

Tariffs, Takeovers, and Transactional Peace: Trumpism, Global Disorder, and the Search for a Geo-Moral Anchor

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Abstract

The resurgence of economic nationalism, coercive diplomacy, and selective multilateralism under Trumpism has accelerated the erosion of the post-Second World War international order. Through punitive tariffs, transactional security arrangements, regime-change rhetoric, and proposals for parallel governance mechanisms such as a “Board of Peace,” Trumpism redefines leadership as leverage and peace as conditional exchange. While presented as a corrective to institutional inertia and strategic overstretch, this approach has intensified uncertainty, weakened normative constraints, and encouraged strategic hedging across regions.

This article argues that Trumpism represents not merely a policy departure but a doctrinal shift toward power detached from responsibility, generating systemic disorder rather than stability. The resulting fragmentation has reduced confidence in multilateral institutions, normalised coercive statecraft, and exposed the strategic limits of transactional approaches—even for the United States itself.

Against this backdrop, the article examines India’s emerging role as a potential stabilising actor in a disrupted system. Without aspiring to hegemony or ideological leadership, India’s emphasis on strategic autonomy, sovereignty, and development-oriented multilateralism positions it to help stabilise expectations across competing blocs and contribute to a more balanced global equilibrium.

Keywords: Trumpism; Global Order; Transactional Diplomacy; Economic Nationalism; Geo-Moral Power; India’s Foreign Policy; Middle Powers; Multilateralism; Strategic Autonomy

Literature Positioning Note

This article situates itself within debates on liberal order erosion, economic statecraft, and middle-power agency. While existing scholarship by Ikenberry, Nye, Acharya, and others has examined institutional decline, soft power, and power diffusion, this article advances the literature by conceptualising **geo-moral power** as a distinct and operational dimension of influence. Unlike soft power, which emphasises attraction, geo-moral power centres on credibility, restraint, and consistency under conditions of systemic stress. By applying this framework to Trumpism and to India’s emerging role, the article

bridges normative theory and strategic analysis, offering a middle-power-centric pathway for restoring equilibrium beyond great-power rivalry.

Conceptual Contribution Statement

This article introduces **geo-moral power** as a fourth dimension of influence alongside military, economic, and diplomatic capabilities. It argues that in an era of transactional statecraft and institutional erosion, geo-moral credibility stabilises global order by shaping expectations, legitimising restraint, and enabling bridge-building across blocs.

1. Trumpism as Doctrine: From Strategic Leadership to Transactional Coercion

Trumpism is best understood not as an episodic deviation in American foreign policy, but as a **coherent—if disruptive—doctrine** that challenges the normative foundations of the post-Second World War global order. Scholars of international relations have increasingly argued that the crisis confronting global order today is not merely one of power transition, but of **norm erosion**, where leadership is decoupled from restraint and responsibility.¹ Trumpism accelerates this erosion by redefining the purpose of American power itself. The rupture has renewed attention on non-material dimensions of influence—particularly the role of geo-moral credibility as a stabilising force in periods of systemic disorder.

Unlike traditional US grand strategy—which blended material strength with institutional leadership, alliance-building, and normative legitimacy—Trumpism privileges **transactionalism over trust** and **coercion over consensus**. Alliances are reimagined not as strategic assets but as financial liabilities, while multilateral institutions are viewed less as stabilising mechanisms and more as constraints on sovereign autonomy.² This marks a decisive shift from leadership through consent to influence through leverage.

At the operational level, Trumpism treats international politics as a sequence of **bilateral bargains**, judged by immediate, visible gains rather than long-term systemic outcomes. Policy success is measured in tariffs imposed, concessions extracted, or costs shifted onto partners, rather than in stability preserved or norms reinforced. As Stephen Walt observes, such an approach abandons the core logic of grand strategy—namely, aligning short-term actions with long-term national interests.³

The doctrine is further distinguished by the **personalisation of power**. Decision-making becomes leader-centric, improvisational, and frequently detached from institutional expertise. This weakens bureaucratic continuity and injects uncertainty into diplomatic and security relationships. Robert Keohane notes that unpredictability, when normalised, undermines both deterrence credibility and alliance confidence, producing strategic volatility rather than advantage.⁴

Economically, Trumpism collapses the boundary between trade policy and national security. Global interdependence—once treated as a source of mutual gain—is reframed as strategic vulnerability. Trade deficits are interpreted as indicators of exploitation, tariffs as expressions of sovereignty, and supply

chains as instruments of coercion. This worldview legitimises punitive economic actions even against long-standing allies, eroding trust across the global trading system.⁵

Strategically, Trumpism signals a partial return to **19th-century power politics** within a deeply interconnected 21st-century world. Casual references to territorial acquisition, regime change, or coercive bargaining over sovereign space challenge the post-1945 norm of restraint. When the system's most powerful actor treats rules as optional, it lowers the normative threshold for revisionism by others.

Ultimately, Trumpism exposes a deeper crisis confronting global order: **power unmoored from purpose**. American capabilities remain formidable, but the moral and institutional scaffolding that once legitimised their use has weakened. The question this doctrine raises, therefore, is not simply about America's trajectory—but about how global stability can be sustained when leadership itself becomes transactional.

2. Punitive Tariffs and Economic Nationalism: Weaponising Interdependence

Trumpism's most visible—and consequential—expression lies in its embrace of **punitive tariffs** as instruments of state power. Far from being conventional trade remedies, these tariffs are deployed as **coercive tools** to extract concessions, reconfigure supply chains, and signal dominance. In doing so, Trumpism reframes economic interdependence—from a stabilising feature of globalisation into a battlefield of sovereignty and leverage.

This shift rests on a particular reading of global trade: that deficits signify exploitation and that openness weakens national autonomy. Such assumptions run counter to decades of economic scholarship, which emphasise comparative advantage and the aggregate welfare gains of rules-based trade. Yet under Trumpism, tariffs become a proxy for strength, and disruption a badge of resolve. The distinction between economic policy and national security is deliberately blurred, legitimising extraordinary measures in the name of strategic self-help.⁶

The consequences for the global trading system are profound. By imposing tariffs unilaterally—often invoking national security exemptions—Trumpism erodes the authority of the **World Trade Organization** (WTO), whose dispute-settlement mechanisms rely on member compliance and shared faith in rules. As retaliation follows retaliation, predictability—the lifeblood of trade and investment—gives way to uncertainty. Empirical studies demonstrate that tariff escalation raises costs for consumers and firms alike, dampens investment, and fragments supply chains rather than producing sustainable re-shoring.⁷

Paradoxically, the domestic gains promised by tariff nationalism have proven elusive. Manufacturing employment growth remains constrained by automation and skills mismatches, while higher input costs ripple through downstream industries. The burden of tariffs frequently falls on domestic consumers and producers, blunting political dividends over time. Analyses by the **International Monetary Fund** indicate that sustained trade conflicts depress global growth and amplify inflationary pressures—outcomes that undermine macroeconomic stability at home as much as abroad.⁸

At the systemic level, Trumpism’s tariff strategy accelerates **trade fragmentation**. States hedge by diversifying markets, building redundancy into supply chains, and forming preferential blocs. While such “de-risking” may reduce exposure to single-point shocks, it also raises transaction costs and disproportionately disadvantages developing economies dependent on open market access. The global economy thus becomes less efficient, less inclusive, and more politically segmented.⁹

Crucially, weaponised interdependence invites emulation. When the leading economic power normalises coercive trade practices, others adopt similar instruments—sanctions, export controls, and regulatory barriers—further eroding the rules-based order. What begins as tactical pressure metastasises into structural disorder. In this environment, tariffs no longer correct market distortions; they **create strategic ones**, embedding mistrust into the architecture of global commerce.¹⁰

3. Regime Change Rhetoric, Territorial Fantasies, and the Return of 19th-Century Geopolitics

Beyond tariffs, Trumpism’s most destabilising impact lies in its **casual re-legitimisation of coercive geopolitics**—a rhetorical and strategic posture that treats sovereignty as negotiable and territorial integrity as contingent on power. Statements suggesting the acquisition of strategic territories, pressure-driven regime change, or the transactional handling of sovereign states represent more than diplomatic indiscretion; they signal a **normative regression** to an era when might routinely trumped law.

Since 1945, the prohibition against territorial conquest and externally imposed regime change has been a cornerstone of international order, embedded in the UN Charter and reinforced through collective practice. Trumpism, however, exhibits open impatience with these restraints. Public speculation about acquiring Greenland, coercive posturing toward Venezuela and Iran, and the instrumental use of regime-change rhetoric blur the line between strategic signalling and revisionist intent. Such discourse weakens the taboo against conquest, even when no immediate action follows.¹¹

The danger lies not only in what is done, but in what is **normalised**. International order depends heavily on shared expectations. When the world’s most powerful state treats sovereignty as a bargaining chip, it lowers the reputational and moral costs for others to do the same. Analysts at the **International Crisis Group** warn that rhetorical permissiveness toward coercion emboldens regional powers with unresolved territorial ambitions, accelerating global instability.¹²

Trumpism also revives a narrow, instrumental view of regime change—one divorced from post-Cold War lessons about state collapse, insurgency, and long-term regional destabilisation. Rather than viewing regime stability as a global public good, regimes are assessed primarily on transactional alignment. This approach disregards the institutional fragility of many states and the cascading humanitarian and security consequences that often follow externally induced political ruptures.¹³

Equally consequential is the pressure applied on alliance systems, particularly **North Atlantic Treaty Organization** (NATO). By repeatedly questioning alliance commitments and conditioning security guarantees on financial contributions, Trumpism reframes collective defence as a fee-for-service arrangement. While burden-sharing debates are legitimate, their coercive framing undermines deterrence

by introducing ambiguity where clarity is essential. Strategic reassurance—central to alliance stability—is replaced by uncertainty.¹⁴

What emerges is a pattern reminiscent of **19th-century great-power politics**, where influence flowed from intimidation, territorial bargaining, and elite deals rather than rules and institutions. The critical difference is scale: today's world is densely interconnected, nuclear-armed, and economically interdependent. In such a context, reviving coercive geopolitics does not restore stability—it multiplies systemic risk.

In effect, Trumpism does not merely challenge specific norms; it **reopens settled questions** about sovereignty, legitimacy, and restraint. This re-opening destabilises the equilibrium painstakingly built after decades of conflict. When revisionist language emanates from the system's core rather than its margins, global disorder becomes not an aberration, but a structural condition.¹⁵

4. The “Board of Peace”: Parallel Governance or Strategic Sabotage?

Among the more controversial propositions associated with Trumpism is the idea of a “**Board of Peace**”—a selective, power-centric forum envisioned to bypass what are portrayed as slow, politicised, or ineffective multilateral institutions. While framed as a pragmatic innovation to deliver results where traditional mechanisms fail, the concept raises fundamental questions about **legitimacy, accountability, and the future of global governance**.

At face value, the argument for such a body appears intuitive: multilateral institutions struggle with consensus, veto politics paralyse decision-making, and urgent crises demand speed. Yet the remedy proposed by Trumpism conflates **efficiency with authority**. Governance, particularly in matters of war and peace, derives not merely from capacity but from consent. By privileging a small, self-selected group of powerful states, the “Board of Peace” risks reproducing outcomes without the procedural legitimacy that confers durability.¹⁶

This approach directly challenges the normative primacy of the **United Nations Security Council** (UNSC). For all its flaws, the UNSC embodies a hard-won compromise between power and representation, binding even its strongest members—at least formally—to collective deliberation. Parallel structures dilute this constraint. As global governance scholars warn, institutional bypassing does not reform broken systems; it **hollows them out**, leaving a vacuum filled by ad hoc power arrangements rather than rules.¹⁷

The selective morality underpinning the “Board of Peace” is equally problematic. Decisions about intervention, coercion, or restraint would be shaped by the strategic interests of its members, not by universally agreed principles. This risks transforming peace into a **transactional commodity**—dispensed where interests align and withheld where they do not. Such selectivity erodes the already fragile norm of impartiality in international conflict management and deepens perceptions of double standards.¹⁸

Historically, parallel security mechanisms have rarely produced stability. From concert diplomacy in 19th-century Europe to informal coalitions in the post–Cold War era, exclusionary arrangements tend to fracture once interests diverge. In a multipolar and ideologically diverse world, a power-based “peace board” would struggle to command compliance from non-members, particularly in the Global South. The likely outcome is not faster peace, but **contested authority** and competing claims to legitimacy.¹⁹

More dangerously, the “Board of Peace” reflects a broader impulse within Trumpism to **externalise responsibility without relinquishing control**. By operating outside established institutions, powerful states avoid the legal and moral constraints that accompany collective decision-making. Peace becomes outcome-driven rather than process-bound, weakening norms that protect smaller states from coercion.

In strategic terms, the proposal reveals a deeper contradiction: while decrying institutional decay, Trumpism accelerates it by undermining the very frameworks that moderate power. The question, therefore, is not whether existing institutions require reform—they do—but whether peace can endure when **authority is detached from legitimacy**. The evidence suggests that it cannot.²⁰

5. What This Means for the United States: Power, Credibility, and Strategic Self-Harm

While Trumpism is often justified as a corrective to perceived American decline, its long-term implications for the United States itself are deeply paradoxical. By privileging coercion over credibility and transaction over trust, the doctrine risks **undermining the very sources of American power** that sustained US leadership for decades—alliances, institutional legitimacy, and normative influence.

At the heart of the problem lies a misunderstanding of how power endures. Military and economic capabilities matter, but they are amplified by confidence in American commitments. When treaties are treated as negotiable, alliances as protection rackets, and institutions as disposable, partners hedge rather than align. Surveys by the **Pew Research Center** show a marked decline in global trust in US leadership during periods marked by unilateralism and unpredictability, with recovery proving slow and uneven.²¹ Trust, once eroded, cannot be tariffed back into existence.

Institutionally, Trumpism places sustained stress on the US foreign policy apparatus. Frequent sidelining of professional diplomacy, public disparagement of intelligence assessments, and abrupt policy reversals weaken bureaucratic morale and continuity. Over time, this hollowing out degrades state capacity. Strategic effectiveness depends not merely on decisive leadership, but on **institutional memory and procedural discipline**—assets that are difficult to rebuild once compromised.²²

Economically, the weaponisation of trade and finance also carries reputational costs. The increasing use of sanctions, tariffs, and financial restrictions has accelerated efforts by other states to reduce dependence on US-controlled systems. While the dollar remains dominant, scholars warn of a gradual erosion of monetary privilege as alternatives—however imperfect—are explored. The irony is stark: instruments designed to reinforce leverage may, over time, **dilute structural advantages** that accrued precisely because the US was seen as a predictable steward of global economic order.²³

Civil–military relations present another fault line. Public politicisation of military leadership and the framing of security commitments as transactional bargains blur the norm of professional neutrality. Analysts at the **Centre for Strategic and International Studies** caution that such trends risk normalising domestic political interference in strategic decision-making, with long-term implications for readiness, morale, and alliance confidence.²⁴

Perhaps most damaging is the erosion of America’s **moral authority**. Leadership in the post-war era was never solely about dominance; it was about persuasion—the ability to set agendas, define norms, and mobilise coalitions. When American policy appears driven primarily by grievance and short-term gain, its capacity to rally others diminishes. Power becomes louder but lonelier.

In this sense, Trumpism risks producing a form of **strategic self-harm**: preserving raw capabilities while degrading the intangible assets that convert power into influence. The United States may remain formidable, but its ability to shape outcomes collaboratively—and to stabilise the system it once anchored—stands weakened. This internal contradiction reverberates outward, accelerating global disorder even as America seeks to assert itself within it.²⁵

6. Global Order in Flux: Fragmentation, Fear, and the Rise of Middle Powers

The cumulative effect of Trumpism’s disruptions is not merely bilateral tension or institutional stress, but a **system-wide transformation** in how states perceive risk, align interests, and exercise agency. The global order is no longer coherently unipolar, nor has it stabilised into a predictable multipolar balance. Instead, it is entering a phase of **fragmentation marked by anxiety**, where uncertainty—rather than power distribution alone—becomes the defining feature of international politics.

One of the most visible outcomes is the erosion of multilateralism as a default problem-solving mechanism. As major powers bypass or weaken global institutions, states increasingly turn toward **minilateral arrangements**—small, interest-driven groupings designed to manage specific risks. While such formations can be efficient, they lack universality and often exclude those most affected by the issues at hand. Analysts note that minilateralism treats symptoms rather than causes, addressing coordination failures without restoring trust in the system itself.²⁶

This environment incentivises **strategic hedging**, particularly among middle powers. No longer confident in the reliability of great-power guarantees, states diversify partnerships, avoid permanent alignments, and seek flexibility over loyalty. Hedging is not neutrality; it is insurance. Countries deepen economic ties with one bloc while maintaining security links with another, accepting inefficiency in exchange for resilience. The result is a web of overlapping commitments that complicates crisis management and blurs red lines.²⁷

The security domain reflects similar dynamics. Arms modernisation accelerates not only among major powers, but across regions previously anchored by alliance stability. The **Stockholm International Peace Research Institute** (SIPRI) documents sustained growth in defence spending driven less by expansionist ambition than by uncertainty about external protection.²⁸ Fear, rather than ideology, becomes the principal driver of militarisation.

Economically, fragmentation manifests in the partial decoupling of trade, technology, and finance. States adopt “de-risking” strategies, prioritising resilience over efficiency. While this reduces vulnerability to coercion, it also entrenches inequality: wealthier states can afford redundancy, while developing economies face higher barriers to entry. The global commons—once governed by shared rules—becomes segmented into regulatory spheres reflecting power rather than principle.²⁹

Importantly, this flux creates space for **middle powers** to exercise disproportionate influence. Countries with credible institutions, diversified partnerships, and diplomatic agility can act as bridges between blocs. Unlike great powers, middle powers are often perceived as less threatening and more pragmatic. Their influence lies not in domination, but in **agenda-setting, norm articulation, and coalition-building**.³⁰

Yet this opportunity is double-edged. Without stabilising leadership, middle powers risk being pulled into competitive dynamics they cannot control. Fragmentation offers agency, but also responsibility. In a world where no single actor reliably anchors the system, the behaviour of these states will increasingly determine whether disorder hardens into conflict—or evolves into a more plural but cooperative equilibrium.

Trumpism did not create this transition alone, but it has accelerated it by removing assumptions of continuity and restraint. The global order is thus not collapsing; it is **reassembling under stress**, shaped as much by fear as by foresight. The question that follows is unavoidable: which actors can help convert this flux into balance rather than breakdown?³¹

7. India’s Strategic Dilemma: Partnering Power Without Becoming a Pawn

Amid accelerating global fragmentation, India confronts a strategic dilemma unlike that faced by most middle powers. It is simultaneously a continental power with unresolved land threats, a maritime actor in the Indo-Pacific, a leading voice of the Global South, and a democracy deeply embedded in the global economy. Navigating Trumpism-induced disorder thus requires India to **partner with power without surrendering autonomy**, and to engage blocs without being absorbed by them.

India’s foreign policy tradition has long emphasised **strategic autonomy**, not as equidistance but as freedom of choice. In a system increasingly defined by pressure politics, this principle becomes harder—but more valuable—to sustain. Alignment with the United States brings technology access, defence cooperation, and balancing leverage in the Indo-Pacific. Yet excessive dependence risks entanglement in transactional bargains that conflict with India’s long-term interests, particularly in areas such as trade policy, sanctions regimes, and regional stability.³²

At the same time, India’s continental realities impose constraints absent for many maritime middle powers. Persistent tensions along the Line of Actual Control with China, instability in the neighbourhood, and terrorism emanating from Pakistan limit India’s appetite for overt bloc politics. Strategic over-identification with any one camp could narrow diplomatic manoeuvring space precisely when flexibility is essential. As Indian policymakers have repeatedly stressed, autonomy is not ideological nostalgia but **risk management in an uncertain order**.³³

India's dilemma is further complicated by its dual identity as both a rising power and a developing country. Economic growth, technological upgrading, and poverty reduction remain core national priorities. Prolonged global instability—trade fragmentation, financial volatility, and sanctions overreach—directly threatens these objectives. Unlike established powers, India cannot afford a disorderly world; it depends on **relative openness, predictable rules, and development-oriented cooperation**.³⁴

Yet this vulnerability is paired with a unique advantage: **credibility across divides**. India maintains working relationships with the United States, Russia, Europe, the Gulf, Africa, and East Asia—often simultaneously and without formal alliance commitments. This diplomatic pluralism is not accidental; it reflects a deliberate strategy to remain relevant to multiple constituencies. In a fractured system, such credibility becomes a scarce resource.³⁵

India's participation in forums as diverse as the Quad, BRICS, and the G20 illustrates this balancing act. Rather than choosing sides, India seeks to **shape agendas**—on development finance, digital public infrastructure, climate equity, and debt relief—while resisting the militarisation of economic and technological cooperation. This approach is frequently misunderstood as hesitation. In reality, it represents an effort to **avoid pawn-hood** in a system where great powers increasingly instrumentalise partners.³⁶

The central challenge, therefore, is not whether India should engage with power—it must—but how to do so without internalising the logic of transactionalism that Trumpism exemplifies. India's strategic test is to remain consequential without becoming coercive, aligned without being dependent, and influential without abandoning restraint. How it manages this balance will determine not only its own trajectory, but its capacity to contribute meaningfully to restoring global equilibrium.³⁷

8. India as a Geo-Moral Anchor: Meaning, Limits, and Strategic Responsibility

As global disorder deepens and transactional power politics gain legitimacy, the search for stabilising forces increasingly shifts away from hegemonic dominance toward **normative anchoring**. In this context, India's potential role as a **geo-moral anchor** does not stem from superior material power, but from its capacity to align interests with principles in a fractured system. Crucially, this role must be clearly defined—both to avoid moral overreach and to prevent misinterpretation as ideological posturing.

A geo-moral anchor is not a moral arbiter. It does not lecture, sanction, or impose values through coercion. Rather, it provides **predictability of intent, consistency of behaviour, and credibility of purpose** across issue areas. As conceptualised in recent scholarship, geo-moral influence functions as a *fourth dimension of power*—complementing military, economic, and diplomatic capabilities by shaping expectations and legitimising restraint in an otherwise coercive environment.⁵³ India's diplomatic conduct—emphasising sovereignty, dialogue, and development—has generally adhered to these attributes. This consistency becomes strategically valuable when major powers oscillate between commitments and coercion.³⁸

India's civilisational outlook further reinforces this positioning. Its strategic culture historically privileges restraint, pluralism, and long-term equilibrium over rapid, forceful resolution. While this has often been criticised as indecision, in a volatile global environment it offers an alternative logic to transactionalism. As scholars of international ethics note, legitimacy in global affairs increasingly derives from **process integrity** rather than outcomes alone.³⁹ India's emphasis on consultation, inclusion, and incrementalism aligns with this evolving standard.

The geo-moral role is also reflected in India's approach to development and global public goods. By championing digital public infrastructure, affordable healthcare access, climate equity, and debt relief for vulnerable economies, India reframes influence as **capacity-building rather than dependency creation**. This contrasts sharply with coercive economic statecraft and reinforces trust among developing nations wary of power asymmetries.⁴⁰

However, the limits of this role must be acknowledged. Moral credibility erodes quickly if rhetoric outpaces action or if principles are applied selectively. India cannot afford to appear ambivalent on core norms such as territorial integrity, civilian protection, or rule-based dispute resolution. Nor can it substitute moral posture for hard choices when its own security is directly threatened. A geo-moral anchor must be **principled but not passive**, restrained but not silent.⁴¹

Equally important is avoiding the temptation to position India as a "third pole" or civilisational counterweight to existing power blocs. Such framing risks replicating the very binaries India seeks to soften. The strength of India's role lies in **bridging rather than balancing**, in reducing friction rather than amplifying rivalry. This requires disciplined diplomacy, internal policy coherence, and sustained investment in institutional capacity.⁴²

Ultimately, India's geo-moral potential is not an abstract aspiration; it is a strategic responsibility emerging from global necessity. As transactional peace proves fragile and coercive order unsustainable, actors that can stabilise expectations without imposing dominance become indispensable. India's challenge is to convert moral credibility into **systemic contribution**—quietly, consistently, and without claiming ownership of outcomes.⁴³

9. From Anchor to Actor: How India Can Help Restore Global Equilibrium

For India to translate geo-moral credibility into systemic impact, it must move decisively from **anchoring norms** to **shaping outcomes**. This does not require hegemonic ambition; it requires calibrated action across a few high-leverage domains where India's interests, capacities, and legitimacy intersect. The objective is not to replace existing institutions or lead rival blocs, but to **restore equilibrium by reducing volatility**, rebuilding trust, and re-centring development in global governance.

First, India can act as a **bridge-builder in a fragmented trade and technology landscape**. As supply chains splinter under tariff pressure and strategic controls, India's scale and market depth position it as a stabilising node rather than a spoiler. By advocating transparent standards, interoperability, and dispute de-escalation within forums such as the **Group of Twenty**, India can help arrest the slide from de-

risking into decoupling. Its emphasis on rules-consistent flexibility—rather than exemptions driven by power—offers a pragmatic middle path between protectionism and laissez-faire globalisation.⁴⁴

Second, India's leadership on **digital public infrastructure (DPI)** provides a template for non-coercive influence. Platforms enabling digital identity, payments, and service delivery—shared as global public goods—demonstrate how capability can be diffused without dependency. By institutionalising DPI cooperation through development banks and UN agencies, India can counter the logic of transactional peace with **functional trust**, particularly across the Global South. This approach reframes technology from a tool of leverage into an enabler of inclusion.⁴⁵

Third, India can re-energise **development-centric multilateralism** at a time when security agendas dominate. Debt distress, climate adaptation financing, and health resilience demand coordination that great-power rivalry has stalled. India's convening role during its G20 presidency underscored a viable pathway: focus on deliverables, broaden participation, and foreground the needs of vulnerable economies. Sustaining this momentum—rather than episodic leadership—will be essential to rebuilding faith in collective problem-solving.⁴⁶

Fourth, India's security partnerships can be leveraged **without militarising alignment**. Engagements in the Indo-Pacific, including the **Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)**, need not be framed as containment architectures. By emphasising maritime domain awareness, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and capacity-building, India can keep security cooperation aligned with stability rather than escalation. This restraint preserves deterrence while avoiding the transactional quid pro quo that characterises coercive alliances.⁴⁷

Finally, India should invest in **institutional reform from within**, particularly within the **United Nations** system. Advocacy for representative reform, procedural transparency, and accountability gains credibility when paired with consistent participation and burden-sharing. Reformist multilateralism—improving institutions rather than bypassing them—directly counters proposals for parallel governance structures that privilege power over legitimacy.⁴⁸

Taken together, these pathways define a role that is **constructive rather than confrontational**. India's contribution to restoring global equilibrium will not be measured by dominance, but by whether it can lower transaction costs for cooperation, raise the reputational costs of coercion, and keep development central to global priorities. In an era of tariffs, takeovers, and transactional peace, such steadying influence may prove more consequential than force.⁴⁹

10. Conclusion: Power Without Purpose, Stability With Meaning

The age of Trumpism has revealed a central paradox of contemporary geopolitics: **power exercised without purpose accelerates disorder rather than control**. Tariffs intended to restore sovereignty fracture interdependence; coercive rhetoric meant to deter revisionism legitimises it; and proposals for transactional peace undermine the legitimacy upon which durable order depends. What emerges is not a more secure world, but a more anxious one—defined by hedging, fragmentation, and the erosion of trust.

This moment marks more than a policy deviation; it reflects a deeper crisis in global leadership. The post-1945 order was never flawless, but it rested on a critical synthesis of power and restraint, interest and legitimacy. As Hedley Bull argued, international order survives not through dominance alone but through shared rules, institutions, and expectations that moderate anarchy.⁵⁰ Trumpism fractures this synthesis by reducing strategy to transaction and peace to leverage. In doing so, it exposes a vacuum—not merely of authority, but of **direction**.

Yet this disruption also creates space. As hegemonic leadership falters and parallel governance temptations grow, the system increasingly depends on actors capable of **stabilising expectations without imposing dominance**. John Lewis Gaddis reminds us that effective grand strategy is less about constant action than about aligning means with long-term purpose—an alignment conspicuously absent in transactional statecraft.⁵¹ The future of global order will therefore be shaped not only by power shifts, but by the quality of strategic judgment exercised by key actors.

India's relevance lies precisely here. Its potential contribution is not to arbitrate morality or challenge power hierarchies, but to **anchor conduct**—to demonstrate that influence can be exercised without coercion, and leadership without conditionality. In a deeply interdependent world, power that reassures rather than intimidates becomes a stabilising force. As Joseph Nye's work on interdependence underscores, durable influence flows from credibility and mutual reliance, not from episodic coercion.⁵²

This role is neither automatic nor guaranteed. It demands internal coherence, disciplined diplomacy, and the willingness to absorb short-term costs in service of long-term equilibrium. A geo-moral anchor must be consistent when others are volatile, restrained when others escalate, and present when institutions falter. Such steadiness rarely attracts headlines, but it shapes outcomes over time.

The lesson of Trumpism, therefore, is not merely about the dangers of disruption—it is about the limits of power untempered by purpose. In a world drifting toward fragmentation, the most consequential actors may be those who resist the temptation to dominate, and instead choose to **stabilise, connect, and endure**. If global order is to be restored—not as nostalgia, but as necessity—it will depend less on transactional bargains and more on principled persistence.



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