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Global Polarization: How International and Domestic Polarization Shape Global Politics

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Abstract

Polarization is a prominent concept in Comparative Politics and is widely used in the debate on contemporary threats to democracy and social cohesion. So far, however, scholars in International Relations (IR) have refrained from systematically thinking about polarization at the international level (international polarization) and its interplay with domestic polarization (global polarization). In this paper, we introduce the concept of international polarization to contribute to filling this gap. Applying the concept and theory of polarization as established in Comparative Politics to the sphere of international politics, we conceptualize international polarization as the intensification of perceived ideological and affective differences between states or groups of states. More specifically, we propose that it is important for IR to take polarization seriously if we are to understand the significant global shifts we are currently witnessing, including the deepening crisis of international institutions. This paper reviews the (lack of) IR engagement with polarization, develops a conceptualization and theory of international polarization and presents preliminary empirical evidence suggesting that polarization should be considered as an important feature of contemporary world politics.

Zusammenfassung

Polarisierung ist ein zentrales Konzept der Vergleichenden Politikwissenschaft und findet in der Debatte über gegenwärtige Bedrohungen für Demokratie und innergesellschaftlichen Frieden breite Verwendung. Die Forschung der Internationalen Beziehungen (IB) hat sich hingegen nicht systematisch mit Polarisierung zwischen Staaten (internationale Polarisierung) und ihrem Zusammenspiel mit innergesellschaftlicher Polarisierung (globale Polarisierung) auseinandergesetzt. Der vorliegende Beitrag entwickelt eine Konzeption internationaler Polarisierung, um zur Schließung dieser Forschungslücke beizutragen. Indem wir das Konzept und die Theorie der Polarisierung, wie sie in der Vergleichenden Politikwissenschaft etabliert sind, auf die Sphäre der internationalen Politik übertragen, konzeptualisieren wir internationale Polarisierung als die Intensivierung wahrgenommener ideologischer und affektiver Unterschiede zwischen Staaten(-gruppen). Wir argumentieren, dass die IB Polarisierung ernst nehmen muss, um die bedeutsamen globalen Verschiebungen zu verstehen, die wir gegenwärtig beobachten, einschließlich der sich vertiefenden Krise internationaler Institutionen. Der Beitrag beleuchtet die (fehlende) Auseinandersetzung der IB mit Polarisierung, entwickelt eine Konzeptualisierung und Theorie internationaler Polarisierung und präsentiert vorläufige empirische Befunde, die nahelegen, dass Polarisierung ein wichtiges Charakteristikum der aktuellen Weltpolitik bildet.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The post-World War II international order, usually referred to as the liberal international order (LIO), is crumbling (Goddard et al. 2024; Lake et al. 2021). Its core norms and institutions are increasingly challenged or openly violated, geopolitical rivalries are intensifying by the day, and violent conflicts have spread in number and gravity since 2010 (Davies et al. 2024). This much-discussed crisis is not only driven by contestation by potentially revisionist powers such as Russia, Iran, or China. The LIO is also challenged by liberal democracies in the West that were traditionally regarded as its main supporters, but who have begun to retreat from international institutions and norms, most notably the United States under President Donald Trump (Wiener et al. 2026). One significant cause of this retreat is the rise of nationalist sentiments and right-wing populist movements across liberal democracies (Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019; de Vries et al. 2021; Lake et al. 2021).

In Comparative Politics, the rise of nationalist and right-wing populist forces has been analyzed as part and parcel of a broader trend characterizing contemporary political developments across different countries and world regions: polarization. In fact, polarization has become a major topic in the academic debate about the current erosion of democracy and the broader trend of autocratization.² This rapidly growing literature documents an increasing domestic polarization, identifies deepening ideological and affective divisions of political elites and general populations, and finds an erosion of common ground and the capacity for compromise, up to the point at which polarization becomes “pernicious” as societies split into mutually distrustful or even antagonistic “Us vs. Them” camps” (McCoy and Somer 2019: 235). Populist and authoritarian sentiments and movements, particularly on the far right of the political spectrum, simultaneously drive and benefit from polarized domestic debates. MAGA in the US, the Front National in France, Fidesz in Hungary, or the AfD in Germany are cases in point. These right-wing movements share a commitment to nationalism, a dislike of representative democracy, favor restrictive migration policies and are skeptical if not outright hostile to international cooperation and organizations (Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019; de Vries et al. 2021; Norris and Inglehart 2019). Hence, the more domestic polarization increases, the less support governments will provide to the norms and institutions of the international order, making them ever less able to facilitate cooperation on global issues such as climate change and address challenges to international peace and security (Friedrichs and Tama 2022; Levin et al. 2021; Schultz 2017).

In this essay, we argue for conceptualizing polarization not only as a domestic phenomenon affecting international politics, but rather as a dynamic that simultaneously plays out at the domestic and the international levels, which interact and feed off each other. It is, thus, not enough to view polarization as an intrastate phenomenon which affects international relations through the domestic politics of foreign policy, as theorized in canonical approaches to the “second image” (Gourevitch 1978, 2002; Kaarbo 2015; Putnam 1988; Risse-Kappen 1991). Polarization also emerges at the international level between (groups of) states, unfolding similar dynamics as polarization within states does. Just as increasing polarization within states has been identified as a crucial factor undermining political order and driving the erosion of democracy, we argue that deepening international polarization is an important factor contributing to the deepening crisis of multilateral institutions. In fact, current debates on the intensifying rivalry between the US and China and a supposed “new cold war” (Buzan 2024), on the confrontation between Russia and “the

2 See Carothers and O'Donohue (2019); Iyengar et al. (2012); Levin et al. (2021); McCoy et al. (2022); McCoy and Somer (2019); Roberts (2022); Rostbøll (2025); Sarsfield et al. (2024); Schedler (2023); Svoblik (2019); for a critical perspective, see Törnberg (2026).

West” in the context of Russia’s war in Ukraine (Morozov 2023) as well as on international norm contestation and backlash (Alter and Zürn 2020; Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2021), all point towards deepening ideological and affective rifts between states – or blocs of states – that mutually delegitimize each other, perceive one another as threats, and, as a result, appear increasingly less willing or able to reach compromise based on shared international norms and procedures.

So far, IR has refrained from studying international polarization and its effects, not to mention the interplay between domestic and international polarization we might call ‘global polarization’. We lack empirical studies that explicitly investigate polarization beyond the nation-state level. This essay is making the case for international polarization as a crucial dynamic shaping current conflicts in world politics and, hence, arguably also the future of world order. The primary aim of the paper is, therefore, to introduce, explain and justify the concept of *international polarization* understood as the intensification of perceived ideological and affective differences between states or groups of states. In addition, we suggest two further concepts to inform and advance the study of global politics: *Global polarization* grasps the interplay between domestic and international polarization, which is further driven by *transnational polarization* that cuts across the distinction between the domestic and the international and arguably constitutes an important transmission belt connecting both levels.

In this essay, we first set out how polarization has entered IR discourse and then develop a conceptualization and theory of international polarization that, fundamentally, applies insights from Comparative Politics to the international arena (Section 2). In Section 3, we make the case for a broader research program that empirically conceptualizes and measures international polarization. We do so by presenting empirical observations that are in line with the effects expected in a world experiencing intense international polarization. Finally, in the Section 4, we conclude by proposing a broader research agenda that considers global polarization as a result of the interplay between the domestic and international dynamics of polarization, further driven by transnational polarization that cuts across the distinction between the domestic and the international.

2. POLARIZATION IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND COMPARATIVE POLITICS

The interplay of domestic and international politics is an important and recurring theme in IR (Gourevitch 1978, 2002; Kaarbo 2015; Putnam 1988; Risse-Kappen 1991). Against this background, there is a remarkable absence in current IR debates about the state and future of world order: a few exceptions notwithstanding, the question of how domestic polarization is shaping international politics has hardly been dealt with.³

2.1 Polarization in International Relations Scholarship

The bulk of early IR literature dealing with domestic politics focuses on rather stable or structural properties of countries, such as national identity, economic development, and political regime type (see Moravcsik 1997). Liberal IR theories in particular examine the institutional properties of political systems and how these shape the translation of indi-

3 One exception concerns the emerging debate on how domestic polarization shapes the foreign policy of states, in particular the US (Friedrichs and Tama 2022; Levin et al. 2021; Schultz 2017). Notably, a 2021 PNAS Special Feature starts with the observation that “polarization within and among nations” constitute important trends, calling for studying these processes and their interplay “at multiple scales, from the local to the international” (Levin et al. 2021: 1). Still, while some contributions to the Special Feature speak to the interplay of domestic polarization and international politics, none analyze dynamics of polarization *between* states.

vidual preferences into foreign policy. Democratic peace theory, in its different versions, emphasizes the role of democratic institutions and norms to explain the peaceful behavior of democratic regimes towards each other (e.g., Russett and Oneal 2001; Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1999).⁴ Similarly, theories of liberal imperialism highlight how particular sectoral interests and their access to decision making affects whether states favor or refrain from imperialist policies (Snyder 1991: 31–55; Doyle 1986). In a similar vein, liberal intergovernmentalism studies how constellations of interests affect foreign policies (Moravcsik 1993, 1997). Adding to this, constructivist theories analyze how domestic norms and national identities of states shape foreign policy and international interaction (Katzenstein 1996; Hopf 2002). Societally driven phenomena, such as polarization, however, do not feature prominently in these debates. A partial exception, which addresses similar dynamics, is research on ingroup and outgroup formation and the role of enemy images in IR (e.g., Geis 2006; Koschut 2018; Owen 1997; Risse-Kappen 1995).

Though mostly implicitly, polarization has been taken up in IR debates by Realist theories of power transition and hegemonic stability (Gilpin 1981; Schweller 1999, 2011). Quite similarly to second image-type research, these theories largely focused on the properties of states and, except for population growth, dismissed societal dynamics. Ideological or affective dynamics as emphasized in research on domestic polarization are generally not covered. As Hegre has noted, traditionally, “research on polarization in the international relations (IR) field has primarily focused on alliance patterns and the distribution of military power” (Hegre 2008: 263).⁵ Such traditional IR perspectives on polarization also dominate the current debate about the transformation of world order. On the one hand, scholars study, for instance, alliance patterns or bloc formation through investigating voting behavior in the UN General Assembly (e.g., Voeten 2025, see Section 3.2). On the other, research examines shifts in the polarity of the international system, from unipolarity to multipolarity and/or bipolarity, by analyzing the distribution of material power resources (e.g., Brooks and Wohlforth 2023). Such studies, by conceptualizing and measuring international polarization either in terms of states’ observable behavior or through the (neo)realist notion of polarity (Thompson 1986), certainly address relevant issues. Still, seen from the perspective of polarization as established in Comparative Politics, which focuses on positions and attitudes rather than behavior or capacities, they investigate the causes or consequences of international polarization but miss the phenomenon as such.

More recently, scholars in norms research have started thinking about and analyzing dynamics of international polarization on gender and sexuality norms (Symons and Altman 2015; De Silva 2024). Their focus is “international norm polarization”, understood as a “process wherein a candidate norm is accepted by some states but is resisted by others leading to a period of international disputation between two groups” (Symons and Altman 2015: 66). Building on this, De Silva (2024) draws on recent research on domestic polarization to conceptualize polarization “as an intense type of Othering in which all states are pushed to take a position within a binary division and which creates the Self-Group, e.g., progressive states, and the Other-Group, e.g., conservative states” (De Silva 2024: 2). In the following, we suggest a similar conceptual move, but with a broader perspective on international polarization beyond the specific dynamics of norm contestation.

4 For a recent debate on the Democratic Peace, see e.g. Rathbun et al. (2025) and Tomz and Weeks (2026).

5 In his study on the impact of international polarization on interstate conflict, Hegre (2008) also uses relatively stable properties of countries to assess polarization; the global distribution of income and domestic political systems.

2.2 The concept and theory of polarization in Comparative Politics

In the debate in Comparative Politics, the concept of polarization refers to a process or configuration characterized by a clustering of “attributes of individual group members along three dimensions: intragroup homogeneity, intergroup heterogeneity, and intergroup distance” (Schedler 2023: 340). With a view to the relevant attributes that shape the formation of two opposed clusters, the literature distinguishes between two different dimensions of polarization:

1. Ideological polarization refers to the clustering of political preferences around extremes, resulting in the emergence of two opposing camps with mutually exclusive policy stances.
2. Affective polarization involves emotional distancing between groups, characterized by the attribution of positive qualities to one’s own group and negative ones to the opposing side, resulting in ingroup favoritism and outgroup hostility.⁶

A second distinction, which is also relevant for our purposes, concerns “the *level of analysis* at which polarization occurs” (Sarsfield et al. 2024: 5, emphasis in original). Research on domestic polarization differentiates between mass (or societal) and elite (or political) polarization, with the former usually referring to polarization among citizens and the latter either to polarization between political parties (as in Sartori’s classic study, 2005 [1976]) or among members of the political elite (McCoy et al. 2018: 20; Sarsfield et al. 2024: 6–7).

While a certain level of ideological and affective polarization at the levels of masses and/or elites is both normal and manageable, polarization becomes problematic – “toxic” (Lührmann et al. 2019), “severe” (Carothers and O’Donohue 2019), or “pernicious” (McCoy and Somer 2019) – when it leads to the formation of antagonistic groups that perceive one another as threats to existence and order, that is, as wholesale enemies instead of mere opponents (Schedler 2023: 352). In this context, a single, identity-based difference begins to “overshadow [...] all others” (McCoy and Somer 2019: 235), with elite and mass polarization tending to fuse, “creating large opposing blocks that comprise both elites and nonelites (Carothers and O’Donohue 2019: 7). Research suggests that deepening polarization makes cooperation across camps more difficult, reduces the mutual willingness to compromise, legitimizes violations of established norms and increases the risk of violent conflict escalation (McCoy et al. 2018; Svobik 2019).

It is crucial to distinguish between normal and extreme polarization. As Schedler has argued, ideological polarization – in giving rise to clashing “vital interests” and “basic values” – and affective polarization – in producing “mutual perceptions as bad people” and “intense negative feelings between adversaries” – can individually or jointly lead to mutual political intolerance; the “perception and description of adversaries as political enemies” (Schedler 2023, 354, Figure 2). Such extreme polarization goes beyond the clustering of preferences and attitudes. It rather connotes “a form of public conflict” that takes the shape of “an entrenched political confrontation at the highest level of the polity between imagined communities whose antagonism tends to absorb, dominate, or displace other cleavages” (Schedler 2023: 358; see also McCoy and Somer 2019).

⁶ Here, we follow scholars such as Sarsfield et al. (2024: 5–6) and Schedler (2023: 350–352) who treat the affective and the ideological as two dimensions or forms of polarization that are analytically distinct, even if they may well relate to, and mutually reinforce, each other.

2.3 International polarization – a conceptual proposal

In line with the previous discussion, we define international polarization as the intensification of perceived differences between states or groups of states. Analytically, we distinguish between positional and attitudinal differences, that is, between the ideological and the affective dimension of international polarization. In addition, international polarization can have different qualities, or intensities, ranging from “normal” differences that are merely perceived as such – political preferences and group identities that happen to be different – to an extreme level at which differences give rise to all-encompassing friend-and-foe images and mutual perceptions of fundamental threats.

When conceptualizing polarization at the interstate level, we can distinguish between two levels of analysis, roughly in line with the distinction between mass/societal and elite/political polarization at the intrastate level. First, we can treat states as individual members of the society of states. As in opinion polls at the domestic level, we would then empirically analyze the positions and attitudes of all states (e.g., by analyzing the speech acts of state representatives) and assess whether, *taken together*, they tend to cluster at the extremes. Second, we can regard states as individually relevant actors, akin to major political parties within states, and assess the extent of polarization between these individual states.⁷

This conceptualization of international polarization is deliberately distinct from traditional second image-type studies in IR and from Realist approaches to power polarity that focus on rather static properties of states instead of societal dynamics. Applying and adjusting the concepts and methods from the study of domestic polarization, this approach enables scholars to trace societal dynamics on the international level. This means zooming in on the evolving positions and attitudes articulated by states and the way these are influenced by intra-societal dynamics, while simultaneously also shaping the interaction between states in the international realm. This draws our attention to state preferences, but also narratives, emotions, and dynamics of identity construction and how they translate into threat perceptions and the readiness for confrontation.

3. EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE ON INTERNATIONAL POLARIZATION AND ITS EFFECTS

In this essay, we make the case for developing a research program on international polarization. As an empirical illustration, this section assesses whether current developments in world politics are in line with the expected effects of international polarization on international politics in general, and international institutions in particular. Future studies could analyze international polarization directly, empirically assessing policy stances and in-group vs. out-group attitudes voiced by governments to measure ideological and affective dimensions of international polarization. The evidence presented in this section, therefore, does not directly demonstrate empirically that the current crisis of international institutions is accompanied or even shaped by increasing international polarization. Yet, combined with established research on increasing polarization at the domestic level, the following analysis suggests that polarization at the international level is contributing to the ongoing crumbling of the international order. Therefore, international polarization should

⁷ Furthermore, international polarization can be analyzed either at the global or at the regional level (Hegre 2008). Polarization dynamics can also run across national boundaries, for instance, when domestic polarization gives rise to transnational movements that connect polarized camps within states across borders (Bob 2012). In our conclusion (Section 4), we propose conceptualizing this phenomenon as *transnational polarization* and argue that it can be regarded as an important transmission belt connecting polarization at the domestic and at the international level.

both be empirically studied more systematically by IR scholars and included theoretically and politically in our thinking about the future of world order.

In the following, we provide initial evidence on developments in international politics that can plausibly be taken to be driven by international polarization. Based on the existing research on domestic polarization discussed above, we can identify three effects of international polarization:

1. At its core, international polarization should lead to the formation of camps – i.e., blocs of states – that increase cooperative relations within their respective ingroup, while reducing such interactions with the outgroup (McCoy et al. 2022: 6).
2. Interactions between these polarized camps will be characterized by a reduced willingness to accept counterarguments by the other side and to make compromises (McCoy and Somer 2019: 249). Consequently, international institutions can be expected to see less joint, or even consensual, decisions and increasing blockades or vetoes.
3. Third, in a context of international polarization, we should see a reduced propensity to respect common multilateral norms and procedures and, hence, a trend towards unilateral behavior and less inclusive (club-type) institutions.

To assess whether current developments in world politics are consistent with these three propositions, we review data and studies on voting behavior in the United Nations (UN), international sanctions, international peace operations, as well as international trade and investment.

3.1 Spreading ingroup and outgroup dynamics

First, with a view to the reconfiguration of international cooperation in terms of ingroup and outgroup dynamics, data and studies on voting behavior in the UN General Assembly, on international sanctions, as well as on international trade and investment relations suggest a trend towards the formation of blocs of states in line with the first proposition.

Increasing geopolitical differences are visible in international fora. An analysis of UN General Assembly voting behavior provided by Erik Voeten suggests “that a counter-hegemonic bloc is forming among states that do not necessarily share many common interests other than a common aversion to Western hegemony and the principles associated with that” (Voeten 2025: 77).

This geopolitical divergence is also reflected in economic data. In general, both trade and foreign direct investment are vulnerable to geopolitical risks, and cultural and geographic proximity can serve as buffers to mitigate this impact (Mulabdic and Yotov 2025; Grover and Vézina 2026). Especially since 2010, “friendshoring”, the notion of increasing economic relations with “friends,” has gained prominence at the expense of global connections (Blanga-Gubbay and Rubínová 2024; Gopinath et al. 2025; Grover and Vézina 2026). Specifically, Blanga-Gubbay and Rubínová (2024: 5–6) find that since the onset of Russia’s full invasion of Ukraine, trade between opposing blocs composed of “east” and “west” countries⁸ grew about 3 to 6 percent more slowly than trade within the same bloc. At the same time, between 2003/2004 and 2022/2024, foreign direct investment between opposing blocs has been decreasing particularly rapidly (Boeckelmann et al. 2024; Grover and Vézina 2026). Furthermore, current developments in the international trade regime we discuss below suggest a trend towards selective disintegration and clustering.

8 The authors define a state as “east” or “west” based on the absolute distance between its preferences in the UNGA and those of China or the United States, respectively. Data on state preferences is based on the ideal point procedure defined in Bailey et al. (2017).

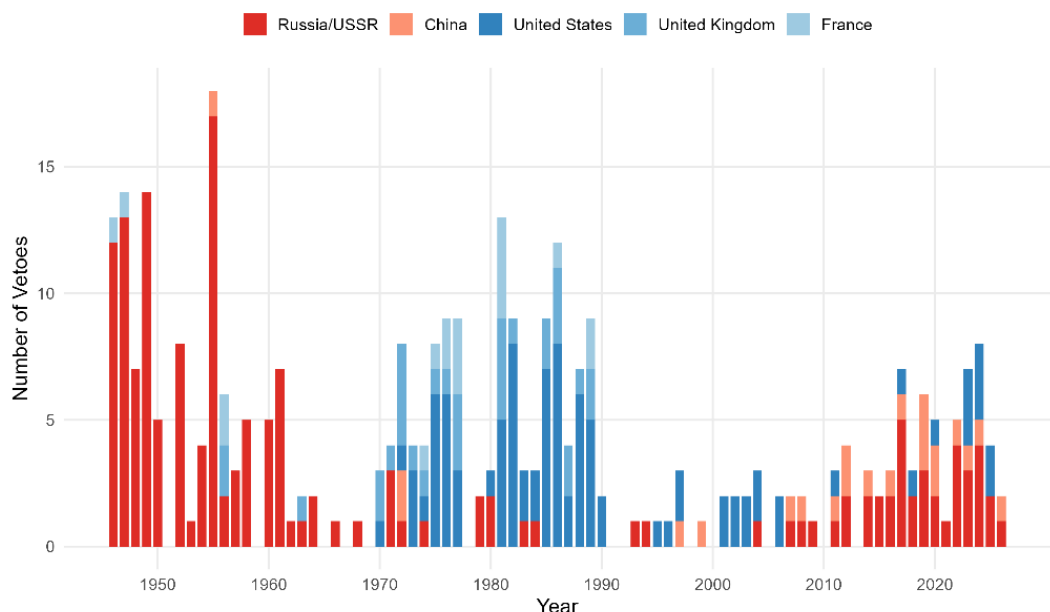
Data on international sanctions reveals similar in- and out-group trends. While the number of sanctions regimes on the books is reaching historic highs, the share of multilateral UN sanctions has been decreasing since the mid-2010s (Yalcin et al. 2025: 2008–10). Meanwhile, Western sanctions against Russia have been accumulating since the start of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Yalcin et al. 2025: 2010). In contrast, in-group sanctions are rare. While the US uses sanctions extensively across many countries, it tends to use more targeted measures when sanctioning individuals and companies in allied countries (Yalcin et al. 2025: 2010). Likewise, “members of the BRICS+ bloc [...] experience minimal sanctions from one another” (Deloitte 2025: 14).

3.2 Increasing blockades of international institutions

Data on vetoes in the UN Security Council (UNSC), the evolution of international peace-keeping as well as the international trade regime lend support to the notion of an increasing blockade of global institutions.

As Figure 1 highlights, after a period of only limited veto use after the end of the Cold War, there is a significant increase in the use of the veto in the UNSC starting about 2015. This highlights a reduced willingness to make compromises in the Council. This is also evident in the fact that most of these vetoes (53 from 2015–2026) came from China and Russia (42), while the US used 11 vetoes in that period. The UK and France have not used their veto since 1989. By this measure, the figure also shows that the most polarized times in UN history were the 1950s and early 1960s as well as the 1970s and 1980s, with higher numbers of vetoes than today despite the Council convening more rarely. This lines up with historical accounts of UN politics (Hanhimäki 2015; Reinalda 2009).

Figure 1: Vetoes against UNSC resolutions by geopolitical bloc, 1946–2026.



Source: Own visualization based on United Nations (2026) data.

A decreased willingness to compromise is also evident in the development of UN peace-keeping missions. While there are still eleven active peacekeeping missions as of July 2026, there has not been a single new mission since 2013, despite a concurrent increase

in violent conflict. Today, peacekeeping missions are under great pressure to cut costs or shut down altogether (Karlsrud 2023). This often leads to drastic restrictions in mandates (Chen and Coleman 2024). These restrictions are generally driven by a lack of agreement between Russia and China on the one hand and Western democracies on the other (Pfeifer Cruz and van der Lijn 2024).

Developments at the World Trade Organization (WTO) show a similar pattern: the system of general trade negotiations has been blocked since the Doha Round in 2001. This situation has worsened with the US blocking the election of judges for the dispute settlement bodies, leaving them basically defunct (Galbraith 2019: 822).

3.3 *Moving away from institutions*

Finally, we also observe a turn to unilateral action, bilateral relations, and ‘minilateralism’ in many important policy fields. In general, there is no obvious trend of states exiting international organizations at increasing rates (Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2025). However, states do not need to formally exit IOs to stop multilateral cooperation. Instead, states can cease working within IOs, turning them into “zombie institutions” making no meaningful progress in pursuit of their original aims (Gray 2018). UN institutions and the WTO, examined below, illustrate this trend.

A turn to uni-, bi-, and ‘minilateralism’ is visible in peacekeeping missions with the “increase in regional and ad hoc coalitions” (Karlsrud 2023: 221). In addition, alternative actors and institutions have emerged, for instance Russia with its extended security engagement in the Middle East and on the African continent, often via mercenary groups such as the Wagner Group (Deitelhoff and Geis 2023).

Similarly, the deadlock at the WTO has been accompanied by more states concluding regional trade agreements only partially complying with WTO rules (WTO 2025). Overall, we observe a general shift towards bilateral, regional, and bi-regional trade agreements, but also unilateral trade policies, further fragmenting the world trade system (Dür et al. 2014). Meanwhile, there is a glaring lack of compliance with the WTO’s rules of free trade. Less than half of its member states still follow their commitment to report on their trade practices (WTO 2024), while tariff and non-tariff trade barriers are steadily increasing (Evenett et al. 2026).

Finally, the rise in international sanctions noted above is overwhelmingly driven by sanctions imposed unilaterally by Western states or among Western alliances, namely by the US and the EU (Yalcin et al. 2025: 2009–10).

4. CONCLUSIONS

In this essay, we have made the case for systematically incorporating international polarization as a societally driven dynamic shaping world politics in general and the current crisis of the international order in particular. International polarization, understood as the intensification of ideological and affective differences between states or groups of states, is usefully conceptualized as an analytically distinct phenomenon. Yet, empirically, international polarization interacts with domestic polarization, giving rise to complex dynamics of global polarization that need to be studied thoroughly.

Given the lack of data on international polarization, we have shown that current developments in international institutions and the global economy resemble the typical effects reported for domestic polarization. We observe a trend towards the formation of geopo-

litical blocs, a decreasing willingness of states to compromise and a move away from institutions and rules alike. Building on work on domestic polarization, we can expect these trends to be driven by both ideological and affective polarization, taking hold among both ordinary citizens and political elites.

Still, these observations and interpretations should be treated with caution. It is far from clear that current patterns of international polarization closely resemble those observed at the intra-state level. The formation of clear antagonistic blocs of states that confront each other as “imagined communities” (Schedler 2023) is undermined by the fact that the conflict lines that shape international polarization in different policy fields appear to be cross-cutting. For instance, the division between “conservative” and “progressive” states observed by De Silva (2024: 2) in the area of gender and sexuality rights runs through the group of Western states, differing from the geopolitical blocs in UNSC voting or the reconfiguration of international trade and investment. Also, the BRICS+ group remains a heterogeneous group whose members might share a position of non-alignment with the West, but hardly a strong anti-Western position. China and Russia may praise their “no-limits partnership,” but a closer look reveals ideological differences on many issues.⁹ Similarly, the “Western bloc” is far from cohesive. Particularly, with the second Trump administration in the US, tensions between Western democracies are increasing.

Current dynamics in transatlantic relations and within the Western Hemisphere also point to a third form of polarization that cuts across our distinction between the domestic and the international level: *transnational polarization*, understood as the formation and deliberate promotion of transnational societal camps that cut across national borders. This, most notably, concerns transnational right-wing networks that actively promote the formation of ingroups and the construction of enemy images and threat perceptions vis-à-vis outgroups both within individual countries and at the international level (Forti 2024; Giménez 2024; Bob 2012). Transnational polarization, in this sense, may be understood as a crucial transmission belt that connects domestic and international polarization.

The return of Trump to the White House also suggests a pathway through which domestic polarization might in fact undermine the formation of stable antagonistic blocs at the international level: precisely because of high levels of domestic polarization, states can not only switch positions, but also identity-based allegiances. Theoretically, this suggests that domestic and international polarization are not necessarily mutually reinforcing. Just as high levels of domestic polarization may prevent governments from reliably associating with one ingroup, international polarization – through the unifying force of an external enemy – may also contribute to reducing polarization within states (Bafumi and Parent 2012).

An additional question concerns the interplay between international polarization (in terms of affective and/or ideological divisions) on the one hand and changes in the polarity of the international system (in terms of the distribution of power) on the other. Given the bipolar nature of polarization (Schedler 2023), there is plausibly an affinity between bipolarity and international polarization, such as during the Cold War (Westad 2007). In a multipolar world, instead, it seems much less likely that polarizing dynamics culminate in the formation of two stable antagonistic blocs. This points to adopting a broader historical perspective on the dynamics of international polarization, the study of which, however, requires corresponding data.

In this paper, we have proposed taking international polarization seriously, arguing that it is plausibly an important dynamic shaping the ongoing transformation of world order, includ-

⁹ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/putin-and-xi-hail-their-friendship-and-growing-energy-trade-at-their-meeting-in-beijing>.

ing the deepening crisis of international institutions. This requires, first of all, better data and more systematic studies that explicitly measure and assess international polarization with its ideological and affective dimensions. Yet, as we can expect domestic and international polarization to interact in complex ways, including via transnational dynamics, such an investigation of polarization between states should be part of a broader research program on global polarization.

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