

From Power to Legitimacy: Rethinking Authority in Twenty-First Century International Relations

Nawid Aria^{1*}

Jami University, Herat, Afghanistan¹

Email Korespondensi : n.aria@jami.edu.af

Abstract: Current issues of international relations have seen increased challenges to conventional perceptions of authority that are predominantly premised on material power, with states endowed with considerable military and economic means finding themselves unable to achieve compliance, while lesser entities wielding little power exert considerable influence. The existing literature provides explanations for the nature of authority based on military and economic power without adequately addressing the issue of legitimacy's importance in building authority at the international level. This paper explores how legitimacy has increasingly become an important source of international authority in the modern world and what the significance of this development is for the international system. This study aims to create an understanding based on the concept of legitimacy and how it impacts the establishment and implementation of international authority in international relations. Based on constructivism, which sees authority as an intersubjective concept that requires recognition, the research uses qualitative conceptual analysis to build a new legitimacy-based framework. The research is based on documentation that comes from a thorough search through peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, edited collections, theoretical writings, documents of international organizations, policy papers, and treaties via JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Out of the total number of around 80 pieces of literature found, 65 pieces of documentation were selected for the purpose of the research, and thematic analysis was conducted on the material. The paper asserts that although material capabilities are still required, they become inadequate to produce legitimate international authority unless complemented by legitimacy resulting from norms, institutions, identities, and acceptance. It explains the dynamics through which the legitimacy from norms, institutions, identities, and performance comes into play along with material capabilities and intersubjectivity to produce legitimate international authority. Three main contributions of the paper include a new conceptualization of international authority based on legitimacy, reconsideration of the power-legitimacy connection, and contribution to constructivist literature on authority in the context of modern times.

Keywords : International Authority; Legitimacy; Constructivism; Power; International Order

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Introduction

The end of the Cold War era was marked by the emergence of the unipolar moment, where it appeared that the US enjoyed not only a preponderance of power, but also the moral status that made it possible for the US to lead the world in the direction of its choice. However, three decades later, this status is highly questioned (Mastanduno, 1997). Factors such as the Russian military operation in Ukraine, the fast rise of China as a global power, the American exit from Afghanistan, the constant deadlock at the UN Security Council, and the erosion of multilateral institutions altogether point to a situation where the link between power and international prestige became highly compromised (Mihoubi, 2025; Meyerle, 2021; Tábor, 2020). The countries with strong armies and economic performance are constantly incapable of getting other nations' cooperation, forging alliances, and influencing the normative aspects of international relations. At the same time, there is an array of actors with relatively few material capabilities, the medium powers like Brazil and Turkey, international courts, and transnational civil society, who often have a great deal of sway on global events. This increasing discrepancy between material capabilities and legitimized power is one of the toughest theoretical problems that the study of international relations faces today (Jongen & Scholte, 2022; Reus-Smit, 2014).

The importance of this problem goes far beyond the realm of academia and into the core of how the international system works. When authority and power get misaligned, the cost of conducting international governance increases substantially. Leading states, lacking the ability to achieve their aims through legitimate measures, turn more and more to coercion; multilateral cooperation arrangements fall apart due to the clash of different interests; and confidence in international organizations decreases steadily (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2016). As a result, we witness a volatile international arena where controversies more and more tend to be solved through coercive methods rather than diplomacy. Hence, having a clear insight into what creates international authority becomes necessary not only from the perspective of research, but also from the point of view of addressing the key transnational problems of today: climate change, nuclear proliferation, public health concerns, and issues of technology governance (Minatti, 2024). Without having a solid theoretical framework for analyzing what international authority is and how it is created, one risks mistaking the source of institutional malfunctions and providing the wrong solutions to them (Kustermans & Horemans, 2022).

The abovementioned literature is definitely helpful but is not enough to deal with the problems under discussion. Realists, either the classical realist school of Hans Morgenthau, the structural school of Kenneth Waltz or other representatives of realism, always emphasize that material resources, like military strength, productivity and geography, are the most important factors which determine the position of states on the international arena. In this context, it may be said that authority becomes

nothing but the use of power through compulsion or its threat (Aria, 2025). The liberal institutionalists, however, present quite another perspective, emphasizing that it is international organizations, binding agreements and regime operating according to rules that ensure compliance. Authority is the product of cooperative institutions, according to scholars like Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, with efficiency resulting from reduced transaction costs and greater information flows (Devitt, 2011). Constructivists like Alexander Wendt, Martha Finnemore, and Ian Hurd have redirected the attention of analysts toward the constitutive qualities of norms and collective identity. For constructivists, authority is essentially a social construct, created not by the use of power but by intersubjective constructions of legitimate rule (Chandler, 2004). All three perspectives offer insights into the nature of international authority; however, none can properly explain the current reality of how material capabilities, institutional association, and normative commitments interact in often contradictory fashion. More importantly, current theory generally considers power and legitimacy as separate factors instead of as co-constitutive components of authority (Reus-Smit, 2014).

The current research seeks to fill a particular gap, that is, the lack of an adequate theoretical understanding of the process through which legitimacy facilitates the transformation of material capacities into international recognition of authority in contemporary circumstances. Although there has been considerable academic focus on the topic of the waning of American hegemony, the rising of China, and the pressures on liberal institutions, the number of scholarly works devoted to a theoretical analysis of the ways legitimacy, as an idea of the rightfulness of exercising influence, affects the interplay of capabilities and authority is remarkably small (Minatti, 2024). Likewise, there is no theory capable of accounting for the reasons why some powerful countries get compliance and others face opposition, as well as for the reasons why some small countries can exert significant influence on international affairs.

The core research question driving the investigation is: What processes have contributed to the emergence of legitimacy as a key factor of international authority in today's world and what do these changes mean for the future of international order? To answer this question, this paper offers a fully developed theory consisting of five parts. First part provides a review of the evolution of international authority from the pre-modern times through Westphalian, bipolar Cold War, and liberal international order arrangements up to today. Second part defines the difference between power and authority and shows the insufficiency of material capabilities through the use of case examples of the crisis of the coercion-based leadership today. Third part explains the role of legitimacy in authority by defining its four components – normative, institutional, identity-based, and performance – and describing the connection of legitimacy to compliance. Fourth part uses all above mentioned ideas to develop a new

legitimacy-based theory of interactions of power, legitimacy, institutions, and recognition and to formulate corresponding theoretical propositions. Fifth part looks at the implications of this theory for the international order of tomorrow.

The present article contributes to scholarship in three major ways. First, it offers an innovative conceptual approach that unites realist, liberal, and constructivist approaches in a new legitimacy-based model of international authority. Second, it adds analytical precision by clarifying the relationship between two concepts: power and authority (an aspect which is often confused in academic literature). Third, the article advances testable theoretical propositions applicable to various issue areas, such as security, trade, human rights, and environmental issues.

Theoretically, the present work relies on the constructivist approach and treats authority as a fundamentally intersubjective concept: there is no authority without recognition and acceptance by the appropriate audience. In terms of methodology, the present article applies the technique of qualitative conceptual analysis, whereby the theoretical framework is developed based on the analysis of selected key concepts and their logical relations, along with some examples from contemporary international affairs. Such methodology is particularly suitable for the development of an innovative framework, although the framework itself is explicitly testable.

The rest is organized as follows. The following section will explain the theoretical framework and methodology in more detail. The following sections discuss historical evolution, the limits of material power, and introduce the legitimacy-based framework. The final sections discuss the implications of the framework for the new international order and draw conclusions.

Theoretical Framework

In International Relations theory, Realism and Liberalism can be considered two of the most influential schools of thought, both contributing significantly to knowledge about the nature of power in the international environment, while still having some flaws. The mentioned flaws became an opening for new theoretical approaches to be developed, one such being Constructivism, which considers ideational aspects in regards to political results (Savu, 2021).

Realism provides a basic perspective to address the issue of authority since it considers material power as the essential element by which international politics operates. As realist thought rests on the premise that the international arena represents a condition of anarchy, that is, it lacks any higher authority-states, as rational actors, seek to maximize their military and economic power in a bid to ensure survival and security (Aria, 2025). From the realist viewpoint, the concept of authority is perceived as inherently dependent on power, that is, the ability to exercise force either directly or through the use of threats. States acquire material resources precisely in order to exert force on others, and international order, according to realists, is ensured by means of balancing and hegemonic stability (Taliaferro, 2000). Nonetheless, despite

the strengths that realism possesses in terms of highlighting the ever-lasting importance of material endowment, the strict focus of realism on the concept of capabilities and its strong statism have been heavily criticized for failing to consider the non-material dimensions of authority. Realism lacks the ability to explain the strange fact of why some powerful states lack the ability to induce obedience, whereas some less-endowed actors have the ability to influence (Dehnavi et al., 2021).

The development of liberalism was as a response to the rigid limitations present in realism, shifting focus from the role played by international organizations, economic ties, and domestic politics of the states in fostering cooperation and order. In particular, liberal scholars argue that the source of authority does not lie in coercion alone, but in collaboration systems, rule-based orders, and reduced transaction costs of international interactions (Moravcsik, 1997). By using international organizations and binding agreements, the states create the system that helps them coordinate their actions and build reciprocal expectations, thus ensuring compliance due to reciprocity and legitimacy (Ikenberry, 2009). However, liberalism cannot avoid criticism as critics tend to see its limitation in underestimation of the stability of power imbalances and susceptibility of institution-based authority in the situation of competing interests prevailing over cooperative impulses. The excessive concern of the theory with formal institutional structures can lead to overlooking the role of norms and identity in sustaining or undermining authority (Mahmood, 2025).

Even though much has been achieved through Realism and Liberalism in our understanding of the dynamics of international authority, both schools of thought share an important drawback since one of them privileges material factors and the other institutional factors while neglecting ideational factors. What is lacking in these theories is their failure to consider the process through which ideas, identities, norms, and social recognition create authority in the first place. While the almost complete focus of Realism on material capabilities does not allow much space for considering the socially constructed nature of authority, the institutional focus of Liberalism operates on the idea that rules alone can ensure compliance without questioning the underlying subjective beliefs (Adeniji, 2022). In both cases, the concept of authority is considered as an objective feature of power structures and institutions without considering its socially constructed nature (Behraves, 2011).

Constructivism comes in to fill the gap through a new assertion that authority is not something intrinsic but something that emerges from collective understanding and interaction. From this perspective, states and other actors in the international community construct their identities and preferences, as well as perceptions of legitimacy, through their interactions with each other and thereby influence their acceptance of the authority (Cho, 2009). As a result of such a constructivist perspective, authority is considered to exist only to the extent to which it is accepted and acknowledged by pertinent groups; it is an intersubjective construct rather than a

concrete one (Wendt, 1992; Aria, 2025). Such phenomena as threat to existing authority, legitimacy challenges, and the context-independent variability found in the authoritative relationship become explainable when attention is paid to norms, meanings, and identity recognition (Mikail & Aytekin, 2016). Constructivism, on its part, questions the presupposition that anarchy or material factors alone are responsible for generating authority, suggesting that ideational content and beliefs shape the international system and thus provide opportunities for change through normative transformations (Jung, 2019). The theoretical approach provides the foundation for legitimacy-based theory developed in this paper.

Methodology

The current study utilizes a qualitative conceptual and analytical approach to study the relation between legitimacy and international authority in the modern political system of the world. With the use of the constructivist literature as an interpretative framework, the study assumes that the international authority in question is socially constructed and not a feature that is inherent to material structures and institutions. The concept of conceptual analysis is used to examine the basic concepts in the legitimacy-based framework, which include power, authority, legitimacy, and their different aspects. The current study uses only documentary evidence as its empirical basis. The secondary sources are comprised of peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and edited collections in International Relations theory, security studies, political philosophy, and international law. The primary sources include theoretical works of leading realists, liberals, and constructivists, documents of international organizations, policy statements of leading states, and treaties. The systematic literature review has been conducted in academic databases such as JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Out of roughly 80 sources found initially, 65 have been chosen for analysis.

In order to ensure the validity of the documentary evidence and credibility of the conceptual synthesis, the research used source triangulation, relying on different categories of scholarly and primary sources, as well as using different theoretical approaches to analysis, namely realist, liberal, and constructivist literature, along with academic books and journal articles, policy papers, and treaties of international organizations. The sources for the study were chosen based on their relevancy to the research question and their ability to directly contribute to the conceptualization of power, authority, legitimacy, institutions, and recognition, along with the sources' credibility (scholarly or institutional). Sources lacking in scholarly and institutional credibility, low relevancy to the research questions, and inability to directly contribute to the conceptualization of the problem were not used. Arguments and concepts extracted from different sources were cross-verified in terms of their similarities and differences. In this case, thematic analysis has been utilized as a way of organizing and

analyzing the collected data. The themes that have emerged in the study include the distinction between power and authority, the development of authority throughout history, the four dimensions of legitimacy, and ways in which legitimacy either increases or reduces material capabilities. This approach has allowed me to construct an entirely new conceptual framework by synthesizing various theories into a framework based on legitimacy. Unlike empirical studies where there is an attempt to verify some hypothesis, this research attempts to reconceptualize authority through synthesizing existing literature.

Results and Discussion

A. The Evolution of Authority in International Relations

The concept of authority in international politics has an extensive history, which dates much further back than the development of the state system itself. In the pre-modern period, authority derived from dynastic claims to kingship, religious sanctioning, and traditional practices that governed interactions between empires, kingdoms, and city-states (Clark, 2007). The Peace of Westphalia signed in 1648 marked a pivotal moment in history, as the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention were established, thus forming the pillars upon which international authority would be based. Under the Westphalian system, authority would come to be defined as the prerogative of sovereign states, which possessed supreme jurisdiction over their domestic affairs, while recognizing equality of all states in the international realm (Phillips, 2023). Such an arrangement resulted in a highly decentralized structure, in which authority was divided among territorial entities, with no supra-national power possessing any authority over states. The nature of international authority during this period was largely negative, or the authority to ward off any foreign intervention (Osiander, 2001).

The bipolar arrangement that defined the Cold War years has changed the nature of international authority. The political and strategic competition between the U.S. and the Soviet Union resulted in the creation of two opposing centers of international authority, with each of them drawing their respective allies through ideological appeal, military security and economic aid (Hong, 2015). International authority in those years was exercised through alliance systems, the system of proxies, and through the institutional mechanisms of the United Nations Organization, which reflected the bipolar nature of power by the membership in its Security Council. The fall of the Soviet Union gave way to what was termed as the 'unipolar moment,' when the United States enjoyed the unique position of being able to exert unprecedented authority to shape the international order based on its own interests (Krauthammer, 2002). This was a time of the rise of liberal institutions, of spreading of democracy and governance norms and of new global governance instruments that gave international authority not

only to the state but also to international bodies, nongovernmental organizations and transnational regulatory bodies (Steinberg, 2022).

Indeed, the 21st century has been characterized by a fundamental transformation in the nature of international authority. The growing power of China, the resurgence of Russia, and the increased confidence of rising economies in general have resulted in a situation whereby the short period of the unipolar world has been undermined, and a rather fractured environment of exercising international authority is created (Ali et al., 2025; Woods et al., 2013). Traditional foundations of international authority based on superiority in terms of military and economic power have become weaker in terms of securing compliance while new foundations of authority founded on legitimacy, attraction, and recognition have gained significance. International authority is no longer exclusively the preserve of dominant powers but it is open to contestation and negotiations between an increasing number of state and non-state actors (Tucker, 2026; Arlen et al., 2023)

B. The Limits of Material Power in Contemporary International Politics

As can be seen from the historical perspective given above, authority has experienced a lot of development over time in the sphere of international relations. The current section aims at expanding this developmental process by analyzing why material power, which constituted the core of traditional authority, has become increasingly inadequate for establishing international authority within the contemporary context (Zürn, 2018; Hurd, 1999). Firstly, an important definition needs to be provided: while being used quite often as interchangeable terms, power and authority are actually two completely different concepts. While power means an ability to influence something via coercion, incentive, or resource use, authority is defined as a right to have an influence based on the recognition and acceptance of such by the people who are influenced. In other words, it is quite possible to have considerable amounts of power without any authority and vice versa (Lake, 2013).

The failure of the military and economic tools to act as dependable foundations for authority has been increasingly apparent. Although the US spends more on its armed forces than the total amount spent by the next ten most powerful military nations and represents about one-fourth of the world's economy, it has found that it could not enforce its demands on other smaller and weaker countries. The war in Iraq and Afghanistan provides convincing examples of this trend as superior technological capacity and material power did not always result in political authority (Kang, 2012).

Economic means of pressure that include sanctions and economic measures such as financial pressures have been equally ineffective as the target states have developed new alliances and institutions that do not rely on Western economic systems. The weakening of coercive leadership is linked to a crisis whereby the traditional means of power have lost their authoritativeness. Countries reject hierarchies that are based on

material inequality, demanding that there should be mutual respect and reciprocity in their relations (Ayodele, 2025; Bell & Wang, 2020; (Arnold, 2025).

Numerous examples of reduced authority in spite of the presence of overwhelming power abound in the empirical literature. The United Nations Security Council, despite its exemplification of power in terms of military and economic might among its permanent members, has increasingly become paralyzed when dealing with important conflicts. The Iran nuclear deal illustrated how a multilateral approach was more effective in creating compliance than the threat of force by the U.S. The inability of the U.S. to garner international support for the use of military intervention in Syria despite its power is another example (Özdamar & Shahin, 2021). China's increased international influence is not solely based on economic progress but is also due to the country's strategy to build up its legitimacy through institution building and development cooperation and diplomacy. These examples suggest that while power is crucial for the assertion of authority, it is not enough in the contemporary international environment. Authority requires legitimization through alignment with norms, institutions, and the pursuit of collective values; the next section focuses on this aspect (Schwarz & Rudyak, 2023; Stephen & Scherzinger, 2026; Stephen, 2021).

C. Legitimacy as the Foundation of International Authority

The previous parts have traced the history of international authority and demonstrated the increasing inadequacy of mere material power as the basis of such authority. In this part, the case is built further by analyzing legitimacy as the important missing ingredient in turning mere power into legitimate authority (Scherz & Suttle, 2025). While power implies the ability to enforce something, legitimacy implies the perception of rightful action that makes enforcement unnecessary and obedience automatic. Understanding legitimacy in international politics involves going beyond a narrow legalistic perspective to a more sociological one: legitimacy arises wherever there is a perception that an entity uses its authority in accordance with widely accepted principles and goals (Hurd, 2019; Minatti, 2024).

Legitimacy in the international community can be observed along four distinct yet related dimensions. Normative legitimacy arises from compatibility with values and principles that are widely accepted and include such issues as human rights protection, democracy, and rule of law. Institutional legitimacy stems from procedural fairness, transparency, and demonstrated competence in organizations that have already been formed. Identity-related legitimacy emerges where actors are viewed as standing for or voicing the identity and aspirations of the people under their control (Reus-Smit, 2007; Liu & Cao, 2023). Performance legitimacy is grounded in the capability of an actor to provide tangible benefits and address collective problems. The interaction among these dimensions takes a complex form; weaknesses in one dimension may undermine other sources of legitimacy. Thus, the European Union has

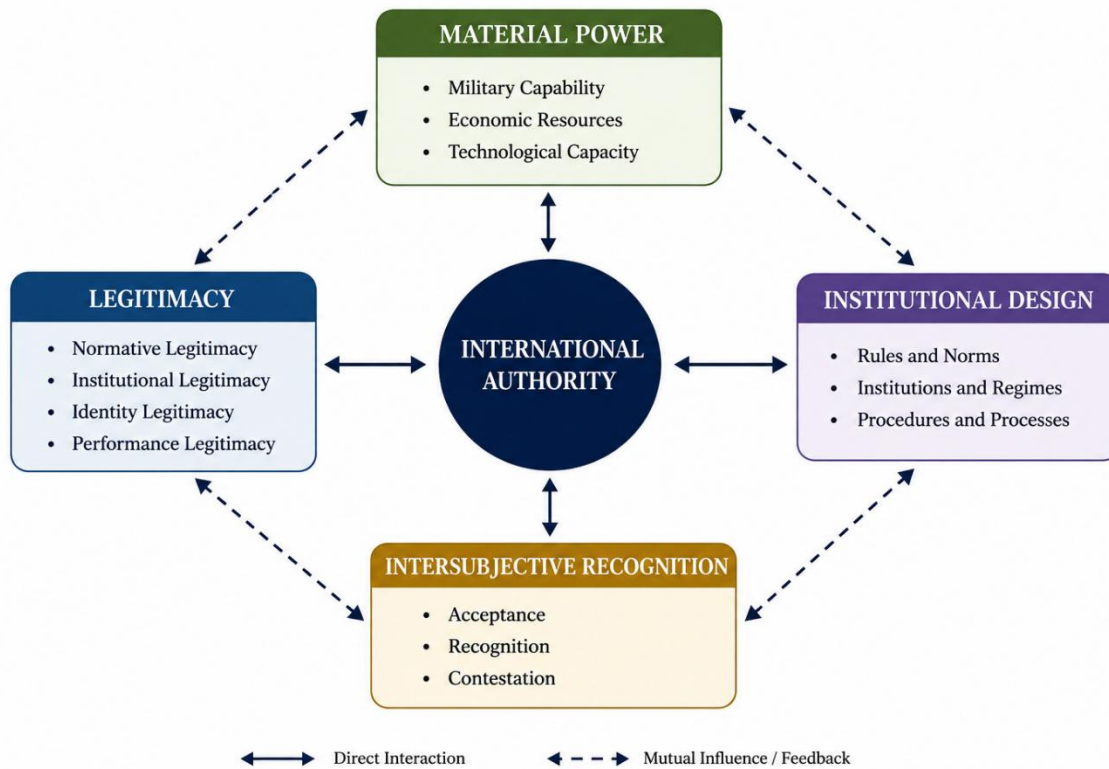
seen its institutional legitimacy erode because of procedural unfairness while its normative attractiveness continues to be high in many parts of the world (Dagher, 2018).

The relationship between legitimacy and compliance is one of the most significant dynamics at play in international politics. With legitimacy, compliance occurs voluntarily and not through coercion. The reason actors comply is due to the legitimacy of the authorities who issue the commands, reducing the cost of governance and making international arrangements more resilient (Steffek, 2007; Minatti, 2024). There are several mechanisms through which legitimacy produces compliance: internalization, where the norms become part of the identity and preferences of actors; persuasion, where the legitimate authorities influence the preferences of others through reasoned deliberation; and social pressures, where legitimate authorities use collective expectations of compliance (Bottoms, 2019). Therefore, legitimacy operates as the source of long-term influence and remains influential even after the initial material capabilities that created the legitimacy are gone. The legitimacy of the Bretton Woods institutions has ensured that they retain their authority despite shifts in material power. Similarly, the International Criminal Court wields disproportionate influence relative to its material capabilities because of the legitimacy it enjoys as a representation of universal principles of justice. This conception of legitimacy as the basis of authority provides the theoretical foundation for the framework discussed in the next section (Buira, 2005; Whalan, 2013).

D. A Legitimacy-Centered Framework of International Authority

The above discussion has traced the evolution of the concept of authority, highlighted the shortcomings of material power as the sole foundation for authority, and shown the importance of the concept of legitimacy. The above findings have been integrated and developed further into an innovative theoretical model, which will show how authority that is grounded in legitimacy operates in international politics today. The proposed theoretical approach is different from traditional power-based theories since it posits that authority arises from the interaction between four different components: material power, legitimacy, institutional design, and intersubjective recognition (Liu & Cao, 2023).

Figure 1.
A Legitimacy-Centered Framework of International Authority



Source: Author's own conceptualization

Firstly, the category of material power includes such things as military power, economic power, and technological capability. Even though power is an indispensable component in the establishment of authority, it turns out to be insufficient by itself, as the foregoing discussion showed. Secondly, the legitimacy category represents the four dimensions mentioned above, namely normative, institutional, identity, and performance dimensions (Farrell, 2020; Reus-Smit, 2014). Legitimacy is the pivotal mediator that transforms the use of power into the exercise of authority, making the latter legitimate. Thirdly, institutions represent the structural context within which the authority is exercised, institutionalized, and contested. Fourthly, intersubjective recognition is the social process through which authority is either confirmed or denied. It has to be borne in mind that authority can exist only inasmuch as it is recognized by the concerned audiences; hence, the recognition has not only instrumental but constitutive significance (Malpas, 2012).

Interaction between these variables occurs through several processes. Material capabilities allow for institutions to be constructed and claims of legitimacy to be articulated, but legitimacy intensifies the power effect while lack thereof reduces it. Institutions mediate and stabilize authority relations, but their efficiency depends on

perceptions of legitimacy. Recognition is affected by material resources and institutions, but at the same time represents a social judgment based on norms and identities (Imerman, 2018; Clark, 2011). This leads us to several propositions. The first one is that authority reaches its peak of manifestation when material power, legitimacy, institutionalization and recognition reinforce each other. Deficiencies in any variable can be compensated with help from other variables, except for lack of legitimacy, which does not get compensated well with material power alone (Hurd, 1999). Finally, authority relations are flexible and open to constant negotiation depending on shifts in power distribution, legitimacy and institutional context. This theory provides all necessary tools for understanding the emerging international order, and this will be the focus of the next chapter.

E. Implications for the Emerging International Order

The legitimacy-centric theory developed above provides the tools necessary to assess the impact of current changes on international authority. This section analyzes the impact of the dynamics of legitimacy-based authority on great power competition, challenges to the liberal international order, new players and institutions, and the potential directions for global governance. The competition between great powers in the twenty-first century is being played out in the realm of legitimacy just as much as material power. Not only does the US compete with China for economic and military supremacy but also for normative appeal, institutional leverage, and recognition from the Global South (Garlick & Qin, 2024; Silva, 2026). Chinese initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, alternative institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and developmental legitimacy via infrastructure finance represent attempts at the construction of authority independent of the Western-centric systems (Deng, 2024; Chu, 2022). At the same time, the United States attempts to rebuild its legitimacy through democratic values, alliance solidarity, and institutional renewal. This great power competition shows that great power interactions in the future are likely to feature competing legitimacy strategies and that authority is dependent on who succeeds in building legitimacy (Ryan, 2026).

The liberal international order is plagued by deep challenges that can be understood through the lens of the legitimacy-based approach. Problems raised against liberal organizations relate to issues of process, exclusivity of governing structures, and disjuncture between the norms asserted and the practices followed. Legitimacy flaws in the system have paved the way for alternative organizational arrangements to gain traction (Kentikelenis & Voeten, 2021; Lake, 2026). The rise of new actors such as rising economies, regional organizations, transnational advocacy networks, and non-state actors indicates a shift of power beyond the traditional Western-oriented structure. Possible future directions for authority in global governance would feature fragmentation, contestation, and hybrids. Instead of one

single order of authority, there would be various overlapping orders of authority, each justifying its existence through different means and attracting varying levels of legitimacy (Khan et al., 2025; Tallberg et al., 2018). The problem of global governance is how to deal with this plurality at the same time as it tries to solve the common challenges which require a collective approach. The legitimacy-focused conceptualization that has been developed throughout this paper indicates that effective authority would need to focus on all four legitimacy dimensions and be adaptable to changing normative contexts.

Conclusion

In this regard, this paper has provided a legitimacy-centered approach to understanding authority in the contemporary era, arguing that material power by itself is no longer enough to gain the recognition and obedience that define true authority. Indeed, the paper has examined the evolution of authority from Westphalia via bipolarity to liberalism, pointing out that in all three cases there are distinctive combinations of power and legitimacy. The discussion of the limitations of material power has made clear that military and economic power, although necessary, become progressively incapable of ensuring the relationships that are based on normative agreement, institutional equality, and common identity. The legitimacy-centered approach that has been elaborated in this paper integrates the findings and explains how normative, institutional, identity, and performance legitimacy can contribute to the exercise of authority together with material power, institutions, and intersubjective recognition. The implications of this approach for the emerging international order are significant. Indeed, the struggle between great powers increasingly takes on a legitimacy character, with the US and China relying on different legitimization strategies to exercise their authority. The liberal international order faces a series of challenges that can be linked to legitimacy problems; and alternative institutional systems try to benefit from this gap. The emergence of novel actors and institutional architectures points to a dispersion of power that exceeds the traditional Western-centered approach. Future development of international governance would be marked by fragmentation, contestation, and hybridity, thus requiring more attention to the issue of legitimization of authority in different respects. For academics and practitioners, reconsideration of authority as a question of legitimacy is no longer an option but a necessity.

Research Limitations. The present research is conceptual and qualitative, thus implying certain limitations regarding empirical testing and generalizability. While the proposed legitimacy-focused framework is based on a review and synthesis of a wide range of different documentary sources, the proposed links between material power, legitimacy, institutional design, and intersubjective recognition were never empirically tested or analyzed in a comparative case study approach. Further research should consequently focus on an empirical examination and testing of the proposed

legitimacy framework in relation to particular issue areas and cases, e.g., climate regimes, international security, trade governance, or cybersecurity. Through comparative case studies and either quantitative or mixed method research approaches, researchers can explore whether changes in the four types of legitimacy, namely normative, institutional, identity-based, and performance, are linked to different levels of international authority, recognition, and compliance.

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