

INFOGRAPHIC

The Chaos Theory of International Relations

How multialignment explains a world with no rules.

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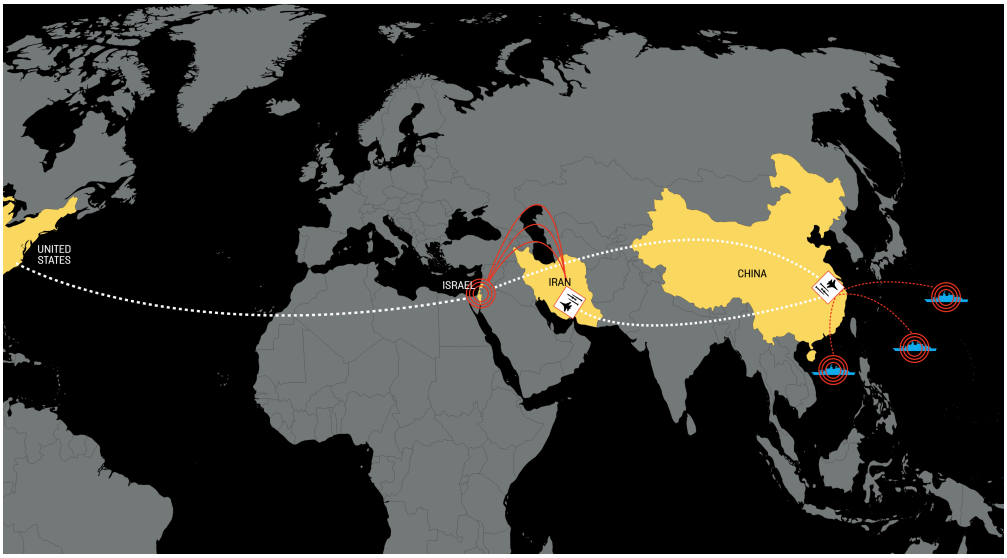
By **Parag Khanna**, the founder and CEO of the geospatial analytics software AlphaGeo.

The enemy of my enemy is my friend. This appears as close to a truism as there is in international relations. But what happens when your friend might also be friends with your enemy? Global politics offers all too many examples of how regularly and unexpectedly simple realpolitik calculus can boomerang back on countries in ironic ways.



Consider **Israel's** violation of U.S. export agreements, transferring advanced missile and fighter jet technologies to **China**. The accumulated leakages of American know-how have boosted China's aerial capabilities, threatening the **U.S. posture in the Pacific** and have also improved the quality of China's missile exports to **Iran**, which have then been aimed and fired back at **Israel**. Oops.

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Now recall Pakistani nuclear scientist A.Q. Khan's smuggling of centrifuge technology from the Netherlands in the 1970s, accelerating Pakistan's nuclear program but also those of North Korea and Iran. Fast-forward to 2026, and Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Turkey signed the Mecca defense pact, ostensibly to protect Saudi Arabia against the nuclear threat from Iran—whose nuclear blueprint came straight from Khan.

Realist international theory takes anarchy (the absence of central authority) as its principal point of departure. It then goes on to identify patterns of behavior that order the system, such as balancing and bandwagoning. But all too often in contemporary geopolitics, these patterns don't hold. Indeed, the frequency with which realist theory falls short, as in the examples above, suggests we live in a world dominated by chaos rather than anarchy.

Contrary to conventional usage, chaos theory does not imply no rules. In fact, agents in chaotic systems follow rules precisely. It is the *consequences* of their collective behavior that make chaotic systems so unpredictable. In two words: butterfly effects. In 1951, historian Arnold Wolfers famously analogized international relations to a set of billiard balls, colliding as they pursued power maximization. Today's billiard table is a lot more crowded in every sense. Along the way, the system has graduated from complicated—with mechanistic but determinable patterns—to complex, with feedback loops among a wide range of actors playing out at regional and global scales over multiple time horizons and generating novel outcomes.

The principle that best explains how each unit behaves in this chaotic system is multialignment. In multialignment, all actors, large and small, put themselves at the center of their own calculations rather than occupying a fixed position in a given hierarchy. They seek to connect with and build ties with as many other states and in as many ways as can be useful to them. This is not so much "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" but rather, "How many friends can I have and get away with?"

In 2006, when I first coined the term "multialignment" in an essay with C. Raja Mohan, I was in the midst of traveling through 40 countries, from Brazil to Saudi Arabia to Kazakhstan, to observe how they practiced this diplomatic technique. At the time, Washington was consumed with neo-unipolar triumphalism after the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. But none of the leaders I met during my journey gave the impression of feeling trapped by George W. Bush's famous "with us or against us" mantra. Each was building ties with Europe and China, Russia and India. Specifically, every country that Washington labeled a "rogue state"—Venezuela, Libya, Iran, North Korea, and others—was also receiving lifelines from China, with many seeking investment and trade with Europe as well.

With formal alliances replaced by dalliances of unpredictable duration, the real action shifted to new functional groupings such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). As these organizations grab the headlines today with their security initiatives and de-dollarization efforts, it's worth reconstructing how multialignment evolved.

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America's "unipolar moment" carried the seeds of its own destruction. The acceleration of globalization that the United States itself underwrote drove rising powers' economic growth and

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confidence, giving them the capacity to seek out the best deals for themselves. Power diffusion is the genie that can't be put back in the bottle.



From left: Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, and Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito meet on Brioni Island, Yugoslavia, in July 1956, prior to the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement. AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

During the Cold War, postcolonial nations were weak and deferential. The Non-Aligned Movement first convened in 1961 in Belgrade, in then-Yugoslavia, to promote anti-colonialism and south-south solidarity. Its economic counterpart was the Group of 77, which coordinated positions on trade and debt relief. Other than the right to give speeches at the United Nations, their members were price-takers. In today's lingo: NPCs, not main characters.

The end of the Cold War changed that. Increasingly, countries want to become agents rather than cogs in someone else's strategic map. The desire for agency—like the human desire for recognition—runs deep among the nearly 100 postcolonial nations born after World War II. After centuries as colonies and decades as Cold War pawns, none of them want to be inert targets of great-power machinations again. They remember the past and don't plan to let it repeat itself. The message should be clear: It's not about you (America)—it's about us (everyone else) seizing the moment.

The transition isn't just from a U.S.-dominated unipolar world to a multipolar one but to a system in which power rests not in static units but in contextual relations and networks—in other words, fluid formations that instantiate when the need arises. It matters less what the latent capacity of the power is; the fundamental principle is that all of them are multialigning to the best of their ability.

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Chinese Finance Minister Lan Fo'an (left) and Brazilian Finance Minister Fernando Haddad pose for a photo as Chinese Premier Li Qiang and Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva applaud after the signing of a raft of agreements on the sidelines of the BRICS summit in Rio de Janeiro on July 5, 2025. PABLO PORCIUNCULA/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

In 1848, Lord Palmerston declared in a speech to the U.K. House of Commons: "We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies." Now, every state is following his dictum by hedging, multialigning, or realigning to suit its immediate and long-term needs.

For some states, multialignment is a matter of survival. Israel's export of reconnaissance drone technology to Russia in the early 2010s inadvertently stimulated the offensive drone capabilities that Russia has been deploying to batter Ukraine—which in turn is competing with Israel to acquire sufficient munitions from the United States. And with U.S. public sentiment turning against unconditional support for the Gaza war, Israel has doubled down on procurement from its second-largest arms supplier—Germany. Now, a converted Volkswagen plant is manufacturing components for Israel's Iron Dome defense system while the United Arab Emirates helps Israel shoot down incoming Iranian missiles.

In other cases, multialignment is about both identity and economics. NATO member Turkey may apply to join the SCO. And why not? It no longer aspires to join the European Union, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank has sponsored nearly 50 projects across Turkey involving manufacturing, transportation, water, and other areas. As the country most associated with spanning Europe and Asia, Turkey rightly wants to dictate east-west energy corridors.

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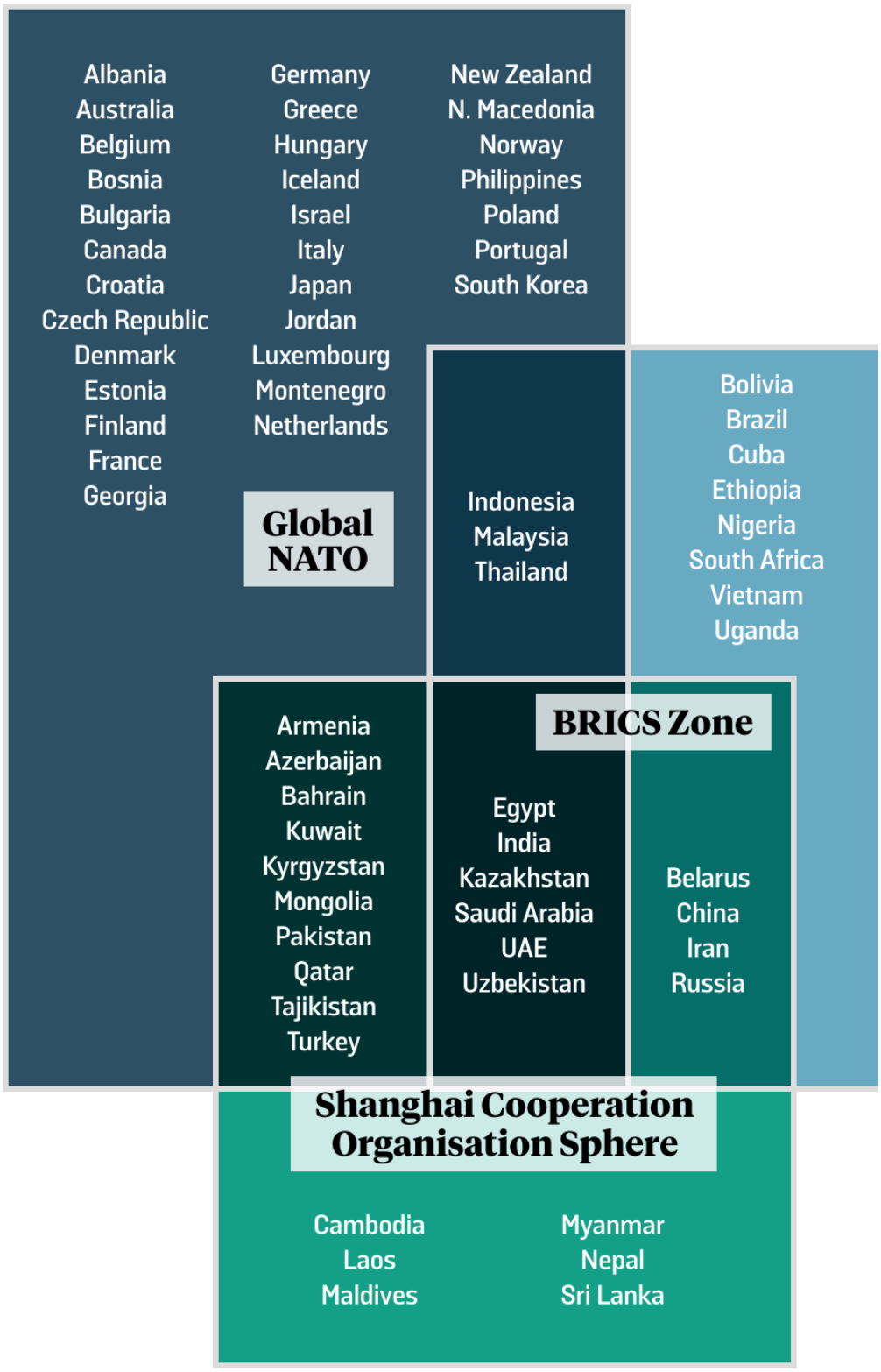

The Gulf countries have also been adept at multialignment. Saudi Arabia has hosted large U.S. military bases while expanding its arms deals with China. The UAE also has deep defense ties with the United States but now counts China as its largest trading partner. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE are SCO dialogue partners, and the latter is a member of BRICS as well. They both also support Moscow's sanctions evasion efforts, including by routing payments from Russia to India. And speaking of multialignment, India remains an exemplar—it is part of the U.S.-led Quadrilateral Security Dialogue but also BRICS and the SCO.

Around the world, this kind of "forum shopping" has become the single dominant mode of international behavior. Indeed, it has come to characterize not just emerging power logic but the

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Even the superpowers are playing the multialignment game. The United States wants Europe to shoulder the burden in Ukraine while it seeks to woo Russia with resource investments. Moscow, for its part, is happy to have Washington bypass Kyiv (and Europe) in making offers that may one day reduce its dependence on China. And with U.S. President Donald Trump imposing wanton tariffs on Canada, Ottawa is being fast-tracked into "associate member" status with the EU. At the same time, U.S. tariffs on Indian exports helped the EU accelerate its efforts this year to conclude a free trade agreement with New Delhi.

China, in turn, is ramping up investments and joint ventures in European markets to convince the continent's leaders to keep tariffs lower than those the United States imposes. And in region after region, Beijing aims to maintain friendly ties with both parties in local rivalries: Saudi Arabia and Iran, India and Pakistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and so on.

To a striking extent, the United States is actually bringing to life many of the new diplomatic networks that enable multialignment. The Biden administration launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework as a "high-standard" alternative to Asia's Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. It also convened the first Quad leaders' summit together with partners India, Japan, and Australia in 2021. The Trump administration, for its part, has launched the Pax Silica network to coordinate semiconductor supply chains and the "Mine to Magnet" initiative to diversify critical mineral extraction, processing, and distribution. Such opportunistic, functional, and often nonexclusive partnerships are what multialignment is all about.

Pundits have consistently predicted that, in conflicts such as Ukraine and the current Iran war, middle powers will eventually be forced to "choose sides." Yet they don't. Instead, they play multialignment to gain leverage over great powers rather than the reverse. This makes multialignment a powerful antidote to the notion of an inevitable "new cold war" between the United States and China. Washington and Beijing don't get to carve up the world if the world doesn't play along. And it isn't. Indeed, nothing inspires countries to pursue multialignment more than being told they can't.

Multialignment, then, is how the "rest" keep the superpowers honest. The United States has lost ground to China where its trade deals feel too constrictive. But, for the same reason, it can also poke at Beijing by offering lifelines to countries where Chinese debt-trap diplomacy and product dumping have gone too far.

A decade ago, the entire African continent was portrayed as a Chinese neo-colony. Sub-Saharan Africa in particular was considered China's economic playground. But now the U.S. International Development Finance Corp. (DFC) has helped underwrite more than $4 billion in the Lobito Corridor, spanning Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Zambia, to extract and process critical minerals outside of China's supply chains. Similarly, Pakistan, long China's most reliable ally, has received U.S. Export-Import Bank loans to accelerate critical mineral production and exports to the United States and is seeking additional U.S. financing from the DFC and other vehicles to potentially buy Boeing aircraft and upgrade oil refineries.

Through multialignment, countries find ways to cooperate even when no great power is at the wheel. Regional groupings from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to Mercosur are premised on bringing down internal barriers and harnessing complementarities. This enables participants to reduce their dependence on distant superpowers and elevate themselves in the process. Cross-regional axes such as the defense procurement network spanning Ukraine, Turkey, and the GCC, and the GCC's food and energy security partnership with ASEAN, similarly illustrate how functional cooperation doesn't require a

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great-power patron. The current Cambrian explosion of international partnerships embodies the flourishing of multialignment—warts and all.

Many continue to lament the end of the liberal international order and the return to a world of naked self-interest. But in doing so, they miss the new and productive strategic networks emerging in place of the old, moribund multilateralism. Multialignment paves the way for geopolitics to evolve from the bottom up rather than just the top down. If international relations now seems more unpredictable than ever, that chaos isn't a bug—it's a feature.

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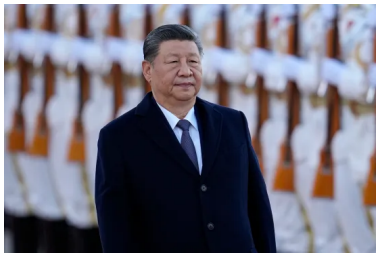

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