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Multinodality and Middle Power Adaptation in a Post-Unipolar World
An Emerging Model for a Fragmenting World Order

Sami Shirazi

University of California Los Angeles

The Department of Political Science

Honors Program

Faculty Advisor: Professor Michael Chwe

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Abstract

Multinodality and Middle Power Adaptation in a Post-Unipolar World

An Emerging Framework in a Shifting World Order

This thesis develops a formal theory categorizing the shift of middle power behavior away from traditional great power alliance blocs to a ‘multinodal’ framework. The research conducted illustrates that the transition from the decaying rules-based order to the current anarchic system has forced middle power states to seek relevance and autonomy through a layered network of relationships rather than universal institutions or classic alliance building. Drawing on former Ambassador Chas W. Freeman’s expertise on international relations and foreign policy through interviews, the research classifies multinodal behavior through analysis of nine contemporary middle powers of international standing within political, economic, and military domains. Key findings reveal that middle power international relations can no longer be explained in terms of power blocs or even bilateral alliances, but rather by transactional pragmatism across different spheres of engagement. This framework provides policy-relevant insights for strengthening governance in a fragmented international system.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney shocked the world in January 2026 when he stood before the World Economic Forum in Davos and unequivocally declared the rules-based international order dead. Carney urged the assembled heads of state and business leaders, "Call it what it is: a system of intensifying great power rivalry where the most powerful pursue their interests using economic integration as a weapon of coercion" (Gardels 2026). He warned that when middle powers negotiate bilaterally with a hegemon, they negotiate from weakness and accept what is offered. "This is not sovereignty," Carney argued, "It's the performance of sovereignty while accepting subordination" (Gardels 2026). He pressed the countries to stop competing for favor from great powers and instead combine to create a third path. "Middle powers must act together because if we're not at the table, we're on the menu" (Gardels 2026).

Both the content and the speaker caused a stir at Davos. Canada has ranked as a staunch, traditionally aligned Western middle power since the beginning of the last century. If its prime minister was driven to sound the alarm bell and publicly describe the existing order as a system of coercion, one can be certain that the pressures driving that assessment extend well beyond any single state's domestic politics. The speech described a breakdown of the world order, a "rupture with the past" (Gardels 2026). Addressing the aftermath of this rupture is the subject of this thesis.

However, even before Carney's moment at Davos, across the international system, there is evidence that middle powers have begun pursuing foreign policies that defy the logic of alliance blocs, spheres of influence, and conventional polarity frameworks. These alignments are rational responses to a system in which no single patron or bloc can provide for all of a state's needs, and where rigid alignment with one partner carries escalating opportunity costs.

The question this thesis poses is how to make analytical sense of this behavior. Traditional IR frameworks struggle with it, each better delineating dimensions of the bipolar order and subsequent unipolar order. Bipolarity refers to an international system dominated by two major powers (the Cold War era), and unipolarity refers to a system dominated by a single hegemon (the post-Cold War era). However, today these terms fail to explain our world, in which middle powers maintain contradictory engagements across political, economic, and military domains simultaneously, openly, and with evident strategic returns. In part, this may be because such a rupture in the world order hadn't happened before, so the frameworks need to be revised, or a new one needs to be defined. The world order evolved to this point, and therefore the analysis needs to evolve too.

This thesis delves into multinodality, a theoretical framework developed by Brantly Womack (2014; 2024; Womack et al. 2023). In a multinodal world, states have exit options in their foreign policy actions. They can shift alignments, hedge against dependencies, and develop associations with states facing similar uncertainties. The critical insight for this research is that multinodal behavior expresses itself differently across different strategic domains. A state's political alignments, economic partnerships, and security dependencies may each follow a different logic and point toward different partners. This thesis introduces a sphere-of-engagement methodology that disaggregates state behavior into three domains: the political and institutional sphere, the economic and trade sphere, and the military and security sphere. Each is evaluated independently. The analytical inquiry questions whether a state's relationships contradict each other within and across these spheres in ways that alliance logic cannot explain. The contradictions that result constitute an empirical marker of the multinodal turn.

This thesis explores nine middle powers spanning across North America, Europe and Asia. India, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates represent a variety of regimes and are active middle powers whose foreign policy behavior most visibly challenges existing frameworks. Canada, France and the United Kingdom serve as controls, probing whether the patterns observed among non-Western middle powers are mirrored by those whose traditional alliances and historical advantages gave them the most to gain from the unipolar order. The research draws on two interviews conducted with Ambassador Chas W. Freeman, Jr. in January and March 2026, on Freeman's published writings, on Womack's theoretical framework, and on secondary sources spanning academic literature, SIPRI arms transfer data, institutional reports, and journalism from the research period of April 2025 to April 2026.

The following chapters review the existing literature and identify the gap this thesis seeks to fill, present the methodology and the sphere-of-engagement analytical framework, and trace multinodal behavior through the political, economic, and military spheres, respectively. The final chapter synthesizes the findings across spheres, addresses the core tension between multinodal networks and great power spheres of influence, outlines the limits of the framework, and articulates current and future implications for international relations theory and practice.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundations

Three theories dominate the established international relations scholarship since the post-war period. They are liberal institutionalism, structural realism, and constructivism. And while they astutely capture many dimensions of the contemporary system, the post-hegemonic configuration has created conditions and behaviors from states that strain the limits of the theory's applicability.

Liberal institutionalism provided the most dominant account of international cooperation for much of the post-war period. This foundational scholarship, pioneered by Keohane (1984), argued that international institutions reduce transaction costs. The causal mechanism for such reduced transaction costs being the provision of information, and the many avenues for accountability that enable cooperation within such institutions. In this theory, even self-interested states had an incentive to participate. Ikenberry (2001) extended this logic to argue that the postwar liberal order reflected a symbiotic relationship between the unipolar hegemon and its subordinate states. The United States provided security and economic guarantees in exchange for institutional deference from allied and adversarial states alike. In theory, the framework could outlast the hegemon's willingness to enforce the order, but this was based on the assumption of a stable hierarchy with the hegemon entrenched at the center of the institutional structures (Ikenberry 2018).

The constructivist tradition, developed most influentially by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998), champions the role of norms and socialization in directing state posture. States under this theory are idealized. Internalizing rules and norms as the reason for compliance seems to attribute some sort of humanity or moral conscience to a nation's conduct. To their credit,

constructivist scholars look beyond outright coercion or material incentives explanations for compliance.

Structural realism posits that the preeminent feature defining the international system is its anarchic nature, and that the independent impact of institutions and norms on behavior is minimal, obfuscating the true catalyst: the distribution of raw power. Of the interrogated theories, structural realism is the most compatible with the perspective presented in this thesis, assigning the most causal significance to systemic pressures for material capabilities. When Waltz (1979) first formalized the logic, it was received as a useful corrective to liberal overreach but was largely overshadowed by the apparent stability of bipolar competition. Today that stability is absent making it much more clearly applicable, particularly in the contemporary variant articulated by Mearsheimer (2014). His ‘offensive realism’ goes beyond the incentive for survival through security and stresses active power maximization of hegemony. This dimension of the theory accurately describes the behaviors of great and small, and middle powers especially. It is no longer viable to remain stagnant—middle powers must seek to dominate and relentlessly optimize every foreign policy avenue available to them. Under Mearsheimer’s (2014) premise, states seek hegemony because only hegemony is truly secure, a useful explanation for the high-risk, aggressive behavior displayed by middle powers despite their undisputed sovereignty and improving conditions in the past decades. The clash between structural realism and middle power multinodality is over whether alignment must be exclusive to be effective. Realism embraces polarity bloc logic, overlooking the flexible, overlapping networks utilized by modern states to magnify power.

These three traditions created a complementary theoretical architecture adequate to the bipolar and unipolar eras. The proliferation of international organizations under American

sponsorship, the normative authority that those organizations exercised beyond their material enforcement capacity, and the alliance structures that organized security competition within and between blocs could all be convincingly explicated by these established theories. Each tradition, however, mistakenly assumed that the status quo configuration would persist. The fragmentation of universal institutions and their replacement by regional and minilateral alternatives has discredited the hegemonic commitment inextricably associated with liberal institutionalism. The framework's foundational assumption holds only when the hegemon remains committed to enforcement. In the absence of a viable hegemon, institutions have become venues for forum shopping rather than constraints on behavior (Alter and Meunier 2009; Morse and Keohane 2014). Constructivism necessitates ongoing normative socialization, which has been mangled beyond recognition; the last thing one hears in contemporary scholarly discourse is talk of cooperation based on shared values. Regarding structural realism, Waltz (1979, 163) himself cautioned that "complications accelerate as [poles] grow because of the difficulties everyone has in coping with the uncertain behavior of many others." Structural realism does not adequately recognize the potency of middle powers. It underestimates their ability to maintain productive relationships with competing great powers while building autonomous capabilities to escape the constraints of patron dependence. The limitations of each have become more apparent as the conditions that previously sustained their assumptions have eroded.

One attempt to address these limitations has emerged from the regime complexity literature, but it too falls short in crucial respects. Regime complexity theory, developed by Raustiala and Victor (2004) and elaborated by Alter and Meunier (2009), bridged some of these limitations by addressing how overlapping international institutions create opportunities for strategic exploitation of contradictions across parallel governance structures. Regime complexity

theory, however, does not lend much focus to the states navigating these institutional environments. It does not explain why particular states exploit those options more aggressively than others— why the same state might behave cooperatively in one institutional setting and competitively in another operating in the same strategic domain. Nor did they offer a conceptual theory for the systemic-level consequences of such behavior for the structure of international order itself.

2.2 Competing Descriptions of the Post-Hegemonic Order: Multipolarity, Multiplex, and Their Limits

Scholars agree that the unipolar moment has passed. They disagree about what has replaced it. The default label remains multipolarity. It has become the accepted vocabulary of diplomatic communiqués and policy analysis worldwide, being invoked regularly by Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, Emmanuel Macron, Narendra Modi, and other consequential world leaders. Multipolarity usefully signals the decline of American hegemony without implying a return to bipolarity. As a description of the system's actual structure, however, it fails in ways that matter for analysis.

The concept of the pole originates in physics, where it describes a point of concentrated force that attracts or repels objects along a two-dimensional axis. Applied to international relations, it implies that a small number of great powers generate gravitational fields that pull smaller states into alignment. During the Cold War, this metaphor mapped reasonably well onto observed behavior—states defined their foreign policy by which pole they gravitated toward, and political alignment, economic partnerships, and military arrangements tended to point in the same direction. In a configuration with many centers of power, however, the metaphor breaks

down. As Womack (2024) observes, multipolarity "suggests that there is a group of powerful actors while everyone else is merely a passive spectator." There is a wide range of relevant sectors in the current international system, which collectively contain dozens of consequential state and non-state actors. This renders the analytical capacity of a single pole incoherent. Such an idea implies consistent fields of attraction throughout all dimensions of engagement between states. Under multipolar logic, a state aligned with Washington politically should also be aligned economically and militarily. The contemporary system produces the opposite pattern. It is nothing out of the ordinary to see a state maintain diversified ties with great and middle powers despite a variety of incongruities. Complications arising from ideology, diverging interests, rivalries, and outright animosity among states no longer preclude cooperation—put simply, nothing is off-limits in a state's pursuit of self-interest. Multipolarity has no vocabulary for this behavior because the metaphor on which it rests does not permit a single actor to be attracted to multiple poles simultaneously.

Acharya (2017) recognized these limitations and proposed "multiplex" as an alternative. The term, borrowed from cinema, describes a world with multiple screens showing different features simultaneously. Acharya argued that the 21st century order is "politically and culturally diverse but economically and institutionally interlinked" in ways that make it fundamentally distinct from pre-World War II multipolarity (Acharya 2017, 271). The liberal order would persist but coexist and enmesh with competing ideas and institutions. Global governance would fragment, with new actors chipping away at existing structures while South-South linkages increasingly supplemented North-North ones. Acharya correctly identified the inadequacy of both liberal institutionalism and realist multipolarity as descriptions of the emerging order, and his call for scholars to "be open to new concepts and theories, and hence to new possibilities of

world order that have no precedent in history" (Acharya 2017) anticipated the theoretical need this thesis addresses. Multiplex captures institutional pluralism and the coexistence of competing governance architectures at the systemic level. Its limitation lies in its analytical structure rather than a misdescription. The multiplex metaphor describes how the system appears from the outside. It does not provide tools for rationalizing any particular state's foreign policy actions, nor does it attribute these actions to a larger, cohesive strategy. Which screens a state watches, which it ignores, and what it means when the same audience member watches contradictory features the same afternoon. Multiplex tells us that the international order contains plural, overlapping institutional spaces. It does not tell us how to observe, disaggregate, or compare the behavior of a specific state as it moves through those spaces across different strategic domains. The framework lacks a unit of analysis at the state level capable of capturing the simultaneous, contradictory engagements that define the behavior of middle powers in the contemporary era.

2.3 Womack's Multinodality: The Theoretical Basis

Womack (2014; 2024; Womack et al. 2023) developed the concept of multinodality to fill this analytical space, and the difference between his framework and the alternatives surveyed above lies in the conceptual architecture of the node itself. The node, in Womack's formulation, is fundamentally different from the pole. As mentioned, a pole is unitary and directional. A node is a connection point where relationships of diverse size and intensity originate, terminate, and intersect on differing vectors (Womack et al. 2023, 164). It operates in three dimensions rather than two. Each node is a cluster of relational activities rather than a unitary actor oriented toward a single relationship. As Qin Yaqing comments, "nodal interactions are not like Newtonian billiard balls or Leibnitzian monads, unitary actors colliding with one another but remaining

unaffected internally. Rather, they are clouds of activity themselves, and their connectivity shapes their identities and interests, analogous to atoms in quantum physics" (Womack et al. 2023, 164). The node, conceptually, accommodates what the pole cannot: a state that routes different dimensions of its foreign policy through different and contradictory channels, and whose very identity as an international actor is constituted by the particular configuration of relationships it maintains.

The multinodal global order, in Womack's account, is "an asymmetric matrix of located political communities interacting with one another and sometimes collectively" (Womack et al. 2023, 164). Power and location are important but not conclusive determinants of state options (Womack 2024). The United States can sanction Iran, for example, but Iran can develop its external relationships despite the United States. Relative power does not automatically prevail. The system is mostly horizontal, defined by ongoing interaction among autonomous actors, though it contains asymmetries that shape each participant's perceptions and options. The diplomatic calculus of each state prioritizes pursuing national interests and reducing uncertainty (Womack 2024). Reducing uncertainty requires stable relationships, which in turn require mutual respect for the autonomy of counterparts. Strategic partnerships become more appropriate than strategic alliances, because partnerships can be recalibrated as circumstances shift while alliances demand exclusive commitment that reduces the very flexibility a multinodal configuration rewards (Womack 2024). A world power that attempts to corral other states into exclusive relationships goes against their interests and isolates itself (Womack 2024).

Multinodality advances beyond multipolarity and multiplex in three respects. Where multipolarity counts great powers and assigns smaller states to their gravitational fields, multinodality recognizes that every state operates within a web of relationships shaped by its

unique position, capabilities, and history. Where multiplex describes institutional pluralism at the systemic level, multinodality provides a structure for analyzing how individual actors navigate that pluralism through differentiated engagement across domains. And where both multipolarity and multiplex treat the state as a unitary actor oriented in a single direction, multinodality, through the concept of the node, permits the analyst to observe a state's engagements as a cluster of activities that may point in contradictory directions simultaneously. Freeman captures this from the practitioner's perspective: "In the emerging, unfamiliar international system, countries interact and connect with each other in a multidimensional, not just a bilateral context, and in multiple, often inconsistent, ways. A nation may have poor political relations or military confrontations with countries with which it nonetheless has a lot of economic interdependence" (Freeman 2024). The inconsistency across domains that Freeman describes as observable fact is what Womack's framework gives the theoretical vocabulary to analyze.

2.4 The Gap This Thesis Fills

Womack developed multinodality through Pacific Asian cases. His empirical work focuses on China-Vietnam relations, the evolution of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, ASEAN's management of great-power competition, and the broader structure of Pacific Asian regionalism (Womack 2014; Womack et al. 2023). The theoretical principles he articulates are general, applicable to all international actors, but the evidence base from which they derive remains concentrated in one region. Freeman links theory to diplomatic practice across a wider geographic range, drawing on decades of experience in the Middle East, Europe, and Asia, but his observations are not formalized into a testable analytical structure. The hedging literature, developed by Kuik (2008) and applied more recently to allied behavior by Hadar (2026),

describes the strategies individual states employ to manage uncertainty in competitive environments. Hedging analysis, however, evaluates strategy as a consolidated national posture. It asks whether a state is hedging, and to what degree, but it does not disaggregate hedging behavior across nodes to determine whether a state hedges differently based on a plethora of needs.

This disaggregation is the central analytical need the existing literature leaves unmet. The apparent behavioral inconsistency Freeman describes requires a methodology capable of scrutinizing a state's foreign policy through its many individual actions before those actions can be evaluated as a collective . The regime complexity literature anticipated that overlapping institutions create opportunities for strategic inconsistency but did not develop tools for tracing that inconsistency across the different domains of a single state's foreign policy. Multipolarity assumes alignment across domains. Multiplex describes systemic-level institutional pluralism without providing state-level analytical instruments. Womack's multinodality provides the theoretical architecture for a state that retains contradictory engagements, but his empirical application does not extend to the full range of middle powers now displaying this behavior, nor does it systematically separate the domains across which the contradictions operate. The concept of the node permits a state to be a cluster of relational activities pointing in different directions. The analytical question that follows, and that existing scholarship has not answered, is how to observe and compare those different directions in a structured way across a diverse set of cases. This thesis strives to answer that question.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Research Design

In an effort to document systematic multinodal behavior by middle powers, this thesis utilized a qualitative, comparative analysis model. It traced and analyzed operations across nine contemporary middle powers: Turkey, India, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, France, the United Kingdom, and Canada. Rather than treating each as a case study to be assessed individually, these states served as empirical anchors for the research and were analyzed thematically. Middle powers were strategically selected to encompass the variation between states in the international system, spanning different regions, regime types, historical alignments, and current strategic postures.

Within the cases, there is representation for monarchies, theocracies, parliamentary democracies, and hybrid regimes. As the last global hegemon, their relationship to American power was an additional critical criterion. The selected states reflect the full spectrum—or, in multinodal terms, the full prism—of alignment with Washington. This was intended to avoid selection biases that could undermine the research's applicability. The states were meant to be diverse enough that patterns observable across all of them could be attributed to systemic structural pressures rather than to the idiosyncrasies of any single state's circumstances. The six non-Western middle powers were selected based on perceived consequences and active roles in the contemporary system; they are states whose foreign policy behavior most visibly confronts existing analytical paradigms through the scale of their international engagement. The three Western middle powers served as another foil to selection bias. Because they historically reaped the greatest benefit from the United States during the unipolar order through their institutional positions and normative commitments, they have the most reason to resist its decay. France and

the United Kingdom bring Security Council seats, nuclear arsenals, and residual imperial influence; their divergent post-Cold War institutional strategies provide a natural paired comparison. Canada's extreme economic dependence on the United States makes it the sharpest test of the framework. This made their multinodal behavior especially significant.

The research proceeded between April 2025 and March 2026, a period of extraordinary international volatility. Most notably, the abduction of Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro (January 2026), the U.S.-Israeli war against Iran (February 2026-present), and the unrelenting reconfiguration of Middle Eastern alignments all unfolded during the research window. Such rapid-onset crises compelled states to reveal their actual alignment preferences under pressure rather than their declared ones. Because of this, the crisis produces observable behavior that peacetime conditions would have obscured more easily. Such volatility deeply complicated the research process but also enriched its content and results.

3.2 The Unit of Analysis: Spheres of Engagement

The analytical innovation of this thesis lies in categorizing state behavior into three strategic ‘spheres of engagement’ and evaluating each independently before checking them against one another.

The political and institutional sphere encompasses diplomacy, institutional memberships, participation in normative and regional blocs, voting behavior in international organizations, and the formation or dissolution of political partnerships. Chapter 4 traced this sphere through institutional fragmentation and the rise of regional governance, institutional straddling by Turkey and India, the politics of impunity exercised by Israel and the UAE under American patronage, and the reluctant political pluralization of France, the United Kingdom, and Canada.

The economic and trade sphere encompasses trade partnerships, investment flows, energy relationships, sovereign wealth allocation, infrastructure development, currency settlement mechanisms, and technology cooperation. Chapter 5 traced this sphere through the ubiquity of economic hedging across the cases, the construction of parallel financial architecture outside the dollar-denominated system, and the constraints that concentrated trade dependency imposes on states seeking political autonomy.

The military and security sphere encompasses arms procurement, defense cooperation agreements, basing arrangements, joint military exercises, indigenous production capacity, and arms exports. Chapter 6 traced this sphere through the durability of American arms dominance, the emergence of procurement diversification and autonomous power projection among non-Western middle powers, and the acceleration of European defense autonomy under pressure from American uncertainty.

The analytical test is simple. A state displays conduct aligned with a multinodal configuration when its operations appear to disunite across the three spheres, or when its relationships within a single sphere contradict each other—divergence can take multiple forms. States may maintain a security dependency on one great power while routing its economic activity through a rival. Another example is they could hold simultaneous membership in institutional frameworks premised on opposing strategic logics. Finally, states might procure military equipment from a supplier whose political interests conflict with those of the state's primary diplomatic partner. These contradictions would be anomalous under alliance logic, where alignment in one domain implies alignment in the others. But instead, they follow from a structural incentive to leverage connections with the goal of reducing uncertainty (2024; Womack et al. 2023)

The cases were not evaluated individually in sequence. Each sphere chapter examines the behavior of all nine states within that sphere, organized thematically rather than by country profile. This structure prevents the analysis from collapsing into nine repetitive national surveys. Instead, it foregrounds three analytically distinct patterns. A single middle power may sustain contradictory relationships within a single sphere, pursuing connections with adversarial states or with states that are adversarial towards each other. A single middle power may also display divergent alignments across spheres, as when its political partnerships, economic investments, and security dependencies each point toward different partners and serve different strategic functions. These within-sphere and cross-sphere contradictions at the level of the individual state constitute the apparent markers of multinodal behavior. A third pattern operates at the systemic level: when nine middle powers spanning four regions and three regime types produce convergent behavior within the same sphere despite sharply different domestic conditions and historical alignments, the convergence indicates structural pressures driving that behavior rather than the idiosyncrasies of any particular case. The coexistence of convergence across cases within each sphere and divergence across spheres within each case is the central empirical finding of this thesis.

3.3 Data Sources

The primary source for this thesis is a pair of interviews conducted with Ambassador Chas W. Freeman, Jr. (USFS, Ret.), former U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia and former Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. The interviews were conducted via Zoom with a two-month interlude on January 16, 2026, and March 16, 2026. The first interview addressed multinodality broadly. It covered institutional fragmentation, middle power

behavior across regions, and the structural dynamics of the post-unipolar order. The second interview, conducted after the outbreak of the U.S.-Israeli war against Iran in February 2026, focused on the war's implications for multinodal theory. It covered the war's effects on middle power alignments and its consequences across the spheres of engagement outlined in this thesis. Freeman's published essay "Surviving the World Order to Come" (2024) supplements the interview material with his broader analytical assessment of the transition from hegemonic to post-hegemonic order. Freeman functions in this thesis as both a primary source providing firsthand diplomatic assessment and as an analytical voice whose interpretive framework, developed over decades of practice, bridges structural realism and institutional analysis in ways that academic literature has not fully achieved. His observations anchor claims throughout the thesis that lack statistical or institutional support from secondary sources.

Secondary sources comprised peer-reviewed academic literature on relevant topics. These included but were not limited to: middle power foreign policy, institutional balancing, and multinodal theory, with particular reliance on the conceptual framework developed by Womack (2016; 2024; Womack et al. 2023). Empirical data relevant to the military sphere, for example, the most recent global arms transfer dataset and information on procurement relating to the Iran war, were drawn from publications by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). Institutional and policy analysis was extensive, but the most useful findings were reports from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House, and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Journalistic and commentary sources include reporting from outlets like the Associated Press, the South China Morning Post, the Financial Times, Noema Magazine, and Radio France Internationale, among others. Trade data, sovereign wealth fund allocations, and financial

architecture developments draw on academic research on transnational financial orders and on the Bank for International Settlements' institutional reporting. The diversity of source types reflects the breadth of the inquiry; no single category of evidence could fully sustain the analysis at its desired intensity.

Chapter 4: The Political and Institutional Sphere

4.1 Institutional Fragmentation and the Rise of Regional Governance

Commitment to the universal international organizations associated with the U.S.-led unipolar order has dwindled. Among the flurry of executive orders issued immediately upon his return to the Presidency, Trump withdrew from 66 international organizations—comprising 31 UN entities and 35 non-UN bodies (U.S. Department of State 2026). This followed earlier departures from the World Health Organization (WHO), UNESCO, and the Paris Climate Agreement. Before those withdrawals, the United States blocked appointment proposals to the Appellate Body 94 times in a row. At the January 2026 World Economic Forum, Trump's 'Board of Peace' for Gaza, filled with personal and strategic allies, suggested that even a superpower hegemon was better served with ad hoc institutions than attempting to operate within those established under the liberal international order. The pattern represents something distinct from multinodal behavior itself—the hegemon is dismantling the architecture it built, and in doing so has produced the permissive conditions for the political diversification this chapter traces.

States have responded by recreating valued elements of the vanishing order on a regional basis. "People are inventing coalitions that do various useful things that used to be done on a universal basis," Freeman observes. "If you're Saudi, what do you care what the foreign trade policy of Nicaragua is? You don't care. But you do care a lot about Bahrain, you care about Turkey, you care about Europe, you care about Iran" (Freeman 2026a). The universal institutional landscape has decentralized in favor of relevant regional bodies, which have emerged and are increasingly engaged to fit a variety of needs. Each of these minilateral bodies offers a more selective transactional engagement than is seen in universalist bodies. They are

calibrated to the interests that matter most in a given region, and as a result, they are faster and more effective at producing tangible results for participants.

4.2 Institutional Straddling and Middle Power Diplomacy

The institutional fragmentation described above has created opportunities for new leadership, empowering middle powers. The emerging institutions are malleable. Middle powers exert disproportionate influence relative to their global clout and gain considerable diplomatic returns from relatively small investments across bodies. Though institutional straddling of various kinds is observable across the cases examined in this thesis, Turkey and India offer the strongest evidence of this pattern. Both states are embedded in Western-aligned institutional architectures, simultaneously participating in non-Western forums premised on competing normative foundations. Turkey's NATO membership dates to 1952; India's foreign policy tradition descends from the Non-Aligned Movement, going back to 1947. Turkey remains in NATO and maintains an EU customs union while holding dialogue partner status with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and pursuing BRICS membership (Mankoff and Bergmann 2025). India is a member of the Quad—widely understood as a response to Chinese assertiveness—along with the U.S., Australia, and Japan, while holding full membership in BRICS and the SCO, which include China and Russia. The institutions these states straddle are premised on opposing strategic logics. The capacity to maintain credible engagement across all of them simultaneously is the defining feature of their political-institutional behavior.

The EU accession process shaped Turkey's trajectory counterintuitively. Ankara's candidacy produced meaningful reforms, but Brussels stalled negotiations after opening only 16 of 35 chapters (Elhan and Kiraz 2025, 178). Freeman believes this was ideologically motivated:

"the French in particular think of Europe as Christendom, and they don't want a huge formidable Muslim state" (Freeman 2026a). That perception drove a reorientation in several directions at once. Erdogan's subsequent insistence that the SCO and BRICS complement rather than replace NATO revealed the dual impulses. New Delhi hesitated to join the SCO for nearly a decade, joining only after membership rules had been finalized on its own terms (Sajjanhar 2023). Where Turkey's diversification was driven by European rejection, India emerged from a strategic calculation that institutional engagement across competing blocs would advance its position relative to China while preserving leverage against American pressure (Jamali and Liu 2024). Entrenchment goes beyond the headline memberships. Turkey leads the Organization of Turkic States, which has increased geoeconomic weight since Russia's invasion of Ukraine disrupted northern transit corridors, elevating the Middle Corridor through Turkey, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, and the Caspian—a route backed by 10 billion euros in institutional commitments (Elhan and Kiraz 2025, 180). Each additional institutional connection expands the policy space available to the state.

The Turkey-Russia relationship reveals the analytical core of the pattern. The two states back opposing factions in Syria, Libya, and the Caucasus while engaging in defense cooperation and energy trade (Öztürk and Ayaydın 2025). Turkey itself has hosted Ukrainian-Russian peace talks, brokered prisoner exchanges, invoked the Montreux Convention to close the straits to non-Black Sea warships, armed Ukraine with Bayraktar drones, and refused to impose sanctions on Russia—all at the same time (Mankoff and Bergmann 2025). Freeman attributes Turkey's menu of institutional avenues to its location, "The United States cannot conduct policy toward NATO, the EU, Greece, Cyprus, Syria, Iraq, Central Asia, the Caucasus, Russia, the Black Sea,

the Balkans... Israel, Palestine, Afghanistan, the Gulf, [and] the OIC's 57 countries" without Turkish cooperation (Freeman 2026a).

India's development of the Chabahar port in Iran is a comparable diplomatic situation. "Chabahar is the port that the Indians are developing in order to use the Iranian port and connections to Afghanistan to undercut Pakistani control," Freeman notes, adding that it also forms part of the north-south transport route connecting the Russian Arctic with South Asia (Freeman 2026a). The project requires productive relationships with Iran, Russia, and the United States.

Multi-alignment carries costs that complicate the analysis. For example, India was reluctant to condemn Russian aggression in Ukraine, and after the Pahalgam terrorist attack in 2025, Western governments offered muted responses of support to India (NUPI 2026, 5). The intensity of solidarity can be diluted by strategically ambiguous behavior, which has become commonplace among middle powers. The calculus that options in every direction outweigh diluted solidarity from any single partner is tested continuously.

Another illustration is the February 2026 war in Iran, during which the United States reportedly told Turkey that the war would last only four days (Freeman 2026b). It did not. Turkey now appears to be in discussions with Tehran about post-conflict rearming—deepening engagement with a state under active military assault by Ankara's own NATO ally. Turkish construction companies, which Freeman calls "very good and very aggressive," are already positioning for reconstruction contracts (Freeman 2026b). India has reportedly reached an arrangement with Tehran to ensure its ships can transit the Strait of Hormuz, despite Prime Minister Modi's ill-timed embrace of Netanyahu (Freeman 2026b). Though the war was launched by their American partner, Turkey and India are managing the fallout and maintaining

active diplomatic, economic, and institutional ties with Iran. War, typically the final tipping point before states pick a side, has not disrupted their institutional straddling; if anything, it has intensified the contradictions.

Freeman's broader formulation captures the logic binding this section together: "if you want to survive and prosper in a world where competition is not regulated by law, you have to form relationships with people who can help you. You have to have a network of relationships. Again this is why the polar concept doesn't work, because poles don't become networks" (Freeman 2026a). Turkey and India have built those networks across institutional frameworks that conventional alliance logic treats as mutually exclusive. The institutional straddling described in this section is a structural feature of the contemporary system, observable wherever middle powers possess sufficient leverage and sufficient motive to maintain engagement across competing institutional orders.

4.3 Politics of Impunity and the Shifting Alignments in West Asia

Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia share a structural feature that distinguishes them from the other middle powers examined in this study: relying on American diplomatic protection to operate outside international norms. In a multinodal configuration, states derive influence from their position within a web of varied connections—the more relationships, the greater the diplomatic options and the lower the uncertainty. Freeman captures how Israel and the UAE have historically related to this logic: "UAE and Israel...have historically operated under the protection of foreign patrons...and their approach to the breakdown of the global order has been to seek to divide and rule their neighbors, that is to say they have felt free to break

every rule of international law and to behave lawlessly because they can get away with it. They have protection...impunity from punishment for breaches of international law" (Freeman 2026a).

The shared feature, however, masks a significant difference in strategy. Freeman draws a sharp distinction between the mechanisms of each state's dependence: "The Israelis manipulate us to their own advantage. The UAE hides behind us to break the rules" (Freeman 2026a). He states directly, "Turkey has leverage on multiple questions. The UAE doesn't, Israel doesn't. Israel has leverage on American foreign policy and not anything else" (Freeman 2026a). The UAE and Saudi Arabia, while dependent on American security guarantees, have pursued a considerably wider range of diplomatic relationships—with China, with Iran, within the GCC, and through multilateral forums—that give them a more diversified political posture. In the political and institutional sphere, Israel represents the most extreme case of single-patron dependence among the middle powers studied here. The UAE and Saudi Arabia occupy an intermediate position and are increasingly multinodal in their broader diplomatic architecture, even as their most aggressive military interventions still shelter behind Washington.

In the contemporary international system, the degree of diplomatic protection the United States extends to Israel is unparalleled. Despite being the only state in this thesis established after the post-war era, Israel has received the largest cumulative total of U.S. foreign aid since its founding, over \$300 billion, with billions more already allocated over the next few years (Masters 2025). The principal organ of collective security, the UN Security Council, has been functionally inoperative on the question of Palestine for decades because of the United States willingness to veto on Israel's behalf. Since October 2023, the United States has cast six vetoes against Gaza ceasefire resolutions (UN News 2025). By any credible authority, Israel's actions constitute a severe genocidal campaign. Israeli holocaust historians Omer Bartov, a prominent

Holocaust historian, has argued as much, even warning that the term "genocide" may itself understate the severity of the devastation (Bartov 2026). Other studies contend that Israeli policies going back to the 2007 siege of Gaza constitute a slow-motion genocide when understood through a Lemkin-inspired framework of social destruction within a settler-colonial process (Nijim 2022). Without the American veto, Israel would have faced binding Security Council resolutions, coordinated enforcement of international humanitarian law, and sustained multilateral isolation. This arrangement constitutes a form of great power patronage so comprehensive that it effectively exempts the client state from the collective political will of the international community—a striking exception in a multinodal world defined by the erosion of rigid alliance structures.

The UAE operates under a parallel but distinct logic of patron-enabled impunity. Freeman groups the two states together on the question of lawlessness: "I would say that Israel and the UAE are examples of countries that have taken advantage of the end of the bipolar order and the continued protection of the American superpower to break the rules. They don't give a damn about what the rules are. In the case of Israel, they're committing genocide. In the case of the UAE, helping the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Sudan. Intervening in Libya, they're very aggressive. They're basically trying to flatten the terrain around them, same as Israel" (Freeman 2026a). U.S. intelligence assessments and other independent investigations have consistently concluded that the UAE has been supplying weapons to the RSF since 2023 (Price 2025). The RSF has also committed atrocities in El Fasher amounting to genocide, according to a UN probe from February 2026 (RFI 2026). However, unlike with Israel, the U.S. curbs accountability on the UAE's behalf through informal diplomatic channels, rather than a formal Security Council veto. Regardless, they have the same effect. The critical distinction is that the UAE has invested

far more than Israel in building political relationships beyond Washington. Dr. Anwar Gargash, diplomatic adviser to UAE President Sheikh Mohamed Al Nahyan, has openly described "strategic autonomy" as the UAE's "enduring choice" (Al Ketbi 2026). Freeman articulates their diversification, "So if you're the UAE, you reach out to China heavily in addition [to the US]...but you don't expect the Chinese to come to your rescue. The United States is the only great power with the capacity to do that" (Freeman 2026a).

The 2026 U.S.-Israeli war against Iran has exposed the structural fragility of this entire arrangement and dramatically accelerated the multinodal turn among states that had appeared firmly embedded in the American orbit. Freeman observes that the war constitutes the most dramatic possible demonstration that "the unipolar moment is over, that the world is a lot more complex, that it is, in fact, multinodal" (Freeman 2026b). The war was "authorized by Benjamin Netanyahu rather than the U.S. Congress", it was an "illegitimate war" conducted "without regard to the Constitution, the law, or international norms" (Freeman 2026b). The diplomatic consequences have been severe. When the Trump administration appealed to NATO, Japan, South Korea, and China for naval support to break Iran's disruption of the Strait of Hormuz, every state refused. Freeman explains, "They all prefer diplomacy to joining a war of aggression against Iran that involves Israel" (Freeman 2026b). A decade ago, a collective diplomatic rejection of America's patron-state authority would have been inconceivable to most international relations scholars. Such allies' refusal to participate now, even peripherally, in United States military operations concerning Iran is hugely remarkable and represents a watershed in the political sphere.

In the Gulf, the war has had shocking consequences on regional diplomatic relationships. Iran has predictably retaliated with consistent, ongoing attacks on US military bases across the

Gulf, as well as on Saudi oil refineries and other critical infrastructure. Despite these relentless bombings, Saudi Arabia condemned the Israeli-American strikes, and joined other GCC states in futile attempts to diffuse hostilities (Akbarzadeh 2026). The détente has proven unexpectedly resilient. During a telephone call with Iranian President Pezeshkian after the preceding June 2025 strikes, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman made a statement that has been unthinkable since the inception of the Islamic Republic in 1979, declaring that "the entire Islamic world is united in backing Iran" (Akbarzadeh 2026). Freeman roots this posture in Gulf culture, "their history is one of rapidly shifting alliances...expediently formed and broken...they're not famous for standing their ground" (Freeman 2026b). Iran is deeply committed to expelling American military bases from its neighborhood, and is pressing Gulf states to guarantee that their territory and airspace will not be used for future operations against it (Freeman 2026b). Other countries have begun cutting individual deals with Tehran to ensure their ships can transit the Strait of Hormuz—China, India, and Pakistan have all reportedly secured such arrangements (Freeman 2026b). The Iranian foreign minister has declared the strait "open to everyone but Iran's enemies" (Freeman 2026b), a formulation that compels each state to define its own diplomatic relationship with Tehran independently rather than sheltering under the American umbrella. Freeman highlights reputational damage as an underrated effect of the war: "Saudi Arabia is much chastened. The Gulf countries, particularly the UAE, are no longer able to present themselves as safe havens for investment or AI or data centers" (Freeman 2026b).

The 2020 Abraham Accords—which formalized diplomatic relations between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan—must be understood against this backdrop. Freeman characterizes the partnership plainly: "The UAE doesn't agree with Israel about very much, but it agrees with them about enough to enable them to cooperate in doing nasty things, to Iran, for

example" (Freeman 2026a). The Accords rested on a narrow foundation of shared enmity toward Tehran, territorial anxieties, and a mutual appetite for surveillance technology. Freeman puts their congruency bluntly, "Israel has very relevant technology if you want to run a police state...it has used the Palestinians to develop all kinds of nasty means of control and surveillance" (Freeman 2026a). The Saudi-Emirati relationship itself conceals growing structural competition, characterized as a "cold peace" masking rivalry across domains of influence (Marzooq 2026). Freeman identifies an irony to the unstable hierarchy, asserting that "The Israeli achievement of military hegemony in the Levant has driven the Gulf Arabs and Iran into a coalition to balance Israel. That's why you see defense ministers going back and forth between Riyadh and Tehran. Even the UAE qualifies its anti-Iranian posture, because it wants to cooperate with Israel on some things but doesn't want to become a prisoner of Israel" (Freeman 2026a). Transactional calculations between states of similar consequence are subject to continuous revision.

The politics of impunity thus contain within them the seeds of the multinodal turn they seek to resist. Freeman conveys the underlying dynamic: "If the previous order was bipolar or unipolar, as it decays, you are seeing countries pursue their own interests with each other without regard to the former superpower" (Freeman 2026a). The Iran war has catalyzed this process. States that cannot rely on international law for protection build networks; states threatened by unchecked power projection seek countervailing partnerships. The Saudi-Iranian détente—sustained through a direct military assault on Iran by the patron that both Saudi Arabia and the UAE depend on—demonstrates that even the most structurally embedded alliance relationships can be destabilized when patron-client behavior exceeds what neighboring states are willing to tolerate. Freeman's formulation captures the logic binding this subchapter together:

"If you're weak, you want protection of international law. If international law is no protection anymore—which it doesn't appear it is—then you've got to be really hard-nosed about where you get your support" (Freeman 2026a). The success of Israel and the UAE in leveraging American protection to operate outside international norms has accelerated the fragmentation of the political order around them—and the Iran war has turned that fragmentation into a full-scale reconfiguration.

4.4 Western Middle Powers Building Strategic Autonomy in a Post-Liberal Order

France, the United Kingdom, and Canada were among the principal architects and beneficiaries of the U.S.-led institutional order. NATO membership, G7 seats, Bretton Woods privileges, and permanent Security Council positions (in the cases of France and the United Kingdom) amplified their influence well beyond what their material capabilities alone could sustain. The institutional fragmentation described in Section 4.1—American withdrawal from multilateral bodies, the proliferation of regional alternatives, the hollowing out of enforcement mechanisms—applies to these states as forcefully as to any others in this study. But they experience it differently. The institutional design examined in Sections 4.2 and 4.3 was, for the non-Western middle powers, instrumentally constitutive of their emerging international identities. Conversely, the decay of the liberal international order compels Western middle powers to reimagine how they operate in the international system, and the political behavior observable since 2025 suggests that reimagination has been underway even if it has been reluctantly and with considerable friction.

Freeman locates the structural condition plainly: "The former imperialist powers in Europe no longer have that power projection capability. But if you're a European, former

imperial power, you've been protected by the United States, and now the United States is making it clear it doesn't want to protect you anymore. So what do you do?" (Freeman 2026a). Each state has begun to answer based on its individual circumstances. For France, the answer has involved channeling autonomy through the European Union. "If you're French," Freeman argues, "you have to make your peace with Algeria, you have to maintain a decent relationship with Germany and Italy and so on. The EU becomes a vehicle for sustaining your independence and freedom of action" (Freeman 2026a). For France, this means leveraging its position as a former empire, retaining its political presence in former colonies like Syria and Lebanon. It engages with modern Gulf middle powers, quietly maintaining a military base in the UAE while cooperating with the Saudi Navy (Freeman 2026a). These residual post-imperial connections combined with France's institutional leverage within the EU. The result is a network of political relationships that extends well beyond the Atlantic alliance which conventional wisdom would see as the boundary of their influence. French advocacy proved central to the European Commission's \$800 billion ReArm Europe plan, advanced after U.S. Vice President Vance's confrontational 2025 Munich speech. Paris had pursued greater European strategic autonomy during the first Trump administration, when the U.S. NATO ambassador dispatched a cease-and-desist letter in response (Leuprecht 2025). That the same agenda now commands institutional resources of this magnitude illustrates how American withdrawal has removed the principal political obstacle to French ambitions within the EU framework.

The United Kingdom took a different path and arrived at a worse position. Freeman's assessment: "The British made a big mistake when they withdrew from the European Union because that diminishes them. They actually had an idea that they would hook up with India and Brazil and other emerging power centers and that would compensate them for the loss of the

European connection and the difficulties they had in the American relationship where the United States talked about special relationships but basically ignored them" (Freeman 2026a). The "Global Britain" project envisioned a web of bilateral relationships with rising powers replacing the institutional depth of EU membership. That project has largely failed on its own terms. (Ward 2021, 4). The United Kingdom's formal transition from EU member state to "third country" consumed years of political capital while narrowing diplomatic options (Whitman 2019). The United Kingdom has sought to compensate through smaller groupings: the E3 with France and Germany, the Five Eyes intelligence partnership, bilateral diplomacy accelerated by freedom from the EU's lengthy collective consultations (Hadfield and Whitman 2023). These forums provide agility but lack the collective weight the EU framework once multiplied. Where France instrumentalizes a supranational institution to aggregate European power, the United Kingdom severed its connection to that institution precisely when structural conditions favored institutional diversification. Both are former imperial powers with nuclear arsenals, Security Council vetoes, and global residual connections. Their divergent institutional strategies have produced sharply different capacities to navigate the multinodal landscape.

Canada occupies the most constrained position. Co-location with the world's largest economy has produced an economic and political dependency so thorough that one analysis describes Europe and Canada as bound together in a 'Schicksalsgemeinschaft', meaning a community of common fate—buffeted by U.S. unilateralism and needing one another to avoid abandonment (Leuprecht 2025). In that logical context, Canadian sovereignty becomes heavily dependent on counterbalancing the United States, ideally through European power. In practice, both Canada and Europe have been gradually deepening their reliance on the hegemon while allowing their relationships to stagnate (Leuprecht 2025). Regionalism has always been

somewhat anathema to Canadians, given the country's geographic position, yet shifting global polarities may compel Canada to pursue arrangements; they reportedly maintain interest in the Trans-Pacific Partnership even though their regional credentials remain tenuous (Hale 2012). At the January 2026 World Economic Forum, Prime Minister Carney publicly characterized bilateral negotiation with a hegemon as "the performance of sovereignty while accepting subordination" (Gardels 2026). That type of rhetorical language is a major departure from past Canadian leaders, and a signal that even the most structurally embedded Western middle power recognizes adherence to a unipolar structure is untenable.

The February 2026 U.S.-Israeli war against Iran has tested whether this recognition translates into political action—and exposed fractures running through the Western alliance system. The United States attacked Iran without consulting Europe, though subsequently it expected de facto support in rhetorically and materially; statements of support along with access to EU bases for further military operations (CSIS 2026). European governments reacted spasmodically without coordination. The responses revealed a strikingly disjointed alignment. Prime Minister Starmer emphasized that the United Kingdom did not participate in the strikes and wavered on allowing the United States to use the Diego Garcia base (CSIS 2026). France took a more legally critical stance, invoking international law and institutional responses while pragmatically deploying the Charles de Gaulle carrier group to protect French assets in the Gulf (CSIS 2026). Canada expressed open support for the U.S. strikes (Associated Press 2026), reflecting its lack of strategic autonomy relative to the United Kingdom or France. Eventually, all three Western middle powers managed to issue a joint statement calling for the resumption of U.S./Iran talks, qualifying their lack of participation (Associated Press 2026).

Freeman describes the broader diplomatic collapse, "We [the U.S.] don't have any allies, just bystanders who insincerely mute their criticism of us to appease Donald Trump...they're just belatedly reacting to being treated with contempt, subjected to verbal abuse, assaulted with arbitrary and capricious tariffs, and they don't jump when we call them now. They won't come to our aid" (Freeman 2026b). He characterizes American diplomacy as "not just missing in action" but "dead," "discredited by amateur envoys...engaged in protection rackets and personal corruption rather than well-prepared or good-faith negotiations" (Freeman 2026b). The war has accelerated a process that was already underway. The transatlantic alliance is turning into something closer to nominal affiliation, in which the institutional commitments persist but the political solidarity they once assumed has eroded.

The Western response to the Iran war also reveals a parallel fracture in political allegiance toward Israel—one that connects directly to the dynamics examined in Section 4.3. The joint British-French-German refusal to participate in the strikes, Macron's invocation of international law, and Spain's outright denial of access to bases all register growing distance between Western middle powers and the Israeli-American military partnership. Association with Israel has become a diplomatic liability across much of the international system. Freeman observes that Israel "is now unacceptable company for anybody really, as a result of the Gaza genocide" (Freeman 2026b), and the Western response to the Iran war suggests that even states historically supportive of Israel's security are recalculating the political costs of alignment. Polling data from the European public reinforce what their governments will not say out loud: 73% of French and 71% of German citizens no longer regard the United States as a reliable ally, and comparable majorities view China unfavorably (Westad 2026). These populations are hostile to both major poles. In liberal democratic societies like those of France, that type of domestic

pressure will see a response from their governments. The more a state profited from the old order, the more it now must scramble to find new partners amidst the current chaos. France, the United Kingdom, and Canada all display political movement toward diversified engagement, but that movement carries institutional and psychological friction absent from the Turkish or Indian cases examined in Section 4.2. The liberal international architecture was built to amplify Western power; its decay requires them to reimagine their own positions in ways that non-Western middle powers—whose relationship to the unipolar order was always more transactional—have found less wrenching. The switching costs are higher for those who had the most to lose.

Chapter 5: The Economic and Trade Sphere

5.1 Economic Diversification as a Structural Condition

Unlike the political alignments traced in Chapter 4—where a single vote or joint statement can signal realignment instantly—economic relationships move slowly. Capital flows, supply chains, and especially infrastructure investments lock states into years-long commitments. This chapter interrogates whether or not such economic connections will be in line with the political patterns just described.

In the same way states hedge against nodal connections in their political networks, they protect their economic health by diversifying their economic partners, reducing uncertainty in the event of a destabilizing crisis such as war, sanctions, or natural disasters. As van Staden notes, “strategic hedging among middle powers is likely to become the new normal,” driven by growing demands for autonomy and memories of Cold War proxy wars (Shi 2026). Many states seek South-South partnerships as a buffer against overdependence on any great power, diversifying with Gulf states, India, and Turkey rather than simply swinging back to the West.

The baseline finding is that virtually every middle power maintains deep economic engagement with both the United States and China simultaneously. What distinguishes their behavior from conventional alliance economics is the deliberateness of the diversification and the extent to which economic partnerships now operate independently of political alignment. Turkey’s total trade with Russia and China increased from \$6.7 billion in 2002 to \$106.8 billion in 2022 (Aydın-Düzgit, Kutlay). Even though it has access to the advantageous EU customs union, it now trades more with the non-Western world than the Western bloc (Keyman 2025, 153). India participates in the Quad while rejecting RCEP because of trade discrepancies, pursuing instead the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework and bilateral arrangements calibrated to

its specific economic interests. These are states whose economic networks and political alignments point in different directions—and the gap between them is widening.

American economic policy has accelerated this process rather than arrested it. Freeman characterizes the trajectory: “America’s distraught response to its loss of economic and political primacy has been to adopt protectionist trade and investment policies and to militarize its foreign policy. But neither protectionism nor militarism can or will ‘make America great again’” (Freeman 2024). The net effect of American sanctioning and protectionism, in his assessment, has been to undermine global monetary and trade settlement systems, encourage the formation of competing currency blocs, and divide the world into segregated economic zones that restrict trade and investment flows to the detriment of global prosperity (Freeman 2024). Sanctions intended to isolate adversaries have produced the opposite of their intended effect. Russia redirected its oil exports from a unipolar customer base—over 45% to the EU before 2022—to multiple buyers: China now absorbs 45-50%, India another 40% (Novak, cited in Al Jazeera 2023). Russian energy revenue in 2023 reached approximately \$93 billion, in line with pre-sanctions levels in 2021, and the energy sector still contributes 27% of GDP (CREA 2024). Freeman captures the dynamic plainly: “The obvious [economic impact] is oil and gas prices, which benefit Russia greatly. So that’s not too smart if our objective is to cut Russia down to size. We’re building it up. We’re driving it closer to China. The Power of Siberia pipeline which was on hold is now going ahead” (Freeman 2026b). The weaponization of economic interdependence, rather than constraining multinodal diversification, has compelled targeted states to construct the alternative economic structure that makes diversification possible for everyone else.

That architecture is taking institutional form. The dollar's share in Russia-China trade settlements plummeted from 95% in 2014 to approximately 30% by 2022, replaced by a mix of yuan, ruble, and offshore euro (Goldman Sachs 2023). China has reduced the dollar's dominance in international trade settlements below 50% (Sun and Mallard 2025). In 2021, the Bank for International Settlements and the central banks of Thailand, the UAE, and China launched Project mBridge, a cross-border digital payment initiative that completed a pilot test of HK\$171 million in transactions across 20 banks. By 2024, the UAE had already piloted multiple large transfers to China; the project was subsequently extended to Saudi Arabia (BIS 2024). The Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS) is a parallel system to Project mBridge with the same function; it processed over 1.2 million transactions in 2025, with a dollar value equivalent to approximately \$15 trillion. Though this is still far below SWIFT—the established messaging network for international payments—it is growing at an annual rate of 40% (Atlantic Council GeoEconomics Center 2025). These are functioning settlement mechanisms processing real transactions as alternatives to the petrodollar system. A new generation of transnational financial intermediaries operating from Hong Kong, Dubai, and Singapore has driven this transition, developing parallel settlement networks and facilitating currency diversification that enables trade between states under American sanctions pressure (Sun and Mallard 2025).

GCC sovereign wealth funds have become vital financiers of this infrastructure. The Kuwait Investment Authority (\$800 billion in assets under management) invests in 42 Chinese listed companies through offices in Beijing, Hong Kong, and Shanghai. Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (\$700 billion) directs 20% of its assets to China, including over 30 technology firms. Mubadala Investment Company (\$670 billion), despite opening its Beijing office only in 2023, already invests in over 80 Chinese technology ventures (Sun and Mallard 2025). Gulf

capital is funding the economic backbone of a system that operates alongside—and increasingly in competition with—the dollar-denominated order those same states depend on for security.

Private Chinese technology firms—which still operate under the heavy-handed oversight of the CCP—intentionally seek out business that will integrate them into strategically relevant states. An appropriate example of such a strategically relevant state is Saudi Arabia, where Huawei has established a joint innovation center specializing in emerging technologies such as 5G, artificial intelligence, and cloud computing (Sun and Mallard 2025). The UAE has adopted Chinese technology in smart city projects despite American objections. Saudi Arabia has included the yuan in its sovereign wealth fund portfolio (Goldman Sachs. (2023) ‘Progress Check on RMB Internationalization’, <https://www.gspublishing.com/content/research/en/reports/2023/07/02/450c00ac-c2ae-4a96-a5e5-26534e7e493c.html>, accessed 7 May 2025.). These partnerships create economic nodes that operate on a track entirely independent of the security relationships those states maintain with Washington. The Belt and Road Initiative functions as the connective tissue of this emerging order, serving as the foundation of a recalibrated global economic profile that challenges the petrodollar-dominated financial system by anchoring trade and currency circulation to alternative development paradigms (Sun and Mallard 2025).

5.2 The Limits of Economic Diversification

Economic diversification, however extensive, operates within hard constraints; integration alone does not assure security, especially when confronted with a great power. The most recent illustration of this concept was the United States' unilateral abduction of Nicolás Maduro in a special military operation. China had invested billions in Venezuelan oil infrastructure over decades and provided intelligence and cyber capabilities (Shi 2026).

Sanctions imposed on Venezuela by every U.S. administration this century destroyed its economy, making it a non-viable market for foreign investment. For that reason, Chinese state-owned enterprises' continued presence should be regarded as political, part of a larger economic-centric diplomacy strategy in Latin America to break into the U.S. sphere of influence. Maduro's subsequent capture revealed that economic diplomacy only goes so far, and “without security guarantees may end up as nothing more than bad debt” (Pang, cited in Shi 2026). Spheres of influence can still persist where great powers are willing to back economic presence with force—and fail where they are not.

Every middle power in this study is cognizant that their economic prospects are not a guarantee on their own of security. The UAE views its strategic environment through what analysts describe as a “split lens”: it leverages connections with China to attract investment, technology partnerships, and trade, while relying on the United States for deterrence, maritime security, and higher-end technologies (CSIS UAE Study 2025). Emirati officials see a U.S.-backed security guarantee as “double-edged”—providing stability but potentially making the UAE a target—and the UAE wants above all to avoid being forced to choose sides in a strategic competition between Washington and Beijing (CSIS UAE Study 2025). Saudi-Iranian trade illustrates a different constraint. Non-oil trade between the two countries stood at approximately \$25 million in 2025, a figure more meaningful for the political message than for the vitality of either state. Still, roughly 61,000 tonnes of goods were exchanged with a cautious plan to increase in the future (Akbarzadeh 2025). Iranian officials hold ambitious expectations for a joint chamber of commerce and expansion of non-oil consumer goods trade. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, already deeply tied to Western finance, would benefit from access to Iranian markets. But since the unipolar era, the economic structure that remains is highly punitive toward

unfriendly American adversaries. Snapback sanctions, along with U.S. secondary sanctions and the steep penalties for evasion, deter financial institutions across the GCC from entering the Iranian market (Akbarzadeh 2025). The two economies are oriented toward different external partners and regulatory ecosystems—Saudi Arabia toward Western capital markets, Iran toward Russia and China—which complicates joint ventures and integrated supply chains even where political will exists.

The Western middle powers face the sharpest version of the dependency constraint. Canada directs approximately 75% of its exports to the United States. As Leuprecht (2025) argues, U.S. leverage over Canadian economic resources would increase American structural power by roughly 10%, reinforcing a superpower status that constrains European autonomy as well. Canada's economy has become excessively reliant on the American market through free trade agreements that deepened that dependency over decades; without European allies, Canada runs the “extreme risk of being left out in the geostrategic cold” (Leuprecht 2025). The United Kingdom's post-Brexit trade profile reveals a parallel constraint. The Commonwealth accounts for 8.7% of the United Kingdom's trade—equivalent to total trade with Germany alone (Ward 2021, 4)—and the bilateral trade agreements that the “Global Britain” agenda promised have not compensated for the loss of EU market access. Turkey's customs union with the EU imposes a sovereignty cost that illustrates how institutional membership in the political sphere creates economic constraints: when the EU signs free trade agreements with third countries, Turkey must open its market without gaining reciprocal access (Elhan and Kiraz 2025, 179). Deep integration without membership binds Ankara to trade rules it cannot influence.

Even states that have aggressively diversified face limits when their diversification partners come into conflict. Israel presents a particularly revealing case. Despite its deep security

dependence on the United States, Israel does not feel obligated to remain loyal to a declining economic engine, and, like every other selected middle power state, has cultivated substantial economic ties with China. Since 2015, Chinese investment in Israeli technology firms, the same ones “relevant for running a police state” in Freeman's words, exceeded \$15 billion. By 2024, Bilateral trade had increased to \$24 billion (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission 2025). A persistent source of tension in the U.S.-Israeli relationship is China’s management of the strategically significant Haifa port through the Shanghai International Port Group, which is located in close proximity to a U.S. naval base. Washington has pressed Israel to curtail Chinese technology partnerships, especially in semiconductors and artificial intelligence, but Israeli firms have resisted at every turn, citing commercial opportunity and the absence of equivalent alternatives (Paltiel 2025). Israel’s incentive to integrate itself with China’s burgeoning economy creates palpable friction with its security alignment, and its critical dependence on the United States for its military campaigns restricts its ability to fully diversify. The Gaza war that began in late 2023 further strained this balance as Israel has needed constant weapons packages to sustain its carpet bombing. This has reduced its room for economic maneuvering, illustrating how security impulses can override economic hedging strategies.

India’s economic diversification, especially prominent post-2022, demonstrates successful navigation of the risk-reward calculus of economic hedging. India saw an opportunity following the invasion of Ukraine, and rather than adhere to the subsequent sanctions on Russian oil imposed by the U.S. and Europe, it became Russia’s largest seaborne crude customer. India took advantage of Russia’s eastward reorientation, at their peak in 2024, importing over 1.7 million barrels per day, a forty-fold increase from pre-war levels (Reuters 2025). To do this, India had to defy Western price caps and operate entirely outside the Western financial system, using a

mix of Chinese yuan, UAE dirhams, and ruble settlements. The UAE became directly implicated in this sanctions evasion, with India often laundering the various currencies through Dubai-based intermediaries. By early 2025, Russia accounted for nearly 40% of India's crude imports, up from less than 2% in 2021 (S&P Global 2025). This dramatic reorientation of energy trade was made possible by the alternative financial infrastructure of other emerging powers. Of course, such actions came with costs. India's trade surplus with Russia (now over \$40 billion annually) accumulated in rubles that were difficult to convert, locking them into a dependent relationship. Moreover, India's diversification toward Russia has not been matched by diversification away from its import relationship with China, with whom bilateral trade exceeds \$130 billion as of 2024, making China India's largest trading partner (Indian Ministry of Commerce 2025). Finally, it faced reputational damage in the U.S.-led Quad and among European powers. India knew the costs and dependencies it would create from these ambitious actions. It moved forward with them anyway, signaling that the gains from diversification exceed the costs for states powerful enough to avoid great-power retribution. This displays a cohesive strategy of multiplying great-power partners rather than choosing a hegemonic patron—as a regional hegemon itself, India could navigate advanced multinodal relations without the threat of meaningful retaliation.

France, as the most deliberate Western diversifier traced in Chapter 4, shows how a European power must maneuver within these constraints. France's economic viability is based on three distinct channels. One is the EU's well-known trade network, which provides France with a useful market scale but imposes a strict regulatory environment that pushes France into foreign markets. From its colonial legacy, it maintains deep ties to Francophone Africa, where French companies retain monopolistic positions in energy, mining, and telecommunications. Finally, it pursues strategic partnerships in the Gulf with other middle powers, where TotalEnergies, a

French Company, has secured major contracts in Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, often bidding directly against American and Chinese firms (IFRI 2025). French arms sales to the Gulf—including Rafale fighters and naval vessels—are extremely enriching and have created dependencies on Paris that it leverages for political influence independent of American interests. Recognizing that it will never be able to outcompete economic heavyweights like China, France has been a vocal proponent of European protectionism, pushing for EU-level instruments to counter foreign subsidies and protect critical technologies for foreign direct investment. That philosophical contradiction allows France to anchor itself in traditional European institutions as a regional economic hegemon while actively seeking other bilateral channels to avoid reliance on increasingly unstable, unipolar-dominated supply chains.

5.3 The Iran War: A Stress Test for Multinodal Economics

Stable energy transit has always been fragile, and the war in Iran has demonstrated to middle powers the need to seek alternative networks wherever possible. Situated in the oil-rich Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz accounts for approximately 34% of global seaborne oil exports, and 40% of global oil production passes daily (Baruah, Labh, and Greely 2023). When Iran unilaterally closed it in retaliation for U.S.-Israeli strikes, the disruption triggered shockwaves through global commodity markets. By mid-March 2026, Brent crude had surpassed \$140 per barrel, shipping insurance premiums for Hormuz transit had increased by 300%, and daily traffic through the strait had fallen by over 50% compared to pre-war levels (Bloomberg 2026; Reuters 2026). Freeman describes the result as a series of cascading effects: “A lot of the world’s fertilizer supply comes out of the Gulf. That means the planting season this year will not have enough fertilizer. That means there will be much reduced crops in the fall. There will be food

shortages. The aluminum that was being produced in the Gulf... have all shut down. Aluminum is essential for military products. It turns out that one of the great byproducts of gas production is helium, which is essential for chip production” (Freeman 2026b). Despite political fragmentation, the world economy remains globalized and interconnected, a legacy of the unipolar era that isn’t going away anytime soon. As mentioned earlier, economic relationships are slower to reconfigure in spite of political expediency. The disrupted energy supply chain has affected almost every critical sector, including semiconductor supply chains, agricultural systems, and military procurement.

Amid this disruption, Iran has demonstrated surprising economic durability that complicates the sanctions-based model of economic coercion. “Iran is actually exporting more oil than it did before the war started,” Freeman observes. “They’ve just ramped up production. Now they control the strait. And everybody’s ignoring the U.S. sanctions. We suspended their effects on Russia, which pissed off everybody” (Freeman 2026b). This year, Iranian oil exports are at the highest level since 2018, averaging 1.9 million barrels per day, with the bulk of shipments going to China and to independent refiners in countries such as Malaysia and Oman (S&P Global 2026). Freeman disclosed that, amidst the war, Iran was initially considering requiring oil and gas transiting the strait to be priced in Chinese yuan rather than dollars. That would be catastrophic for the United States—one of the most important American structural advantages is the waning yet enduring dependence of the global system on dollars as the primary global reserve asset. Freeman notes that while “they didn’t do that, not yet... they have a lot of cards,” (Freeman 2026b). That kind of systemic disruption would accelerate the transition away from a unipolar financial order in a matter of months rather than decades, even its discussion is significant.

The war has also altered the calculus of Gulf states. Freeman notes that Gulf countries, particularly the UAE, “are no longer able to present themselves as safe havens for investment or AI or data centers” (Freeman 2026b). The economic nodes that states have constructed over decades can be disrupted in weeks by military action—a reminder that the economic sphere, however autonomous in its day-to-day operations, remains subordinate to security realities when those realities become acute enough. At the same time, the war has opened new economic corridors: Turkey’s construction firms are positioning for Iranian reconstruction contracts, and the Middle Corridor connecting Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and the Caspian has gained strategic significance as northern transit routes through Russia have been disrupted (Freeman 2026b). Freeman captures the broader redistribution: “I think it will be very good for places like Canada and Brazil and probably others in South America” (Freeman 2026b)—a reference to energy exporters positioned to benefit from Gulf disruption.

Womack’s observation that in a post-hegemonic world, “de-risking can create opportunity costs as well as new sources of risk” (Womack 2024) finds concrete expression in the economic fallout of a war that was intended to consolidate American and Israeli strategic dominance but has instead accelerated the construction of alternative economic networks.

5.4 Cross-Sphere Divergence: Reading the Economic Against the Political

The central finding of this chapter, compared with Chapter 4, is that political alignments and economic partnerships increasingly point in different directions—and the gap between them constitutes multinodal behavior in the economic sphere. The states most deeply embedded in American security frameworks—the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and to a lesser extent Turkey—are simultaneously the most aggressive economic diversifiers toward China. The states that have

maintained the most concentrated political alignment with Washington—Israel and Canada—are also those with the most concentrated economic dependencies, the former on American aid and diplomatic protection, the latter on American trade. The correlation between political autonomy and economic diversification runs in both directions: economic diversification enables political autonomy by reducing the leverage any single partner can exercise, while political diversification creates the diplomatic relationships through which new economic partnerships develop.

Turkey's political straddling across NATO, the SCO, and the OIC maps onto its economic straddling across the EU customs union, the Middle Corridor, and its participation in the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. India's Quad membership coexists with BRICS economic cooperation and a transport corridor through Iran linking to the Russian Arctic. The Gulf states' dependence on American security coexists with deep economic integration with China. France uses the EU for political leverage and must supplement economic clout through Francophone African networks and Gulf partnerships. The economic sphere operates on a track that intersects with but does not replicate the political sphere, and the distance between the two tracks is widening.

The parallel settlement systems bypassing dollar hegemony and the bilateral transit arrangements emerging from the Ukraine and Iran wars represent economic relationships explicitly structured as partnerships rather than alliance commitments. They can be recalibrated or redirected as circumstances shift. The states with the least economic diversification—Canada locked into the American market, the United Kingdom adrift after Brexit, and Israel dependent on a single patron's aid—are those with the fewest exit options when the strategic environment shifts against them.

The economic sphere also reveals a limit that the political sphere obscures on its own. Political diversification can be signaled cheaply because institutional memberships do not

require immediate material sacrifice. Economic diversification requires capital, infrastructure, and the gradual redirection of trade flows over years or decades. The states examined in this chapter have pursued economic diversification with varying degrees of success, but none has achieved full independence from the dollar-denominated system that underpins American economic leverage. The alternative financial architecture under construction—mBridge, CIPS, and yuan-denominated trade settlements—remains nascent relative to the scale of global dollar transactions. The economic sphere is where multinodal theory confronts higher switching costs, deeper dependencies, and material consequences of miscalculation. The political sphere tolerates ambiguity much more readily; the economic sphere demands commitments that accumulate over time and cannot be easily reversed. The military and security sphere, examined in the following chapter, operates under an even more constraining logic—longer procurement cycles, deeper interoperability requirements, and the existential stakes of security guarantees that make military diversification the slowest and most consequential dimension of the multinodal turn.

Chapter 6: The Military and Security Sphere

6.1 Security Patronage and Its Erosion

The political and economic spheres examined in Chapters 4 and 5 revealed a consistent pattern of middle powers diversifying their institutional affiliations and trade relationships across competing networks, producing a gap between political alignment and economic partnership that constitutes the observable signature of multinodal behavior. The military-security sphere operates under a different and more constraining logic. Arms procurement cycles extend over years and even decades. Interoperability ties a state's military infrastructure to its suppliers' communications standards, maintenance systems, and training doctrine. Military basing agreements carry sovereignty costs that accumulate over the life of the arrangement. These features make the military sphere the slowest to shift among the three examined in this thesis, and they make evidence of diversification within it disproportionately significant. American dominance in the military sphere has grown from a production standpoint-the United States supplied 42% of all international arms transfers between 2021 and 2025, up from 36% four years prior, and exported arms to 99 states (SIPRI 2026). Global arms transfers increased by 9.2% during this same period, driven overwhelmingly by European demand in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine (SIPRI 2026). Despite dependable contributions in the military sphere, American reliability as a partner has declined across the other two spheres. The gap between those two trends creates the core conflict of this chapter.

Freeman frames the security consequences of the current moment in terms that pertain directly to this analysis. "Death and destruction are not the ends of warfare, but its means," he observes of the Iran war. "It's how warfare is carried out. Neither subjugation nor humiliation equates to peace, and Iran will not accept either. Wars don't end until [a party] admits defeat.

They do not end when one side proclaims mission accomplished" (Freeman 2026b). The war has exposed the limits of force as an instrument for securing compliant behavior from middle powers. "We're basically shooting off everything we have [at Iran]," Freeman warns, "which means it won't be available for Ukraine, which means Ukraine's about to be disarmed because the Europeans depend on us to produce stuff that they buy and then turn over to Ukraine. If there's a Taiwan contingency, we won't have the wherewithal to do anything significant" (Freeman 2026b). This has exposed the material consequences of a great power patron's overextension. SIPRI analysts concur that the war will likely slow American arms exports as the United States prioritizes its own forces' needs and stockpile replenishment before fulfilling foreign orders (Hussain and Wezeman 2026). Any middle powers dependent on American arms procurement face a supply bottleneck created by their patron's military commitments. The incentive to diversify suppliers, already present before the war in Iran, has sharpened considerably.

The reputational dimension compounds the material one. Freeman characterizes the damage as "severe, really severe reputational damage to us, both political and military, because we're demonstrating the futility of the use of force in trying to secure certain objectives. And finally, if the purpose of war, as William Tecumseh Sherman said, is to secure a better peace, there's now no process in place to gain one for Israel, Gulf Arabs, the United States, or Iran" (Freeman 2026b). A patron whose military operations fail to achieve their stated objectives and whose arsenal is being depleted in the process offers its dependents a weakening security guarantee. The Trump administration's annexation rhetoric toward Greenland, however briefly entertained, reinforced this calculus for European states by raising the question of whether the patron itself constituted a threat to allied sovereignty. European defense spending has reached

record levels not because NATO's collective defense logic has changed but because the assumptions underlying it have.

6.2 Diversification and Autonomous Military Capacity

In this new geopolitical environment, several patterns of military diversification have emerged across the cases examined in this thesis. The most analytically significant involve procurement diversification away from a single supplier, the emergence of middle powers as arms exporters in their own right, and the development of autonomous military capacity outside patron-state supply chains.

Turkey's S-400 purchase from Russia represented the sharpest challenge to alliance-based procurement norms among the cases examined here. Despite trying to justify the acquisition on the grounds of national defense requirements, Washington responded with sanctions and exclusion from the F-35 program (Elhan and Kiraz 2025, 177). The purchase demonstrated the costs of diversifying away from the patron's supplier ecosystem. The purchase did not, however, reverse Turkey's broader trajectory away from that ecosystem. Turkey became the world's 11th largest arms exporter by 2020-24, with a 103% increase in exports over the previous five-year period, the highest increase rate among the top 20 arms exporters (Hussain and Tartir 2025, Farag 2025). Driven primarily by unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) drone transfers to Ukraine and West African states, Turkish arms exports to Europe grew by 469%, to Africa by 296%, respectively. A state that began the century as a net importer, locked into American and European supply chains, now operates as a significant supplier node, exporting to 33 states in the Middle East, Asia, Europe, and Africa. France, the second-largest global arms supplier since 2021, accounting for 9.8% of global exports, and India received 24% of French arms transfers,

the largest single-country share (SIPRI 2026). India distributes its procurement across Russian, American, French, and Israeli platforms, ensuring that no single state can exercise over Indian military capacity the kind of leverage Washington exercises over Israel's, and it holds over 40 annual joint military exercises spanning American, Japanese, Australian, French, and Southeast Asian partners (Gagan and Kumar 2025; Sisodia and Seth 2025)

Iran's military profile presents the most striking case of autonomous capacity development; it has essentially developed complete self-sufficiency in the military sphere, accounting for less than 0.05% of global arms imports in 2021-25 (Hussain and Wezeman 2026). This was a choice of necessity. Starting in 2006, a series of UN Security Council resolutions imposed an increasingly strict arms embargo on Iran. In response, Iran invested heavily in domestic production of missiles, drones, and air defense systems. Even after the UN embargo expired in 2020, Iran received relatively few major arms, presumably because it had achieved a high level of self-sufficiency in the systems it deemed necessary (Hussain and Wezeman 2026). The Iran war has tested this indigenous capacity under conditions of direct confrontation with the most advanced military in the world. Freeman's assessment of Iran's resilience draws on institutional rather than purely military factors: "Iran is an institutionalized society, heavily institutionalized. You knock off one man or 40 men and that doesn't stop the wheels of government from turning. It just results in a reshuffle of authority and new people" (Freeman 2026b). He goes on, "Iran prepared for this for 20 years. They decided they've had enough sort of petty assaults that they respond to in a limited way. They're not going to respond in a limited way. They made it clear if they're attacked again, they're going for broke" (Freeman 2026b). Because they do not import arms or provide inventory, the extent of Iran's underground military infrastructure remains unknown to outside observers. "We can't prove that either," Freeman

acknowledges, "because we can't get into the caves and caverns and tunnels and everything else that Iran built" (Freeman 2026b). Iran has launched thousands of missiles and drones against Israel, regional U.S. military installations, and Gulf Arab states. Intercepting them has likely taken several air defense missiles per interception, depleting stockpiles across the region (Hussain and Wezeman 2026). A state that imports virtually no major arms has sustained a protracted military campaign against a superpower and its most heavily armed regional client. That outcome carries implications well beyond the conflict. Freeman captures the proliferation logic directly: "One of the effects of this war is that since international law is no longer a protection, since the United States has demonstrated a complete indifference to normal international norms, the only way to protect yourself is to arm and follow the North Korean example" (Freeman 2026b). Iran will now almost certainly pursue nuclear weapons. "There's going to be a nuclear weapon now for Iran," Freeman states. "And the people who have been arguing for that, including the junior Khamenei, Mujtaba Khamenei, he's in favor of nuclear weapons" (Freeman 2026b). Freeman believes that once Iran does acquire nuclear capabilities, Turkey may follow. The security architecture of West Asia is being reshaped not by diplomatic negotiation but by the demonstrated failure of patron-provided security guarantees and the demonstrated viability of autonomous military capacity.

Though Iran doesn't import weapons, it uses its vast military stockpile to arm its ideologically sympathetic militia groups across West Asia. Since the inception of the Islamic Republic, Iran has supplied Hezbollah with anti-tank missiles, surface-to-air missile launchers, reconnaissance drones, multiple rocket launchers, and portable surface-to-air missiles (Hussain and Wezeman 2026). To its allied Houthis in Yemen, Iran transferred surface-to-air missiles, anti-ship missiles, one-way attack drones, and reconnaissance drones between 2020 and 2023

(Hussain and Wezeman 2026). These transfers have created a network of sub-state military actors equipped with Iranian-produced weapons operating across Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, and Palestine. It also exports to strategic partners like Russia, supplying approximately 7,000 Shahed-136 one-way attack drones and several hundred Fateh-360 ballistic missiles, which Russia deployed in its terror bombing campaign against Ukraine after its stockpiles stalled (Hussain and Wezeman 2026). Russia has since begun producing its own copies of these weapons. The military supply relationships flowing outward from Iran, a state under comprehensive sanctions and near-zero arms imports, demonstrate that middle powers can pursue autonomous production capacity and generate a robust security network without a procurement dependency on a patron. Freeman places this in the broader multinodal frame: "it's pretty clear that since the Strait [of Hormuz] has been open to [China] and since [China] cares about a multinodal order not dictated by the United States... They're going to help Iran survive. And so will Russia. So, I believe, will Turkey, despite the historic animosity between the Turks and the Iranians" (Freeman 2026b). In his view, "this is a total breakdown of American hegemony and its replacement by the emerging multinodal order" (Freeman 2026b).

Because of their NATO protection, European military development completely stalled throughout the unipolar era, with very few resources allocated to defense and spending targets often ignored. Since then, Trump's qualified NATO posture and the Ukraine war have spurred frantic responses as they seek to respond to their rapidly changing conditions. Defense spending across European capitals has reached record levels (Hidalgo Martínez 2026). The European Commission's ReArm Europe plan has provided financial instruments that NATO does not possess: economic competencies to incentivize military buildup through fiscal rule adaptation, and access to financial resources through the EU budget and the European Investment Bank

(Hoeffler 2025). France and the United Kingdom have established formal coordination on nuclear policy, capabilities and operations, and Paris has committed to increasing its nuclear warheads as part of a deterrence strategy that may extend to other European nations (Hidalgo Martínez 2026). It is telling that the EU seeks to develop competencies in arms transfers, defense industrial policy, and procurement coordination independently; NATO lacks the political will and organizational structure required to accomplish these goals. (Hoeffler 2025). Freeman (2026a) observed in his first interview that "as the American sphere of influence in Europe decays, these countries also behave in a multinodal fashion. They reach out, so the French have a base in the UAE, they cooperate with the UAE. They support the Saudi Navy, but not the other services in Saudi Arabia". The French military presence in the Gulf, the Franco-British nuclear coordination, and the EU's defense industrial instruments all represent security relationships that operate alongside but increasingly independent of the American guarantee. European states that purchased 78% of their military equipment from non-EU sources in the immediate aftermath of the Ukraine invasion have begun investing to rebalance toward European production (Hoeffler 2025). The process will take years, but successive American administrations have called for European defense burden-sharing for decades, and the result may be a partner that emerges as something different from what Washington wished for (Hidalgo Martínez 2026).

Freeman identifies middle power military diversification as a systemic phenomenon rather than a set of isolated national decisions. "Armcorp built jet fighters, cruise missiles. Japan, Brazil, South Africa, all middle power players benefitting and active in middle power [international relations], expanding military budgets and are either suppliers who need consumers or vice versa" (Freeman 2026b). The war in Iran has dramatically accelerated this process, "I think this is catalyzing a lot of motion," he observes. "We're going to see more

independent action from allies like Japan and Turkey" (Freeman 2026b). The supply chain dependencies that bind middle powers to American platforms also bind them to American strategic choices. When those choices include a war that depletes available munitions, delays export orders, and generates reputational damage, the incentive to develop alternatives intensifies across the system. China's role adds a further dimension: "nothing flies, no drones fly, no missiles go anywhere without magnets from China" (Freeman 2026b). Dependency on rare-earth minerals from a rival great power constitutes a vulnerability that neither American military dominance nor European rearmament can resolve through procurement policy alone.

6.3 The Military Sphere in Cross-Sphere Perspective

The military sphere changes more slowly than the political and economic spheres examined in the preceding chapters. The evidence assembled here suggests, however, that it changes in the same direction. Security relationships also complicate the diversification observed in the political and economic spheres. A state can join competing institutions because institutional memberships require no immediate material sacrifice. A state can form economic connections which contradict its security commitments because capital flows do not trigger the interoperability conflicts that military procurement does. But a middle power state cannot make competing military pacts without facing sanctions, program exclusion, and intelligence-sharing restrictions. The military sphere imposes material constraints on the kind of fluid, partnership-based recalibration that Womack (2024) describes as appropriate to a multinodal configuration. This may suggest that the three spheres of engagement diversify at different rates, with security ties functioning as the most resistant dimension. The evidence examined in this chapter, however, also indicates that when security diversification does occur, it carries

consequences that reverberate through the other spheres in ways that political or economic diversification alone cannot produce. Iran's autonomous military capacity, Turkey's drone diplomacy, and Europe's defense industrial buildup have all reshaped both the diplomatic and economic relationships surrounding them.

Chapter 7: Limits and Implications

7.1 Cross-Sphere Synthesis: The Multinodal Pattern

The preceding three chapters traced middle power behavior through its political, economic, and military dimensions. Taken altogether, a finding emerges that middle power states are actively disassociating their behavior across these dimensions, decoupling diplomatic calibrations, trade dependencies, and security relationships. Freeman asserts this is innate rather than circumstantial: "All [middle powers] seek to increase their strategic autonomy. None is willing to subordinate itself to China, the United States, or any other potential overlord" (Freeman 2024). That refusal to subordinate is the common thread across cases that have unique domestic conditions and positions in international relations.

The decoupling runs both across spheres and within them. Across spheres, middle power states maintain security dependencies with powers while routing capital toward their rivals and cultivating institutional memberships wherever possible, regardless of ideology. Within spheres, contradictions multiply further. States join competing regional institutions and make diplomatic inroads with states that are at war with each other. They deepen economic partnerships with nations at odds, and reluctantly integrate into the same trade networks as their enemies. Middle powers export arms to warring factions; they arm themselves with few external suppliers, in some cases, they arm themselves completely while exporting to their strategic partners. They can now sustain wars against patron-superpower coalitions. These contradictions would be inexplicable under the logic of alliance politics, where acceptance into one domain is conditional on alignment in the others. Under the logic of multinodality, they intentionally reduce dependence on any single relationship by using all available leverage to sustain variegated ties from disparate pools.

The degree of differentiation varies by the attributes unique to each middle power, and this variation is meaningful. Examined states such as Turkey and India, that command multiple independent sources of leverage, whether it be their geographic position, energy resources, sovereign wealth, demographic weight, or military capacity, sustain greater divergence across spheres and enjoy more autonomy. States like Israel and Canada, whose interests have been concentrated within the unipolar status quo, face greater limitations in their strategic options. That concentration paid extraordinary dividends during the unipolar era, when the returns on exclusive alignment with the American hegemon were high and the alternatives scarce. In a multinodal configuration, the same concentration restricts movement into different foreign policy avenues, increasingly even when that avenue is against the state's best interest. The most patron-dependent states examined here have moved relative to the unipolar baseline; the least dependent states have abandoned it entirely.

7.2 The Core Tension: Networks versus Spheres of Influence

The multinodal pattern described above coexists with a competing vision of international order. 'Spheres of influence'—a concept that Trump favors—refers to states exercising indisputable authority within their geographic regions (Westad 2026). The United States has not accepted the diffusion of agency documented in the preceding chapters. China and Russia see such spheres as beneficial to their regional hegemony, and that hegemony implicitly comes at the expense of American hegemony, which has not yet adjusted to the reality of the emerging order. Freeman describes this impulse, "the assertion that the international system and its dynamics are now defined by great power rivalry will not withstand scrutiny. This is a peculiarly American reaction to the progressive loss of U.S. dominance in every global domain other than the

military... states [now] have agency, the power to make a difference and to conduct themselves as they perceive their interests to dictate" (Freeman 2024). Spheres of influence represent an attempt to reimpose hierarchy on a system that has already evolved past it.

The tension runs through every sphere examined in this thesis. In the political sphere, American withdrawal from global institutions led to the acceleration and consolidation of middle power influence in regional alternatives. In the economic sphere, sanctions were meant to isolate adversaries. Instead, states have created parallel financial settlement networks now available to any state seeking to move away from the dollar. In the military sphere, the United States invasion of Iran has proved that a sanctioned middle power without any external military support can resist a great power. At each level, attempts to reimpose hierarchical control through unilateral action have created conditions that encourage further multinodal diversification.

Spheres of influence do have some bearing on international relations when great powers concentrate military force, and no other great or middle powers deem it worth intervening. Maduro's capture displayed successful, unchecked U.S. coercion in its immediate hemisphere. Russia's invasion of Ukraine represents a sphere-of-influence assertion pursued at catastrophic cost, though it could also be seen as a successful defense of its sphere from American encroachment. These cases confirm that spheres have not yet vanished, but Womack's (2024) broader point that attempts at coercion in a multinodal matrix disturbs the entire web of relationships is supported.

The trajectory favors the networked configuration, or at least its sharp rise. The United States accounts for a steadily declining share of global production and trade. This trend is observable going back to 2008, the same year that developing economies collectively surpassed advanced economies for the first time since the 19th century (Womack 2024). American

protectionism and the militarization of foreign policy have produced the resurgence of civilizational states, the renaissance of the Islamic world, the reassertion of European strategic autonomy, and the rise of a dozen middle-ranking powers from Brazil to Turkey. The G7's position, in his assessment, resembles "a retreat into a defensive citadel" that "risks placing the West on the fringe rather than at the center of the future, marginalizing its previously dominant role in human progress as parallel international communities and orders emerge" (Freeman 2024). The result, Freeman writes, is "the end of a unified, Western-dominated global order and its replacement by a hodgepodge of collaborations and rivalries at the sub-global level" (Freeman 2024). The partnership has superseded the alliance as the fundamental unit of international cooperation. Great powers still aspire to be global hegemon, but they operate within a system of increasing barriers; other powerful states with interests of their own that must be attended to.

7.3 Limits: What This Framework Does Not Explain

Designating a 'middle power'

The classification of the selected states into the middle power tier was imperfect and requires clarification. Despite its intuitive appeal, the scholarship has not produced a consensus definition of a "middle power", though factors such as a state's material capabilities, regional dominance, institutional embeddedness, and demonstrated capacity to shape outcomes beyond its region recur as criteria. However, the criteria are neither exclusive nor exhaustive. Japan, Brazil, South Africa, Germany, Mexico, and Indonesia are all powerful states and could easily be tested using the same methodology. Ultimately, they were not chosen due to concerns about relevance and finding adequate source material to include them in the research. Furthermore there was consideration of what constitutes a great power. Some scholars designate Russia as a middle

power because of its relatively small economy, which rivals Italy's. But its security apparatus is so vast, along with its institutional importance, that it preserves its great power status in all but the most narrowly material readings. Freeman disagreed with the classification of India as a middle power in this research, arguing that it has earned great-power standing through its regional hegemony, economic reach, and institutional centrality. These judgments reflect the increasingly malleable hierarchy of the multinodal world order.

Selecting only nine states for analysis compressed a much larger population of consequential states, but it improved analytical clarity by allowing for depth. Excluded states and their foreign policy strategies could, in theory, follow entirely different logics inconsistent with multinodal theory, though states with a variety of conditions were selected specifically to mitigate this possibility.

Discerning Biased Sources

The research encountered a persistent difficulty of finding sources untainted by the political interests they describe. International relations scholarship on power competition is inherently contentious. Academic journals, think tanks, media outlets, and government offices all possess pre-existing beliefs and institutional commitments which compromise their reliability. States routinely distort the information available to their populations to accommodate their agendas. Turkish sources seemed to emphasize Ankara's multinodal credentials. Whereas western sources, evaluating the same behaviors, often framed Turkish behavior as an inconsistency. Indian scholarship often mirrored state rhetoric. Most surprising was the lack of reliability that could be placed in the American media and research apparatus when it came to the breakdown of unipolarity. This is a feature of the domain itself, which I came to accept as the

research went on. Sources flagrantly contradict one another in their interpretations of what a behavior signifies for the future. Conscious of this distortion and striving not to replicate it, I consulted multiple outlets and research institutions to gradually accumulate a richer, unbiased collection of material. Upon reviewing primary source interviews, it was notable that Freeman spoke little of Saudi Arabia, even though much of what he was saying about the UAE and Israel seemed equally applicable. As the former Ambassador to the country, it is possible Freeman did not want to put himself on the record, or just did not want to be biased. Either way, it was rather late in the research process before this was realized and the necessary additional research was done to supplement the gap. The possibility that systematic bias has crept into the analysis in spite of these efforts cannot be excluded. The framework presented here should be stress-tested against alternative interpretations.

When Multinodality Does Not Apply

Multinodality is presented here from an international relations perspective. In following with that, it emphasizes state agency and the pursuit of national interest through international relations methods such as hedging and forum-shopping. It may obfuscate the role of other influential elements like domestic politics. An appropriate example would be Israeli domestic politics. Netanyahu's pending corruption charges, initiated in 2020, are widely cited as a reason for the state's constant warmongering and military operations. This was completely missed as a factor in my research, and could easily have been a very influential facet in Israel's multinodal evaluation. Case-by-case factors, such as electoral needs, succession dynamics, and surging populist movements, can all impact foreign policy divergence, only appearing multinodal when viewed from the international level. Non-state actors, multinational corporations, and

transnational networks also shape state behavior in ways the framework stresses less than a comprehensive account would require. A state may wish to diversify its economy but be hindered by its private sector's concentrated dependencies. It may also pursue diplomatic autonomy while subject to diaspora pressure or to domestic constituencies with fixed great-power alignments.

7.4 Implications

Unipolarity enabled specific behaviors that a multinodal configuration structurally discourages. A single hegemon could wage wars of choice with minimal systemic resistance, crash a rival's economy through unilateral sanctions, fund coups and intervention campaigns across multiple continents simultaneously, and exempt favored clients from the international legal standards it imposed on others. The preceding chapters documented how the erosion of that capacity has proceeded across all three spheres of engagement: institutional fragmentation in the political sphere, the construction of parallel financial architecture in the economic sphere, and the development of autonomous military production and procurement diversification in the security sphere. The implication is that these behaviors become progressively harder to sustain as the distribution of capability across states widens. Freeman's assessment of the current order captures the structural consequence: American protectionism and militarized foreign policy have produced not compliance but "the resurgence of civilizational states like China, India, Japan, and Russia, the strengthening renaissance of the Islamic world, the reassertion of strategic autonomy by France and other European powers, the rise of new middle-ranking powers" and the emergence of ASEAN and Africa as independent economic actors (Freeman 2024). The attempt

to maintain hegemonic prerogatives has accelerated the diffusion of the capacity it was designed to prevent.

Much of the current international disorder originates in the friction between this diffusion and the residual determination of great powers to arrest it. The wars in Ukraine and Iran, the abduction of Maduro and subsequent threats to Latin America, the annexation rhetoric toward Greenland, and the weaponization of trade policy all reflect a hegemon asserting control over a system that no longer responds to assertion the way it once did. That friction will diminish as the structural conditions supporting hegemonic enforcement continue to erode. The configuration replacing it differs from prior multipolar moments in that relevant powers are dispersed across continents with divergent developmental trajectories rather than concentrated in a single region pursuing identical colonial models. The competition among 19th-century European empires for the same territories and extraction patterns produced the conditions for catastrophic war. The competition among contemporary middle powers for differentiated partnerships across separate strategic domains produces incentives for diplomacy and mutual accommodation. States need each other for different things, and the multinodal web penalizes attempts at exclusivity. International relations theory requires corresponding adjustment. Frameworks built for bipolar and unipolar configurations cannot account for the simultaneous, contradictory, and strategically rational behavior this thesis has documented across nine states and three spheres of engagement. Uncertainty management has displaced power maximization as the governing strategic calculus. The field requires networked models that treat cross-sphere divergence as a structural feature of the international system rather than as an anomaly awaiting correction.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

The research question this thesis posed was how middle powers behave across different strategic domains in a fragmenting international order, and what the divergence between those domains reveals about the structure of the contemporary system. Analysis of nine states and three spheres of engagement demonstrates how middle powers actively decouple their political alignments, economic partnerships, and security dependencies. These decouplings operate both within spheres, where states maintain contradictory relationships under the same strategic heading, and across spheres, where a state's diplomatic posture, trade orientation, and arms procurement each follow a separate logic. The behavior is rational, widespread, and accelerating.

Looking back at Davos, one discerns Carney describing a world in which bilateral negotiation with a hegemon produces "the performance of sovereignty while accepting subordination" and calling on middle powers to build "institutions and agreements that function as described" rather than invoking an order that no longer operates as advertised (Gardels 2026). The multinodal framework developed in this thesis explains why that call is well-timed, and why it emanated from the leader of America's most traditionally aligned partner. Carney's message was consistent with every state examined in this thesis.

The unresolved tension of this thesis is between the multinodal networks middle powers are constructing and the spheres of influence great powers are attempting to salvage. That strain will persist as the United States, particularly, resists its relegation from the unipolar status it once held. The trajectory of the system, however, favors the new networked configuration. The tools of hegemonic enforcement have paradoxically funded the infrastructure of the system that replaces hegemony. Sanctions once effective have now created alternative settlement mechanisms, institutional withdrawal produced regional alternatives, and military overextension

emboldened once cautious states while pushing forcing partners to diversify procurement sources. The war in Iran compressed this process by years, exposing the limits of patron credibility, accelerating diplomatic realignment among Gulf and European states, and demonstrating that autonomous military capacity can sustain a state against a superpower coalition. The multinodal framework provides the analytical lens to examine the new positions and connections that have begun to take form as states shift and recalibrate their alliances and associations. Where middle powers land and whether great powers adjust to inhabit a system they no longer dominate will define the next era of international relations.

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