

# Multipolar Aspirations and Strategic Realities: The Limits of Alternative Security Guarantees in the Contemporary International System

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## I. INTRODUCTION

For decades, the rules-based international order shaped by the United States and its Western partners has defined expectations for global interaction. Built after World War II and reinforced during the Cold War, it promoted accountability, transparency, and structured regulation while encouraging alignment among states. Yet the system often struggled to accommodate leaders who sought independent development models or resisted external governance frameworks. Across Africa, figures such as Thomas Sankara, Muammar Gaddafi, Kwame Nkrumah, and Patrice Lumumba demonstrated how efforts to assert sovereignty or redefine national priorities frequently carried political consequences.

Despite rising dissatisfaction with this U.S.-led system, a truly multipolar order remains aspirational. Emerging powers have not yet shown reliable security guarantees in moments of crisis. Recent events in Libya, Venezuela, and Iran highlight an enduring imbalance: the United States and its allies still possess the decisive technological and military capacity to influence outcomes, while alternative power centers fall short in global affairs.

## II. A RULES-BASED INTERNATIONAL ORDER AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Following the establishment of the United Nations (UN) in 1945, newly independent African states rapidly acceded to the organization, embracing both its foundational principles and the broader rules-based international order it symbolized. As decolonization accelerated across the continent during the second half of the twentieth century, African governments increasingly sought legitimacy

and international recognition through participation in multilateral institutions. By the end of the Cold War in 1991, all 54 African states had joined the UN, formally integrating themselves into a global system premised on sovereignty, legal norms, and collective security. During this period, many African states also recalibrated their foreign policies, distancing themselves from earlier alignments with the Soviet bloc and the People's Republic of China, while gradually gravitating toward Western-led political and economic frameworks. This shift was often accompanied by expectations of humanitarian assistance, development cooperation, and diplomatic engagement from the United States and its allies (Monyae, 2018).

The legal foundation of this international system is articulated in the UN Charter. Chapter I, Article 2(4), explicitly prohibits the use of force in international relations, stipulating that all member states must refrain "from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations." In principle, these provisions were designed to create a universal standard of accountability governing interstate conduct. In practice, however, enforcement has often been most visible in cases involving weaker states. Several African leaders have faced international prosecution under these norms. For instance, Charles Ghankay Taylor, former president of Liberia, was convicted on 26 September 2013 by the Special Court for Sierra Leone for crimes against humanity, terrorism, and war crimes (Al Jazeera, 2013). Similarly, in April 2011, Laurent Gbagbo, then president of Côte d'Ivoire, was removed from power and arrested following the 2010–2011 post-electoral crisis before being transferred to international judicial authorities

(BBC, 2011). These cases demonstrate how international legal mechanisms have been applied to African political leaders in the name of maintaining global order and enforcing accountability.

Critics argue, however, that adherence to the rules-based order has been inconsistent, particularly when examining the actions of powerful states. During the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan, the United States faced accusations of violating provisions of the Hague Conventions—notably Articles 23 and 25—which prohibit methods of warfare that cause unnecessary suffering and the deliberate targeting of undefended settlements (Nouri, 2022). More recently, Israel has faced allegations from Human Rights Watch that its military operations in Gaza Strip involved the deliberate deprivation of essential resources such as water and food to civilian populations (Human Rights Watch, 2024). At the same time, Vladimir Putin of Russia has been accused of crimes against humanity in relation to the ongoing war in Ukraine (Dickenson, 2025). Despite these allegations, no comparable arrests or judicial proceedings have occurred against leaders of major powers. This disparity has fueled persistent debates over the selectivity of international justice and raised questions about whether the rules-based international order operates uniformly or reflects the enduring asymmetries of global power (Pressenza International Press Agency, 2026).

### III. REAPPRAISAL OF PRE-COLONIAL AFRICAN GOVERNANCE

Before the imposition of Western governance models, African political systems were deeply rooted in communal values, collective responsibility, and culturally grounded mechanisms of social regulation. Across major pre-colonial polities—including the Zulu Kingdom, the Ashanti Empire, and the Mali Empire—leadership legitimacy was anchored in royal lineage and hereditary succession, rather than through mechanisms resembling mass electoral participation. As Amoo-Osae (2024) demonstrates, these monarchies operated within dynastic frameworks in which rulers were selected based on lineage, customary law, and spiritual authority rather than popular vote.

In addition to hereditary governance, many African societies maintained robust indigenous restorative

justice systems, which prioritized reconciliation, social harmony, and the reintegration of offenders into the community. Kinyanjui (2010) observes that these systems effectively addressed disputes through mediation, compensation, and communal participation. However, British indirect rule—and, later, the post-colonial Kenyan state's adoption of English common law—fundamentally altered these practices by replacing them with a retributive, state-centered model that emphasized punishment over restoration and felt increasingly alien and ineffective within African social contexts.

Gertrude Kamyia Othieno (2025) further argues that the arrival of European powers under the logics of mercantilism and capitalism triggered profound disruptions in African governance, resource management, and cultural cohesion. Colonial intervention restructured the political and economic foundations that had sustained African societies for centuries, undermining indigenous leadership institutions, redistributing authority, and reshaping local economies to serve external interests.

In the contemporary era, global inequality and geopolitical asymmetries continue to reinforce the displacement of African identity in favor of externally imposed ideologies and institutional frameworks. As a result, the erosion of traditional governance systems represents not merely the loss of historical cultural practices, but the continued marginalization of African epistemologies, political philosophies, and modes of communal organization (Sustainability Directory, n.d.). This ongoing replacement of indigenous identity with externally oriented ideological systems underscores a broader crisis of representation, legitimacy, and cultural continuity across the continent.

### IV. THE LIMITS OF ALTERNATIVE SECURITY GUARANTEES

A review of three scenarios—Libya (2011), Venezuela (2025–2026), and Iran (2026)—demonstrates the limits of purported rising alternative powers in shaping a multipolar security order, showing that while states such as Russia and China often maintain diplomatic, economic, or rhetorical alignment with vulnerable regimes, these

relationships rarely translate into credible or timely military protection during moments of acute crisis.

#### V. LIBYA (2011): OVERTURES WITHOUT PROTECTION

In the lead-up to United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973, Russia and China abstained from the Security Council vote, allowing the resolution authorizing a no-fly zone and protective measures in Libya to pass. This decision reflected a strategic miscalculation that indirectly enabled international intervention against Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi (Ishetiar, 2019). Earlier, in November 2008, Libya and Russia had discussed civil nuclear cooperation during Gaddafi's visit to Moscow as part of Tripoli's effort to diversify partnerships beyond the West (Al Jazeera, 2008). Gaddafi also sought closer ties with Beijing and Moscow, signaling that Chinese and Indian firms could replace Western companies and meeting with ambassadors from China, Russia, and India days before the vote. These diplomatic overtures, however, failed to translate into protection when NATO intervened; Gaddafi's regime collapsed in 2011, illustrating the limits of non-Western security assurances at a decisive moment.

#### VI. VENEZUELA (2025–2026): APPEALS AND AFTERMATH

Facing growing pressure from the United States in late 2025, Caracas formally appealed to Russia, China, and Iran for military assistance—including missiles, radar systems, and overhauls for Su-30MK2 fighter aircraft—to strengthen deterrence (Shumlianskyi, 2025). Nevertheless, on January 3, 2026, Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro was captured during a U.S. operation reportedly named “Operation Absolute Resolve.” The operation demonstrated the precision and reach of U.S. military capabilities and revealed that potential external guarantors were either unable or unwilling to prevent the outcome (AP; CBS News).

#### VII. IRAN (2026): PRECISION AND POWER VACUUMS

In late February 2026, coordinated U.S.–Israeli strikes targeted Iran's leadership and strategic facilities. Early reports and official statements indicated that Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, had been killed, although initial coverage varied in confirming the details during the first 24–48 hours (Israel National News; The Guardian; ITIC). Despite early uncertainty, the episode underscored the operational dominance of U.S. and allied capabilities and again highlighted the absence of effective protection from alternative external patrons.

#### VIII. INFERENCE ACROSS CASES

Across these cases, rhetorical alignment and commercial or diplomatic ties with Russia and China did not evolve into credible or timely security guarantees during moments of extreme political and military risk.

#### IX. CONCLUSION: A WORLD IN SEARCH OF BALANCE

The preceding analysis highlights the persistent tension between the aspirations for a multipolar international system and the realities of contemporary global power distribution. Although dissatisfaction with the U.S.-led rules-based international order has grown—particularly among states seeking greater autonomy or alternative development paths—the institutional, technological, and military advantages of the United States and its allies continue to shape decisive outcomes in international crises. Historical experiences in Africa, including the erosion of indigenous governance systems and the uneven application of international legal norms, further complicate perceptions of legitimacy within the existing order.

At the same time, the cases of Libya, Venezuela, and Iran demonstrate the limited capacity of emerging powers to provide reliable security guarantees when geopolitical stakes escalate. Despite diplomatic engagement, economic partnerships, and rhetorical solidarity, alternative power centers such as Russia and China have rarely translated these relationships into effective strategic protection during moments of

crisis. Consequently, the vision of a stable multipolar order remains uncertain and incomplete, reflecting a global system still structured by enduring asymmetries of power, enforcement, and strategic influence.

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