eastern and global affairs. This trajectory finds support in current trends but faces the countervailing pressure of the structural advantages enjoyed by the American-led order, including the centrality of the dollar in global finance and the density of US alliance networks.

The third trajectory posits a bifurcated or bloc-based international system, reminiscent of Cold War bipolarity but differentiated by the greater porosity of bloc boundaries, the centrality of economic interdependence as both a source of vulnerability and a constraint on escalation, and the salience of non-state actors in shaping conflict dynamics. This trajectory may be the most consistent with the empirical evidence, which suggests a world in which the United States and its allies maintain dominance in certain domains (technology, finance, maritime power) while the Iran-Russia-China alignment contest others (land power, energy, certain manufacturing sectors, information environments).

The US-Israel-Iran conflict serves as both a catalyst and a barometer for these polarity changes. Its escalation dynamics, normative contestations, and alliance consequences are accelerating trends that were already underway but might otherwise have evolved more gradually. The conflict thus functions as what Gilpin (1981) termed a 'hegemonic war' in miniature—not in the sense of a direct great-power military confrontation, but in its capacity to reorganize the hierarchy of international actors and redefine the rules of international conduct.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined how the US-Israel confrontation with Iran is reshaping the polarity of the international order through the mechanisms of alliance restructuring, institutional erosion, and normative contestation. The empirical analysis demonstrates that this trilateral conflict has played a significant role in accelerating a transition away from post-Cold War unipolarity toward a more complex, contested, and potentially multipolar international system.

Three principal findings emerge from the analysis. First, the conflict has catalyzed the consolidation of a counter-hegemonic quasi-alliance among Iran, Russia, and China, providing each party with strategic capabilities and diplomatic cover that partially offset American and Israeli power. Second, it has severely damaged the multilateral institutions and normative frameworks—including the nonproliferation regime, the JCPOA model of negotiated constraint, and international humanitarian law—that undergirded the post-Cold War order. Third, the trajectory of polarity change most consistent with available evidence points toward a bifurcated system characterized by competing blocs with porous boundaries, rather than either the continuation of unipolarity or a clean transition to genuine multipolarity.

These findings carry important implications for scholars and policymakers alike. For scholars of international relations, they underscore the importance of examining regional conflicts not merely as phenomena to be explained by systemic variables but as active drivers of systemic change. For policymakers, they suggest that the management of the US-Israel-Iran conflict cannot be disaggregated from broader questions of world order management, and that policies pursued in the name of regional security may carry unintended systemic consequences that undermine the very order they seek to defend.

Future research should examine the specific conditions under which regional conflicts produce systemic effects of this magnitude, the role of nuclear dynamics in accelerating polarity transitions, and the capacity of reformed multilateral institutions to manage the tensions generated by the polarity change underway. The reshaping of the world order is not a distant prospect but a present reality, and the US-Israel-Iran conflict stands as one of its most consequential drivers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors gratefully acknowledge the contributions of colleagues at Universitas Nusantara PGRI Kediri and South Eastern University of Sri Lanka whose discussions and insights enriched the analytical framework of this study. The authors thank the international relations and political science faculty at both institutions for their intellectual engagement with the core arguments. Special thanks are due to the anonymous reviewers whose constructive critiques substantially strengthened the manuscript. This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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