

From universalism to regionalism – the future of international law in a multipolar world

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Abstract. The relevance of the study is due to the accelerated transformation of international law under the influence of multipolarity, technological changes and the growing role of regional actors. The aim of the work was to determine the prospects of legal pluralism in the context of the evolving relationship between universalism and regionalism in the modern international legal system. The research methodology was based on a comprehensive analysis of international treaties, regional agreements. The study established that classical universal treaties lost effectiveness due to intensifying geopolitical competition, technological transformations and declining trust among leading states. Contemporary initiatives increasingly implement the principle of flexible universalism, offering framework arrangements instead of binding obligations. Regional agreements demonstrate higher practical applicability, yet simultaneously reinforce asymmetry in access to legal mechanisms. The concept of legal pluralism reflects the adaptive capacity of international law under conditions of multipolarity and rapid systemic change. Current tendencies indicate that universal and regional regimes coexist in a dynamic and mutually influential manner. Universalism provides legitimacy and general principles, while regionalism offers flexibility and technical effectiveness. Their interaction produces a pluralistic legal structure, which simultaneously ensures adaptability and generates risks of fragmentation. The growing geopolitical divide between the United States and China, as well as between Russia and the European Union, prevents the emergence of truly universal norms. Competing models of governance and legal interpretation deepen regional differentiation and transform international law into a field of normative rivalry rather than consensus. The sustainability of this model depends on harmonisation of overlapping regimes and recognition of mutual legitimacy. Prospects for international law are defined by several potential trajectories. The most realistic path involves integration of universal values with regional specificity, where pluralism functions as a mechanism of legitimacy and effectiveness. The practical significance of the study is the possibility of using its results to predict the development of international legal regimes

Keywords: pluralism; legitimacy; coordination; global standards; normative

INTRODUCTION

The modern development of international law takes place in conditions of multipolarity, which radically changes the established ideas about the universalism of legal norms. If between the 1950s and 1990s the universality of international law was perceived as an axiom enshrined in the UN (United Nations) system and global treaties, the growing competition between states and regional blocs is forming a new architecture. Universal mechanisms are increasingly losing their practical significance.

In the study of J. Dugard (2023) stressed that the universalism of international law is no longer a neutral and

self-sufficient category, as it depends on political conditions and the consensus of key actors. The author emphasised that universal treaties are increasingly replaced by regional ones, which provide greater efficiency in specific circumstances. Universalism loses the ability to act as a guarantor of a single normative system and turns into one of the levels of multi-level architecture of international law. E. Han & X. Li (2024) viewed the erosion of universalism through the prism of the crisis of legitimacy of global institutions. They noted that bodies such as the UN Security Council or the World Trade Organisation are

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increasingly unable to act independently of the political interests of great powers. As a result, states lose confidence in universal mechanisms and prefer regional formats that ensure efficiency and greater control. Regionalisation appears as a practical response to the lack of efficiency of global institutions. In turn, T. Berger (2020) analysed the regionalisation of international law in the context of critical theory and analyses it as a manifestation of postcolonial transformations. The author argued that universalism has historically been associated with a Western vision of law, while the new regional legal spaces reflect the growing voices of the Global South. Regionalisation not only weakens universal institutions but also creates more inclusive and contextually oriented legal instruments.

The idea of “transitional justice” is increasingly viewed through the lens of regional initiatives in the areas of human rights, the environment, and security. Such initiatives, as documented in the study by B. Weiffen & J. Battistuzzi Penachioni (2025), can respond more effectively to local challenges, while universal norms often remain declarative and unsupported by practical implementation mechanisms. This reflects a shift in the balance toward regional law, which is increasingly gaining practical significance. The contemporary landscape of international law increasingly resembles a mosaic of intersecting and partially overlapping regimes. This fragmentation, as R.E. Kim (2020) emphasises, is an inevitable consequence of multipolarity: universal agreements are no longer able to encompass all areas of international relations. However, this arrangement should not be perceived as chaotic. On the contrary, it demonstrates the high adaptability of international law to changing political realities and the growing complexity of the global order.

Universalism in international law is increasingly subordinated to the logic of power, and legal instruments themselves are beginning to reflect the balance of interests of actors such as the United States, China, Russia, and the EU. K.J. Heller (2024) notes that this is leading to the formation of alternative regional legal spaces, where international law no longer appears as a supranational system of norms, but as a field of struggle. Regional formats serve as tools for protecting individual interests. At the same time, the process of regionalisation cannot be viewed unequivocally as a challenge to universalism. On the contrary, regional norms can serve as a kind of laboratory for legal solutions that can subsequently be integrated into the global context. In the study of L. Marotti (2022), regionalisation is not a destructive force, but a potential mechanism for updating international law and adapting it to multipolar conditions.

Research by S. Rosengrün (2022) focused on new areas of international law, particularly cybersecurity and the regulation of artificial intelligence. The author noted that universal initiatives in these areas are weak and declarative, while regional agreements showed greater practical effectiveness. This indicates that regionalisation is becoming a laboratory for the development of new standards, which may subsequently receive wider recognition. The problem

of the study is that the scientific literature still considers the erosion of universalism and the rise of regionalism mainly separately. At the same time, it is not well understood how these processes interact and what new quality of international law they form together. Particularly unresolved is whether regionalisation is a threat to the universal order, or rather a way of transforming it. The aim of the study was to assess the prospects of regionalism in international law within the context of a multipolar world. The tasks were to identify the main trends of erosion of universal norms, determine the role of regional legal initiatives in the field of security, ecology, and new technologies. Also, assess the possibilities of combining global and regional approaches in the new architecture of international law.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study used an interdisciplinary approach that combined the methods of international law, political science and international relations. The conceptual framework was the concept of legal pluralism. The study was conducted in three consecutive stages. The first stage involved an analysis of the practice of universal international regimes in a state of transformation or erosion, the Geneva Convention... (1949), European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights... (1950), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons No. INFCIRC/140 (1970), Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations... (1997), Paris Agreement (2015), the European Green Deal (2019), as well as modern initiatives in the field of cybersecurity under the auspices of the UN, Open-ended Working Group on Security... (2023). To study the field of digital policy, the legislation, and regulations of the European Union (Regulation (EU) 2016/679..., 2016), the USA (Protecting Consumer Privacy..., 2012) and China (Cybersecurity Law..., 2016) were analysed. A comparative analysis of these documents made it possible to assess which mechanisms of universalism remain relevant and which lose their effectiveness under the influence of geopolitical competition and technological changes. The second stage focused on the regionalisation of international law and an analysis of the prospects for legal pluralism in a multipolar world. A comparative approach allowed to identify typical features of regional legal regimes and identify instances of conflict between regional and universal norms. The third stage of the study was devoted to conceptualising the identified changes and predicting possible scenarios for the development of the ratio of universalism and regionalism. For this purpose, the method of scenario analysis was applied, which allowed to formulate three basic models of development: restoration of universalism, mosaic coexistence and dominance of regionalism. The specificity of the source base was the need for a comprehensive combination of normative legal acts, the practice of international and regional organisations and analytical materials. This allowed to ensure the integrity of the study and at the same time to identify trends of imbalance and fragmentation of the international legal order.

The sample type is purposeful, with an emphasis on international legal acts, political documents, donor reports and analytical reviews, which ensured the representativeness, objectivity and scientific reliability of the conclusions.

The methodological basis of the study was based on a combination of several approaches, which made it possible to comprehensively examine the relationship between universalism and regionalism in international law. The comparative legal method was used to compare universal and regional legal regimes, which made it possible to identify their strengths and weaknesses in the context of contemporary transformations in international law. The historical-legal method was used to trace the evolution of treaty regimes and coordination mechanisms, which was important for understanding the origins of contemporary models of legal pluralism. The structural-functional method was based on the study of conflicts and duplication of norms at different levels of legal systems, which made it possible to assess the effectiveness of interaction between universal and regional legal systems. Scenario analysis was used to construct predictive models of the development of international law in a multipolar environment, which made it possible to formulate potential scenarios for the relationship between universalism and regionalism.

RESULTS

Universalism of international law under the pressure of global transformations

The universalism of international law has been considered one of the key aspects of the global legal order since the mid-20th century. Its essence lies in the fact that key international norms and rules have a general, comprehensive meaning and are applied regardless of the regional affiliation of states or the peculiarities of their political regimes. From the 1950s to the 1990s, this model demonstrated considerable effectiveness, as seen in instruments such as the Geneva Convention... (1949) and the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons No. INFCIRC/140 (1970). Universalism provided a certain predictability, limited the abuse of force, and formed the basis for multilateral cooperation. However, in the 21st century (2000-2025), universalism began to lose its former stability and effectiveness. In this context, a paradigm shift is increasingly noticeable: from the dominance of universalism of international law to the growing role of regionalism.

The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (Treaty on elimination..., 1987) became an example of the erosion of the classical system of universal treaties. Its purpose was to create an arms control mechanism that would serve as a model for developing broader disarmament standards. The document's universal nature lay in its provision for the renunciation of an entire class of weapons, the principles of which could be extended to other states. However, the limited number of signatories and the rapidly changing structure of international relations undermined its viability. A key factor was the rapid growth of China's military potential, which was not a party to the treaty and thus placed the

United States at a disadvantage. At the same time, the security rivalry between Russia and the EU deepened, weakening Russia's motivation to maintain the treaty's restrictions. Together, these circumstances, along with new technological challenges, made its extension impossible. The demise of the INF (Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces) Treaty in 2019 (Pompeo, 2019) was a clear demonstration of the inability of the universalist model to adapt to the dynamics of multilateral competition and the changed balance of power.

A similar dynamic emerged in the case of the Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations... (1997), which aimed to develop a global framework for combating climate change. Its universalist approach sought to establish uniform emission reduction standards for all participants in the international community and gradually establish a global environmental regime. However, differences in economic development and national priorities led to highly uneven implementation of the commitments. The US (United States) decision to withdraw from the commitment system (U.S. Statement on Climate Change to OSCE, 2001) effectively deprived the protocol of global authority, and the lack of effective enforcement mechanisms rendered the agreement's implementation pro forma. As a result, the universalist model failed the test of asymmetries of interests and political will, confirming the limitations of the classical treaty system in a multipolar world.

Analysing both examples, it can conclude that the crisis of the classical universal contractual system is caused not only by specific political decisions or the withdrawal of individual states from the agreements. The problem is systemic and concerns the very foundation of universalism. First, changes in the global balance of power have led to the fact that great powers no longer perceive universal regimes as a neutral platform but view them through the prism of competitive advantages or limitations. Secondly, technological progress, in the field of arms and energy, has created new challenges that classical contractual formulas did not take into account. Thirdly, the role of non-state and new state actors that were not included in existing systems has increased, which undermined the legitimacy of the agreements. In this context, universalism is increasingly perceived as an archaic form that is unable to respond to the dynamics of modern processes.

The INF situation has shown that in the field of security, universal mechanisms face a dilemma: either they remain narrow and lose significance due to the exclusion of key actors, or they try to spread globally, but then they need to adapt to extremely different interests. In both cases, the effectiveness of universalism is threatened. In the case of the Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations... (1997), the crisis of universalism manifested itself in the sphere of global governance, where the lack of enforcement mechanisms and the asymmetry of the interests of states made the universal architecture unworkable. Both examples demonstrate that universal treaties, which in the past were considered the best way to consolidate the international order, are increasingly losing functionality. Instead of strengthening

international law, universal agreements begin to produce the opposite effect: they become a field for competition, a symbol of unwillingness to yield to national interests and a source of fragmentation of the legal space. The classical contractual system, which assumed of the readiness of states to compromise in the name of global stability, turned out to be unsuitable in conditions when competition for technological, economic and military superiority comes to the fore. This does not mean a complete rejection of universalism but indicates that its classical forms are experiencing a crisis of legitimacy and efficiency. Analysis of the erosion of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (Treaty on elimination..., 1987) and the Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations... (1997) reveals a broader trend: the universalism of international law, once a guarantor of stability, is increasingly giving way to more selective, regional or flexible forms of cooperation. This necessitates rethinking the very nature of the treaty system, the search for new tools that can combine global goals with the real interests of individual states.

The decline of the classical system of universal treaties cannot be explained by the isolated failures of individual agreements; its roots lie in systemic transformations in international relations. Three key factors consistently undermined the stabilising role of universal agreements: geopolitical rivalry, technological change, and the erosion of trust (Hoffman *et al.*, 2022). The first factor was geopolitical rivalry. After the end of the Cold War, the balance of power shifted, altering the perception of universal treaties. Instead of serving as a neutral instrument for risk reduction, they increasingly became tools for advancing the priorities of dominant players. For the United States and its allies, such agreements consolidated their strategic agenda, while Russia, China, and others viewed them as mechanisms for uneven burden sharing. In this context, bilateral or regional formats proved more attractive, as they allowed for flexible bargaining and avoided compromises on vital interests. As a result, universalism lost its character as a “common good” and became yet another arena for great power rivalry.

Technological challenges have also dealt a blow to universalism. The treaty architecture of the second half of the 20th century was developed in a relatively stable technological environment. However rapid innovations in areas such as cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and space are undermining the relevance of already slow universal agreements. Cumbersome negotiation and ratification processes have failed to keep pace with technological change, leading to a growing gap between regulation and reality. At the same time, developing countries fear that universal regimes could institutionalise their technological inferiority, while developed countries strive to maintain their competitive advantage. This imbalance reduces incentives to maintain universal mechanisms in developing countries.

A third factor has been the loss of trust. Perhaps the most decisive factor has been the erosion of trust in the binding nature of commitments. The demise of the

INF Treaty (Pompeo, 2019) and the US rejection of the Kyoto Protocol (U.S. Statement on Climate Change to OSCE, 2001) demonstrated that even leading powers no longer view universal agreements as sacrosanct. For developing states, universal regimes often appear unfairly burdensome, while for developed states, they offer no guarantee of strategic benefits. This dual crisis, “from above and below”, undermines predictability as a key function of international law, replacing it with selective participation and pragmatic calculation.

The crisis of the universal contractual system is a manifestation of a broader trend where global mechanisms give way to more fragmented, but at the same time adaptive, forms of regulation. New universal initiatives of international law emerged as a response to the crisis of the classical treaty system, which revealed its vulnerability. The traditional model of universalism was based on the assumption that states are ready to conclude rigidly institutionalised agreements with clearly defined obligations and control mechanisms.

The Paris Agreement (2015) became a kind of symbol of the transition from classical to flexible universalism. Unlike the Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations... (1997), which established strict emission reduction quotas for certain groups of states, the new treaty is based on a system of voluntary nationally determined contributions. This approach is due to the recognition of the fact that in modern conditions it is almost impossible to impose universal and equal obligations for all states. The flexibility of the Paris Agreement was that it created a framework for global cooperation but left considerable room for states to independently determine the pace and scope of action. This reflects an awareness of the structural asymmetry of the international system: developed, and developing countries are in fundamentally different conditions regarding resources, technology and economic sustainability. The introduction of a voluntary mechanism allowed to attract almost all the states of the world, which was not achieved in previous universal environmental agreements. At the same time, the flexible universalism of the Paris Agreement demonstrates an important innovation in the very understanding of international law. It is no longer focused on enforcing rules, but relies on a combination of reputational pressure, mutual reporting and political motivation of states. Universalism ceases to be a static set of norms and turns into a process of constant renewal of obligations that evolve in response to changes in the global context. Such a model reflects a tendency to increase the role of “soft law” and to hybridise legal mechanisms, when rigid legal obligations are replaced by more flexible framework arrangements. This allows the universal level to remain relevant, but at the cost of weakening legal obligation. However, analysis of the Paris Agreement reveals problematic aspects of flexible universalism. On the one hand, it really provides almost universal participation, but on the other hand, it creates a risk of minimalism of obligations when states declare measures that do not correspond to the scale of a

global problem. The mechanism of voluntary contributions does not guarantee a cumulative result, since there are no effective tools for coercion or sanctions.

At the same time, the evolving global climate agenda has revealed an intensifying competition of regulatory paradigms among leading world actors. China, as the largest emitter of greenhouse gases, increasingly positions itself as a norm-setter in the sphere of sustainable development, linking ecological modernisation with its broader economic and technological expansion. Its model emphasises state-led planning, gradual decarbonisation, and the export of environmental standards through investment and infrastructure projects. The European Union, by contrast, seeks to institutionalise climate leadership through market mechanisms and rule-based governance, integrating environmental criteria into trade policy, taxation, and industrial regulation. This approach extends the logic of conditionality beyond the Union's borders, turning access to the European market into a tool of ecological influence. Russia finds itself in a more ambivalent position. Having long relied on fossil fuel exports, it perceives external environmental regulation as a potential constraint on national sovereignty and economic security. Consequently, Moscow promotes the idea of energy transition on its own terms, focusing on technological adaptation and regional cooperation rather than adherence to externally imposed standards. In this context, the interactions between the EU, China, and Russia reflect not merely ecological policies but deeper struggles over the rules and values that define the future global economic order. This calls into question the effectiveness of the universal level as such, it retains symbolic legitimacy, but the practical results depend on the political will of individual states and regional blocs. Flexible universalism appears not so much as a final solution to the crisis of universal contracts, but as an attempt to adapt to new conditions, which partially overcomes the issue of involvement, but does not solve the issue of ensuring efficiency.

Similar trends are emerging in the field of cybersecurity, which has become one of the newest platforms for universal initiatives under the auspices of the UN. Unlike environmental agreements, where experience has already been gained in implementing universal regimes, the digital sphere poses fundamentally new challenges. Cyberspace is simultaneously global and fragmented: governance models reflect competition between the US, China, Russia, and the EU. Under these conditions, the creation of a classic universal treaty seems virtually impossible. Instead, the UN is promoting hybrid formats of cooperation, such as non-binding political commitments to prevent attacks on critical infrastructure, limit cybercrime, and support trust mechanisms (Open-ended Working Group on Security, 2023).

These processes are built on an idea similar to the NDC (Nationally determined contribution) logic in climate policy: states retain sovereignty but accept minimum standards of behaviour. Notable initiatives include the Open-Ended Working Group (OEWG) on Responsible

State Behaviour in Cyberspace (OEWG 2021-2025), which discusses principles, confidence-building measures, and a mechanism for institutional dialogue. Furthermore, the OEWG report calls for the creation of a new permanent mechanism a Global Mechanism to further facilitate discussions on ICT (Information and Communication Technology) and security issues (Digital Watch Observatory). The advantage of this format is its inclusiveness and adaptability: even without strict compliance mechanisms, it serves as a basis for coordination. However, there are obvious limitations. First, voluntary commitments do not guarantee compliance, as there are no verification or sanctions mechanisms. Second, fundamental geopolitical differences persist: Western countries advocate the application of international law to cyberspace, while Russia and China emphasise digital sovereignty and non-interference. As a result, negotiating forums often become a forum for position-making rather than for developing binding norms. Another area of activity is capacity-building initiatives. For example, the International Multilateral Partnership Against Cyber Threats (IMPACT), supported by the ITU (International Telecommunication Union), focuses on technical support, training, and strengthening infrastructure in less developed countries (Resolution of the Plenipotentiary Conference..., 2022). While its activities do not aim to create binding norms, they illustrate that universalism in cyberspace extends beyond norms and embraces practical cooperation. However, the effectiveness of such initiatives is limited: they fail to resolve structural contradictions between states and do not create legally binding regimes. UN cyber initiatives demonstrate the potential of universalism, but also its limits. They provide a minimal level of coordination, but are unable to overcome technological asymmetries and strategic mistrust among key players. Universalism in cybersecurity remains fragile and depends more on the political will of great powers than on the legal force of instruments.

The analysis showed that universalism in the field of cybersecurity is forced to transform under the influence of a combination of structural and procedural constraints. In the classical view, the universal regime assumed the presence of clear, formally mandatory norms, verification mechanisms and sanctions for non-compliance. In the cyber sector, these elements have proved practically unsuitable: the technical nature of threats makes reliable and transparent verification impossible, and the high speed of technological change makes long negotiation cycles ineffective. The transformation of universalism affects the process of multi-stakeholder engagement. In the cyber sphere, private corporations, infrastructure providers and technical standard-forming bodies play an important role. This involvement changes the nature of the universal order: norms are formed not only between states, but also in cooperation with non-public actors, so the legitimacy and effectiveness of rules depends on the ability of such rules to combine state interests with the possibility of practical implementation in technical infrastructure. Such

multidimensionality enhances flexibility, but at the same time complicates the certainty of rules and blurs the responsibility for their implementation. Another significant consequence is the change in the distribution of the centre of gravity of rule-making. Where the universal level shows weakness in enforcement, regional, subregional and bilateral formats are formed that provide a faster response and control mechanisms based on a greater degree of trust or overlap in the interests of participants. Regional agreements provide detailed technical standards and clearer procedures of mutual assistance. Their effectiveness stems from the consideration of regional infrastructures, legal frameworks and prevailing political conditions. Such diversification violates unitarily of universalism, but increases operational efficiency in individual contexts. At the same time, it is critically significant to realise that changing the form of universalism does not mean its complete marginalisation. Framework universal norms play the role of benchmarks for rule-making at other levels and form general expectations of acceptable behaviour.

Regionalisation of legal norms under conditions of multipolar competition

The development of international law in the 21st century (2010-2025 years) is increasingly determined by the dynamics of regionalisation. While in the second half of the 20th century (1950-2000 years) the paradigm of universalism dominated, which was reflected in the creation of numerous global treaties and institutions under the auspices of the UN, at the present stage the role of regional agreements and mechanisms that form the complex architecture of “legal multipolarity” is growing. This phenomenon is not a consequence of the simple disintegration of universal regimes, but rather indicates a structural transformation of international normative, where regional formats become key laboratories of legal innovation, from which the universal system often borrows new approaches. The growing influence of regional agreements also has conceptual implications for international law. The traditional view of universality as the highest form of normative legitimacy is gradually being revised. In practice, regional mechanisms, such as the European Union or ASEAN (Association of SouthEast Asian Nations), have proven more effective, as they provide effective tools for monitoring, enforcement and policy coordination. Their effectiveness is measured by the ability to make timely decisions, the level of implementation of commitments by member states and the presence of concrete implementation mechanisms, which allow for practical results that remain problematic in global structures (Olatunji, 2023). For example, the Paris Agreement (2015) provides for a universal framework, but its implementation largely depends on regional or national strategies, such as the European Green Deal (2019).

The phenomenon of legal multipolarity is also manifested in the growing number of alternative models for regulating the same areas. In the field of digital policy, the EU promotes the concept of strict regulation of platforms and

data protection (Regulation (EU) 2016/679..., 2016), while the US adheres to a more liberal, market-oriented paradigm (Protecting Consumer Privacy..., 2012). China, in turn, is developing a regulatory framework that combines digital control and the priority of state security (Cybersecurity Law..., 2016). These approaches do not amount to universal consensus, but instead reflect different civilisational and political logics. As a result, international law increasingly functions not as a single system, but as a space of interaction between different legal centres between which states manoeuvre, sometimes using regional standards as levers in global negotiations.

Multipolarity in the field of human rights makes it impossible to have a single universal standard, but instead creates a complex pluralism in which coexistence and competition interact simultaneously. The current dynamics of the development of international law demonstrate that the growing influence of regional agreements and the formation of legal multipolarity are not a sign of the degradation of the international system, but of its structural transformation. Regionalisation creates a multi-level architecture in which the universal and the regional coexist in a complementary manner, although this interaction is often accompanied by competition and legal tension. For states, this situation means the need for strategic choices: in which areas to focus on universal principles, and where to rely on regional standards.

Regionalism in modern international law appears not only as a tool for adapting legal norms to local conditions, but also as a complex challenge to universal regimes that have traditionally been considered the basis of global law and order. One of the key aspects of this problem is that regional agreements are increasingly moving beyond subsidiary instruments and are beginning to compete with universal treaties. Universal norms are usually more general in nature, which allows a wide range of states to be involved, but at the same time reduces the degree of their detail and effectiveness. Instead, regional mechanisms create more specific standards and procedures that reflect local political, cultural and economic realities. This situation leads to hierarchical uncertainty: formally, international law does not establish a clear priority for universal or regional norms, so the resolution of conflicts depends on the specific context and interpretations. The contrast between the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian approaches makes this dynamic particularly evident. The United States and the European Union rely on rule-based universalism, advocating the primacy of international institutions such as the UN, WTO (World Trade Organisation), and promoting legal frameworks grounded in liberal values and individual rights. In contrast, Russia and China view such frameworks as instruments of Western dominance and emphasise the principle of sovereign equality and non-interference. For Moscow, this is reflected in the concept of a “multipolar legal order,” where regional institutions like the Eurasian Economic Union act as normative counterweights to Western-led regimes. Beijing, meanwhile, advances its own model of legal regionalism

through Belt and Road mechanisms (The Belt and Road Initiative..., 2023), proposing consensus-based norms that prioritise stability and state-led development over universal obligations. Analysis of these processes shows that regionalism turns into a challenge to universalism not only because of potential contradictions of norms, but also because of a change in the very understanding of legitimacy. States participating in regional agreements perceive them as more “their own,” since they take into account local specifics and are formed with the active participation of those who are directly interested in their implementation (Marotti, 2022). This creates an effect of increased confidence in regional norms, and at the same time undermines the status of universal mechanisms as final arbitrators. When the state faces a contradiction between universal and regional norms, in practice it often leans in favour of the latter, since they seem more relevant and equipped with effective institutional mechanisms.

The human rights comparison is particularly revealing. Universal documents such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) form basic principles, but regional systems such as the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights... (1950) set higher standards and create judicial institutions capable of enforcing decisions. This suggests that regionalism not only duplicates universal mechanisms, but actually increases their effectiveness, creating a “superstructure” over general norms. At the same time, such asymmetry creates inequalities in access to protection of rights depending on the region, which calls into question the principle of universality of international law. Regionalism at the same time strengthens the practical implementation of norms and demonstrates the limits of universalism, which is unable to provide the same level of guarantees in all parts of the world. In this context, the relationship between universal and regional regimes is particularly complex. Regionalism at the same time performs an auxiliary function, detailing universal standards and increasing the level of their implementation, and forms autonomous systems with its own normative logic. Such duality is manifested in the fact that, on the one hand, regional mechanisms provide a deeper adaptation of norms to specific cultural, historical and political contexts, and on the other – create conditions for fragmentation of international law. Universalism is based on the idea of unity and equality of legal approaches, while regionalism actually legitimise the plurality of decisions and standards (Marotti, 2022). This leads to an increase in the risk of imbalance of the system of international law, within which norms are increasingly crystallised in regional forms that are not always consistent with each other.

This divergence becomes most visible when comparing Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian legal paradigms. While the EU and the US promote a rights-based approach centred on individual freedoms and judicial accountability, Russia and China advocate sovereignty-oriented models that prioritise state security and social stability over liberal rights. In these systems, human rights are often interpreted through

the lens of national interest and collective order, rather than universal moral imperatives. The European Court of Human Rights has consistently advanced doctrines of proportionality and effective remedy, ensuring that individual rights prevail even over state prerogatives. By contrast, Russia’s 2020 constitutional amendments, which gave national law precedence over international rulings, and China’s emphasis on “developmental human rights,” reflect an opposing logic one in which state sovereignty serves as the ultimate guarantor of legitimacy. In China’s “community of shared destiny” narrative, rights are framed as contingent upon collective harmony and economic stability, while in Russian legal discourse, the concept of “traditional values” is invoked to justify normative divergence from Western liberalism (Mälksoo, 2021). Such divergence institutionalises competing legal philosophies, reinforcing the regionalisation of international law and eroding the common normative foundation that universalism presupposes. As a result, the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian blocs increasingly function as distinct normative poles, each exporting its own legal standards through trade agreements, development assistance, and multilateral diplomacy thereby transforming international law into a field of geopolitical contestation rather than convergence.

In the minds of growing multipolarity, the problem of a collision of norms will intensify. Between bipolar and unipolar systems, the current order does not allow a single centre of power to ensure convenience. Universal regimes are no longer perceived as an insane priority: their importance lies in the readiness of leading powers to recognise them as legitimate. Within the hierarchy of norms, the principle of multiple legitimacy is formed, which creates the basis for the selective stagnation of law (Kreuder-Sonnen & Zürn, 2020). This supports the idea of universalism as a system of universal rules and reinforces the importance of regionalism. Regional formats demonstrate different implementation mechanisms and avoid the institutional inertia of global structures.

The idea of global legal pluralism increasingly characterises the contemporary state of international law (Hakimi, 2020). Instead of a single hierarchical structure built around universal treaties and organisations, the system is represented by a mosaic of regional, sectoral and bilateral regimes. These regimes coexist, sometimes compete, and sometimes overlap, forming a complex network rather than a pyramid. The decline of the rigid centrality of the UN or WTO illustrates this shift: their authority is measured not by universalism itself, but by their ability to coordinate with other levels of governance. From this perspective, regionalisation should not be seen as fragmentation or collapse, but as part of a broader trend toward pluralism in global law. In a multipolar world, international law is increasingly produced through multiple centres and formats, reflecting diversity of interests and asymmetry of power. The key challenge becomes not the preservation of hierarchy, but the creation of mechanisms of coordination and harmonisation among legal regimes. Legal pluralism reflects

the structural transformation of international law: it is no longer universalist in form, but adaptive and multilayered in practice. This model provides flexibility in addressing new issues such as cybersecurity or biosecurity, but also carries risks of fragmentation and inequality. The balance between flexibility and stability will determine whether pluralism evolves into a coherent paradigm or turns into disordered fragmentation.

To more clearly reflect these trends, Table 1 summarises the key characteristics of universal and regional

approaches in international law and their contribution to the formation of a pluralistic system. The table allows comparing the functional advantages, limitations, and interaction of different regimes, demonstrating how universal norms and regional standards can coexist, complement each other and at the same time create potential conflicts. This clearly emphasises that legal pluralism is not only a conceptual model, but also a practical tool that reflects the complexity of the modern multipolar international system.

Table 1. Prospects for legal pluralism in a multipolar world

Aspect	Universalism (classical model)	Regionalism (modern trend)	Implications for international law	Application areas
Normative framework	Single universal treaties (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea – UNCLOS), Kyoto Protocol)	Multiple regional agreements adapted to the specifics of the region	The rise of regional agreements leads to normative fragmentation, yet enhances effectiveness in addressing region-specific issues	Maritime law (UNCLOS), global environmental governance (Kyoto Protocol, Paris Agreement)
Institutions	UN and universal conferences	Regional organisations	The global institutional landscape is increasingly characterised by overlapping and functionally specialised organisations operating at both universal and regional levels, often without clear hierarchical coordination	UN institutions (e.g. ICJ – International Court of Justice), vs. EU Court, ASEAN bodies
Coercive mechanisms	UN Security Council, international courts	Regional courts, sanction mechanisms, local arbitration	Jurisdictional competition, blurred priorities	Peacekeeping (UN vs African Union), trade dispute resolution (WTO vs USMCA panels)
The role of great powers	Determinant in shaping global rules	Balance of influence in regions where key actors dominate on a smaller scale	Resilience depends on local balances of power	U.S. role in global treaties vs. China in SCO or Belt & Road norms
Regime flexibility	Limited by consensus	Higher due to regional commonality	Regional models adapt faster to new challenges	EU regulatory responses, ASEAN's non-binding but quick instruments
Development prospects	Universalism weakens under the pressure of geopolitics	Regionalism strengthens, forming a network of legal order	The formation of “legal pluralism” as a new norm	Multipolar legal governance; hybrid legal systems

Note: USMCA – United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, SCO – Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

Source: created by the author based on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982), Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations... (1997), Paris Agreement (2015), F. Zhang (2023), P. Li (2023)

The results presented in Table 1 allow for an analytical assessment of the prospects for legal pluralism in a multipolar world. A pluralistic system can provide greater flexibility in responding to new challenges, particularly in the areas of technology, cybersecurity, and environmental protection, where universal treaties fail to keep pace with rapid changes. It also follows that the coexistence of universal and regional regimes creates the opportunity for a more differentiated consideration of the specificities of individual states and regions, which increases the practical effectiveness of norms and allows for the adaptation of global standards to local conditions. At the same time, the growing divergence between the regulatory models of the US, EU, Russia, and China reveals a profound structural rift in the global legal order. The inability of these blocs to agree on

universal standards from digital governance to environmental regulation is transforming international law into a mosaic of overlapping regional systems. As a result, regional legal spaces increasingly function as autonomous systems rather than as components of a unified global order. This dynamic exacerbates the fragmentation of norm-setting processes, with transatlantic and Eurasian centres of power seeking to export their own regulatory logic to dependent or partner states. Analysis of the table reveals serious risks: without mechanisms for coordination and inter-mode dialogue, pluralism can degenerate into fragmentation, weakening the primacy and predictability of international law. In this sense, the rivalry between these normative poles shapes legal pluralism not simply as a technical result of global diversity, but as a reflection of strategic competition

for rule-making authority. The success of this concept depends on the ability of states and international organisations to develop rules of interaction, prioritise norms, and avoid conflicts between different levels of legal regulation. Overall, legal pluralism in a multipolar world has the potential to become an effective paradigm combining universal values with regional adaptability; however, its implementation will require systemic instruments for coordination and ongoing monitoring of conflicts between regimes.

The rapid growth of the role of regional agreements and the formation of various regional standards in the modern multipolar world creates new challenges for the classical model of universalism of international law. The emergence

of regional platforms, flexible multilateral initiatives and localised legal mechanisms demonstrates that universal treaties can no longer always provide the necessary efficiency and adaptability in response to technological, environmental or security transformations. In such circumstances, the development of international law can take place under different scenarios, involving different interaction of universal and regional regimes. These possible trajectories are demonstrated in Table 2, which structurally reflects three main scenarios: the restoration of universalism, pluralistic coexistence and the dominance of regionalism, providing an analytical basis for assessing the potential future of the international legal order.

Table 2. Future scenarios of the relationship between universalism and regionalism

Aspect	Scenario 1: Restoration of universalism	Scenario 2: Pluralistic coexistence	Scenario 3: Dominance of regionalism
Character of the international system	Attempt to restore a centralised, coordinated system of norms; global treaties take precedence	The international system ceases to be a single hierarchy, but its parts are linked together through common principles and minimal coordination mechanisms, which prevents it from completely disintegrating	Proliferation of regional agreements and standards; universal mechanisms are losing influence
Role of States	States actively support universal mechanisms, recognise their priority	States selectively interact with universal and regional regimes	States focus on regional and bilateral agreements, universal treaties are ignored
Priority of norms	Universal norms dominate, regional ones adapt	Priority depends on context and regulatory scope	Priority belongs to regional norms, universal frameworks play a supporting role
Coordination mechanisms	Central authority or international institution ensures coherence	Network ties and “soft law” facilitate coordination	Minimal coordination mechanisms; competition of regimes
Advantages	Unity of norms*, predictability, global legitimacy	Flexibility, adaptability, consideration of local specificities	High adaptability to regional needs, rapid response to local challenges
Risks	Ignoring regional specificities, difficulty in adapting to new areas	Conflicts between regimes, risk of legal fragmentation	Decentralisation can lead to chaotic fragmentation and weakening of the legitimacy of international law
Examples of agreements	Paris Climate Agreement; International Criminal Court (ICC); UNCLOS	Association Agreement between the EU and Mercosur	EU legal system: Treaty of Lisbon...; USMCA

Note: *by “unity of norms” mean a return to a state where global treaties and institutions are the centre of the international system, and regional mechanisms merely complement them, but do not compete with or replace them. For example, the Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations... (1997), The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (Treaty on elimination..., 1987) discussed in the study

Source: created by the author based on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982), Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations... (1997), Agreement on the Privileges... (2002), Treaty of Lisbon... (2007), Paris Agreement (2015), United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (2020), Association Agreement between the EU and Mercosur (2024)

Analysis of the table shows that the future of international law in a multipolar world can develop along several fundamentally different trajectories, each of which has its own advantages and risks. The universalism recovery scenario involves attempts to centrally coordinate norms and restore comprehensive global treaties. It provides a high level of predictability and consistency of international law, but in the face of rapid technological change and political multipolarity, it risks remaining non-operational and unsuitable for adaptation. The scenario of mosaic coexistence demonstrates a balance between universal

principles and regional flexibility, allowing to take into account the specifics of individual regions and respond quickly to new challenges. In this case, international law becomes more adaptive, but requires effective coordination mechanisms to avoid conflicts between different regimes and ensure the legitimacy of norms. The scenario of dominance of regionalism emphasises the autonomy of regional agreements and multilateral platforms, which increases efficiency and allows taking into account local features, but at the same time weakens the role of universal standards. It undermines the predictability and

overall integrity of international law. The growing divergence between the transatlantic bloc (the United States and the European Union) and the Eurasian powers (Russia and China) further reinforces this trend. The inability of these major actors to agree on shared regulatory or environmental standards accelerates the fragmentation of global governance. As a result, regional legal regimes increasingly become instruments of geopolitical competition rather than elements of a coherent international order. General analysis shows that no scenario is optimal in its pure form: the effective future of international law involves the integration of universal values and regional adaptability, where a pluralistic structure combines stability and flexibility, and inter-regime dialogue and coordination become key mechanisms for maintaining the legitimacy and functionality of the system.

Regionalisation of international law is one of the key trends in the modern stage of development of the global legal system. It reflects the deeper processes of political and economic multipolarity, leading to a gradual shift from the idea of a universal unified order to a multi-level system of legal regimes. This process is not reduced to simple fragmentation: regionalisation forms a new model of interaction, where universal norms coexist and intertwine with regional standards, creating a complex but more adaptive architecture. Trend analysis shows that regionalisation has a dual nature. On the one hand, it strengthens the effectiveness of international law by bringing norms closer to the specifics of local contexts, expanding opportunities for law-making innovations and creating conditions for faster response to new challenges. On the other hand, it produces risks of normative asymmetry and undermines the principle of universality, which calls into question the ability of international law to perform an integration function on a global scale. An important consequence of regionalisation is the formation of global legal pluralism, within which there is no single centre of legitimacy. Instead, stability is provided by a network of interconnected but autonomous modes. This pluralism can become both a source of flexibility and pluralism, and a factor of political manipulation, when strong states use the competition of regimes to advance their own interests. In general, the regionalisation of international law is not a deviation from the universalist tradition, but a new phase of its evolution. It reflects the adaptation of the global legal system to the conditions of a polycentric world, where the balance between universal values and regional specificity becomes the main challenge for further development.

DISCUSSION

The obtained results testify to the complex interaction of universal and regional norms in international law, which is determined by historical traditions, political priorities and legal strategic approaches of individual states. In the global context, universal norms continue to be the general basis of international law and order, while regional mechanisms function as platforms for testing new legal solutions and

adapting global standards to local conditions. Such interaction creates a dynamic model of international law, where universalism and regionalism do not contradict each other, but complement each other, increasing the practical effectiveness and legitimacy of norms. At the same time, it is noted that regional initiatives are able to form peculiar normative spaces that are partially autonomous from the global system, which emphasises the need for an integration approach in the formation of international legal standards. The findings demonstrate the relevance of further study of the mechanisms of interaction between universal and regional norms. They also highlight the need for a systematic analysis of the potential of regionalisation as a tool for strengthening international law and order in a multipolar world.

In the writings of O.A. Olatunji (2023) and A. Vetterlein & T. Schmidtke (2025), which analysed regional mechanisms for regulating international law, notes that regional agreements create opportunities for adapting universal standards to local conditions and at the same time form the basis for further integration into the global legal system. A. Vetterlein & T. Schmidtke considers regional agreements as a tool for testing new legal solutions, while O.A. Olatunji emphasises their role in the gradual harmonisation of norms with international law. These findings are partly consistent with the results of the study, which identified the potential of regional mechanisms as laboratories of new legal practices. However, unlike the position of the authors, the results of this study show that regional initiatives not only contribute to integration into the global system, but are also able to independently act as stable elements of a multipolar international law and order. They form local legal spaces with their own legitimacy. study show that regional initiatives not only contribute to integration into the global system, but are also able to independently act as stable elements of a multipolar international law and order, establishing local legal spaces with their own legitimacy. The reason for the disagreement lies in the broader focus of study, which includes political, economic and strategic aspects of the functioning of regionalism in modern international law.

In the writings of L. Kulaga & K. Turnbull (2024) and J. Hall & L. Koen (2024) noted that the development of regional law in the areas of investment and ecology creates tension with universal norms, while contributing to the renewal of the global contractual system. The results of this study are consistent with this approach: stress does exist, but it has a constructive character. At the same time, this study differs from the conclusions of J. Hall & L. Koen in that it shows the important role of the geopolitical context of regions in determining how much this tension is transformed into positive changes. The authors focus more on the normative dimension of the development of law.

The study found that multi-vector regional mechanisms can act as stable elements of a multipolar international order, and not just a preparatory stage for global integration, which expands the understanding of the

functional role of regionalism in modern law. Regional systems are able to support universalism, but at the same time form a multi-vector of legal practices, which sometimes slows down global unification. These conclusions partially coincide with the results of the study of E. Marat & L.A. McCarthy (2020), who examined the interaction of regional and universal norms in international law. The authors analysed the concept of Eurasian international law, where regional norms create an autonomous level of legal regulation that coexists with universal standards.

Approaches A. Van Engeland (2022) and G. García Escobar (2023) to universalism and regionalisation of international law demonstrate different accents in the interpretation of the relationship between global and local norms. A. Van Engeland emphasised that universalism has always been ideologically loaded and needed constant adaptation, and regionalisation is a natural reaction to the uneven distribution of power in the world system. G. García Escobar, on the contrary, emphasised the critical role of universal mechanisms, especially in the field of human rights, regardless of regional variations. The analysis of this study confirms the thesis A. Van Engeland on the need for flexible norm testing in a regional context, but demonstrates that the pessimistic predictions of G. García Escobar regarding the risk of weakening universal standards is not always justified. The results show that even in the field of human rights, regional practices can strengthen universal principles, creating additional mechanisms for control and adaptation. The discrepancies in the conclusions of the authors can be explained by the difference between the theoretical assessment of the role of universalism and the practical influence of regional initiatives on its implementation. This suggests that regionalisation is not necessarily a threat to universalism, but may be its complement and laboratory for innovative legal solutions.

In the studies of M.A. Sanchez (2023) and M. Gutierrez (2025) showed that regional judicial institutions, in particular in Africa and Latin America, do not undermine global law and order, but form an additional level of protection. The data of the conducted study confirm this thesis, since the analysis of regional legal mechanisms showed that local judicial practices can enhance the effectiveness of rule-making due to closer binding to the social and political context of the region. However, unlike the findings of M.A. Sanchez and M. Gutierrez, this study demonstrates that the effectiveness of regional institutions is often selective and largely depends on the geopolitical weight and economic potential of the region. This suggests that regionalisation does not always provide uniform support for global standards and can simultaneously strengthen some aspects of universalism, leaving others less regulated. Such a conclusion expands the arguments of previous authors, pointing to the complex interaction between global and local legal levels, which requires more flexible approaches to integrating regional decisions into the international system.

C. Efstathiopoulos (2021) and T. Berringer & M.D. Ferreira (2022) sees regionalisation as a manifestation of the

“Global South” opposing Western dominance in international law, emphasising its function as a tool of post-colonial resistance. The analysis partially confirms this thesis, because some regional initiatives really act as a way of defending autonomy in a multipolar environment. At the same time, the results of the study point to an additional aspect: regionalisation can serve as a channel for integrating new legal concepts into the global law and order, and not just as a means of resistance. This demonstrates that local legal practices are capable of performing dual functions – at the same time forming independent regional mechanisms and stimulating the adaptation of universal norms. This approach expands the authors’ argument, showing that regionalisation can be both an act of strategic autonomy and a laboratory for testing legal decisions before they are integrated globally.

In the writings of K. Von Benda-Beckmann & B. Turner (2020) and A. Acharya *et al.* (2023) noted that globalisation is accompanied by the emergence of multiple centres of law-making, transforming the traditional understanding of universalism. The authors point out that universal norms can no longer be considered as a monopoly property of international law, but act as a result of multi-level communication and interaction between different actors. The results of this study are consistent with this thesis: regional initiatives demonstrate the ability to establish new legal solutions that, through horizontal interaction, are gradually integrated into the global system. However, unlike K. Von Benda-Beckmann & B. Turner and A. Acharya *et al.*, findings emphasise that this process is not always linear and depends on the geopolitical weight of the region. It also depends on the willingness of global institutions to adapt innovations. Regionalisation is not only a laboratory of new norms, but also a factor in the multi-vector development of universal law, which expands the arguments of previous authors. F.L. Bordin & J. Odermatt (2024) in the study analysed the competition between regional and global norms, which creates space for flexible adaptation of international law. The study confirms this thesis, demonstrating that regionalisation does not destroy universalism, but changes its functions in accordance with the local context. At the same time, the results differ from the conclusions of the authors mentioned above: in this study, they found that the positive potential of this competition prevails over the risks of conflict, while the authors focus more on possible contradictions between the levels of norms.

The analysis of T.H. Morrison *et al.* (2023) emphasises the growing polycentricity of the international order, where regional practices act as “bridges” between the local and the global. These results are consistent with this thesis: multipolarity does not destroy universalism, but contributes to its renewal through horizontal networks of interaction. At the same time, the difference is that this study demonstrates the dependence of the effectiveness of such “bridges” on the readiness of global institutions to accept innovations and on the geopolitical weight of regions. T.C. Halliday (2023) and R.Y. Jennings (2024) emphasise mainly on structural

changes in the system. However, this entails the risk of double standards, which T.C. Halliday notes. The author highlighted the risks of double standards in the field of human rights arising from regionalisation. The results of this study partly confirm these caveats, but show that regional mechanisms are often the first channels for the introduction of new norms that later gain global acceptance. The difference with the studies of R.Y. Jennings lies in the focus: they concentrate more on potential negative consequences, while the study emphasises the positive role of regionalisation in strengthening universal standards in the long term.

The results of the study show that the process of regionalisation in international law does not necessarily contradict universalism, but can act as its complement and stage of updating the global system. Regular testing of new legal norms within regional initiatives makes it possible to more effectively adapt universal standards to specific political, cultural and economic conditions. Although regional mechanisms function autonomously, they are able to gradually integrate innovative solutions into the global law and order, while maintaining the principle of universalism as a normative basis. The study demonstrates that the multipolarity of the world creates space for the interaction of regional and global norms, and their complementarity, which contributes to the stability of international law and its effectiveness. At the same time, there are risks of fragmentation that arise from differences in the political and legal traditions of the regions, but they do not reduce the potential of regional systems as tools for innovation and testing of new norms. The results also emphasise that the active use of regional platforms allows states to more effectively influence the formation of global rules, while ensuring the adaptation of universal standards to local realities. This approach contributes to the development of a multi-level model of international law, where universalism and regionalism do not compete, but complement each other. In particular, regional initiatives serve as platforms for testing new legal solutions that can later be applied on a global scale, increasing their legitimacy and practical effectiveness. These findings underline the importance of a strategic combination of global and regional approaches to strengthen the international legal order and adapt it to the multipolar conditions of the modern world.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis revealed that international law has entered a phase of transformation, characterised by the loss of stability of the universal treaty system and the strengthening of regional regulatory formats. Universal treaties have demonstrated a limited ability to adapt to new conditions, due to growing geopolitical rivalry, accelerated technological change, and weakening trust between leading actors. Under these conditions, universal mechanisms function primarily as coordination tools, ensuring a minimal level of consistency but lacking the previous degree of legal binding force. Regional initiatives are gaining increasing importance, enabling a more precise adaptation of norms to the political and institutional characteristics of individual spaces. Their advantage lies in greater practical effectiveness and the ability to detail rules, but this is accompanied by the risk of conflicts and increasing legal inequality between states not involved in regional associations. Modern international law increasingly functions on the principle of a pluralistic network, where interaction between universal and regional levels is based not on hierarchy, but on compatibility and the ability to coordinate. The prospects of this model are determined by how successfully the mechanisms for coordinating regimes and preventing fragmentation will develop, which will become a key condition for maintaining the stability of the international legal order. Further research should focus on a detailed study of inter-regime platforms, procedures for harmonising norms and mechanisms of “soft law”, as well as on the impact of technological innovations and regional conflicts on the formation of legal pluralism. This allows a deeper assessment of the prospects for the stable coexistence of universalism and regionalism in a multipolar world.

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