

International Cooperation and Contestation in the Trump Era

How Can Countries Exercise Agency in a Fragmenting Order?

Andy Sumner



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The German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) is institutionally financed by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), based on a resolution of the German Bundestag, and the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) as a member of the Johannes-Rau-Forschungsgemeinschaft (JRF).

Suggested citation:

Sumner, A. (2026). *International cooperation and contestation in the Trump era: How can countries exercise agency in a fragmenting order?* (IDOS Discussion Paper 5/2026). German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS). <https://doi.org/10.23661/idp5.2026>

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IDOS Discussion Paper / German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) gGmbH

ISSN 2751-4439 (Print)

ISSN 2751-4447 (Online)

ISBN 978-3-96021-290-4 (Print)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23661/idp5.2026>

© German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) gGmbH

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Printed on eco-friendly, certified paper.

Abstract

Countries now act in an international cooperation architecture whose rules are disputed from several directions at once. One of those directions is the hegemon itself, the US. The paper argues that the Trump administration's disruption matters because it moves the largest actor from affirming to contesting across several arenas at once. That reshuffles the calculus for every country. This paper asks how countries can exercise agency when the international order itself is fragmenting. The paper surveys the bewildering array of concepts on state agency and proposes a schema built on two continua. The first is the medium or type of agency, meaning material/institutional versus ideational/discursive. The second is orientation to the prevailing order in a specific arena (not in general) as affirming versus contesting. Countries are not fixed in one position. Whether the same state contests the rules depends on its interests in a particular arena. Each potential position is available only to a country that can pay the arena's entry fee. The entry fee is the resources, broadly defined, a position demands before a country can take it up. The paper sets out the strategic positions available in a fragmenting system. It names a further position, norm imperialism, where material instruments are turned against an ideational object. The implications for different types of country are discussed.

Contents

Abstract

1	Introduction	1
2	State power and agency	2
2.1	Types of state power and agency	2
2.2	Contested cooperation, (dis)order and hedging strategies	3
3	A synthesised schema	5
4	Implications	8
5	Conclusion	9
	References	10
	Annex	13

Tables

Table A1:	Concepts of country agency	13
Table A2:	Strategies and tools for exercising country agency in a fragmenting order	14

1 Introduction

The norms on which the international cooperation architecture was built have become an object of dispute. The most visible disruption is the second Trump administration's withdrawal from multilateral commitments and contestation of norms (Klingebiel & Sumner, 2026). This pivot matters because of its breadth. The largest actor has shifted from affirming to contesting in several arenas at the same time, which resets the calculus for every other country. Countries of the Global South, for their part, have long contested aid and trade norms and the governance of the Bretton Woods institutions. At the same time, rising powers are building parallel institutions and pressing for a larger say in global governance.

Forums multiply and informal bodies grow beside the formal ones. The international cooperation system takes on the character of a 'regime complex', a web of overlapping institutions with no single forum in charge (Alter & Meunier, 2009; Raustiala & Victor, 2004). In such a system some Global South countries gain space for agency (Ishmael, 2023; Ishmael et al., 2026). They lose the stability that comes from the existing institutions in retreat. Development cooperation shows the pattern. The US pivot to national interests, returns on investment and 'trade over aid' leaves recipients seeking new providers or building self-reliance. Others accept the business deals on offer through the Millennium Challenge Corporation and the US International Development Finance Corporation, both retained because they align with US geoeconomic priorities (Klingebiel & Sumner, 2026).

Situating the contemporary moment in the literature on state agency requires engaging with a bewildering array of concepts. These include Nye's hard and soft power (1990, 2004) and their combination in smart power (2009, 2011). They also include Barnett and Duvall's compulsory, institutional, structural and productive power, Lukes' three dimensions and Strange's four structures. Few of these power-concepts or typologies were designed for a world in which foundational norms are in dispute and the largest power has become a principal contestor. A close literature is that on hegemonic unravelling and revisionism. Cooley and Nexon (2020) do theorise the collapse of a hegemon's own order, through pathways set out in Section 2.2. Each pathway runs through the conduct of other actors. They treat the Trump administration as an accelerant of each of these pathways. They do not, however, theorise the hegemon's coercive displacement of its own norms as a mechanism in its own right.

Schweller's (1994) balance-of-interests typology is also a nearby precedent. It orders states on two criteria: satisfaction with the international order (status-quo versus revisionist) and the scale of their ambitions (limited versus unlimited aims). Schweller's typology positions countries by disposition and anchors orientation to the prevailing order in general. The schema below sorts by arena and anchors orientation within a single arena.

This paper sets out the strategic positions available in a fragmenting system. It then draws out what each position implies for different types of country. This paper follows George and Bennett's (2005) typological method. We specify the conditions under which a position is feasible for a country. We do not specify why a country selects one feasible position over another. That second step depends on how elites define interests, which lies outside the schema and is stated as a limit in Section 5.

2 State power and agency

2.1 Types of state power and agency

This section surveys the literature on countries' agency, concepts of power, cooperation under contestation and the strategic approaches of countries. Agency is defined as the capacity of an actor to act and to make a difference to outcomes (in keeping with Giddens, 1984). Agency is different from capacity (the stock of resources a state holds) and autonomy (the absence of external constraint). Capacity still bears on agency. It sets which courses of action a country can afford, without itself constituting agency (a dependence we specify in Section 3 as the entry fee). Agency varies across arenas. An arena is an issue domain or institutional forum in which a distinct set of rules is at stake, such as trade, aid or the governance of a multilateral body. A country can hold different positions in different arenas. In any one arena a country's agency may depend on its interests, the rules at stake, the resources it holds in that domain and the conduct of others there as well as domestic political economy.

Agency is relational and contingent, in keeping with the long-running structure-agency debate in international relations. It cannot be read off income per capita. Agents and structures are mutually constituted. Structures set the terms on which action is possible and action reproduces or alters those structures over time (Wendt, 1987). A small state may exercise real agency in one arena and almost none in another. The same state may affirm the rules in one arena, such as trade, while contesting them in another, such as finance.

In terms of foundations, Dahl's (1957) relational definition of power, in which A gets B to do what B would not otherwise do, captures the visible face of power. Bachrach and Baratz (1962) added a second and less visible face, the power to keep issues off the agenda. Lukes (1974) went further. He added the power to shape what actors take their interests to be. Baldwin (2016) argued that power claims mean little without a specified scope and domain as agency is exercised in relations, specific to an arena and an issue.

Table A1 categorises the agency concepts into different groups. Direct-influence concepts foreground what one actor does to another. These concepts were developed largely in debates over US primacy. They travel poorly to cooperative and institutional settings. For example, a coalition in a treaty negotiation cannot be described as one actor coercing another. Nye's (1990, 2004) hard and soft power separate coercion from attraction. Nossel (2004) discussed smart power in an argument for pursuing US interests through allies, institutions and norms. Nye used the term independently at around the same time and developed it further (2009, 2011). On his definition smart power combines the coercion and payment of hard power with the attraction of soft power in a strategy fitted to a given setting.

There are two further groupings of agency concepts more fitting for international cooperation. The first is structural and institutional. These concepts centre on the architecture within which actors operate and on how rules constrain and enable. Strange's (1988) structural power is the capacity to shape the structures of the global political economy across security, production, finance and knowledge. For Barnett and Duvall (2005), institutional power runs indirectly, through the rules and procedures of institutions. Network power depends on where an actor sits in a web of relations, on brokerage and on exit options (Hafner-Burton et al., 2009).

The second is normative and discursive concepts. These focus on the direction of agency. Manners' (2002) normative power is the capacity to shape what passes for normal in world politics. Hyde-Price (2006) objects that such power tracks the underlying distribution of capabilities. Productive power, in Barnett and Duvall's (2005) account, works through the diffuse systems of meaning that constitute actors and their self-understandings.

Norm entrepreneurs promote new norms through a life cycle of emergence, cascade and internalisation (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Bloomfield's (2016) norm antipreneurs defend the status quo against new norms. Entrepreneurship is a mode of action and carries no fixed orientation to the order. An entrepreneur who promotes a norm that reinforces the rules of an arena affirms that order, and one who promotes a rival norm contests it. Bettiza and Lewis (2020) call the second case counter-norm entrepreneurship.

To these we add the 'norm imperialist', used tentatively in Sumner and Klingebiel (2025) and given a definition here. The norm imperialist uses state power to displace an existing norm and impose its opposite by material coercion. Its instrument is material and its object is a norm. The two pull in opposite directions on the first continuum of the schema, which orders instrument and object together. Section 3 places the resulting case between the two contesting cells rather than inside either. This paper takes the Trump administration's promotion of illiberal norms as the current exemplar of this.

Wiener (2014, 2018) treats contestation as constitutive of norms, separating reactive contestation, the objection to a breach, from proactive contestation, the clarification of meaning and implementation. Acharya (2004) describes how norm-takers reconstruct foreign norms to fit local beliefs. The mechanisms are discourse, framing, grafting and cultural selection. Adaptation prunes a norm to fit, and it sits between wholesale acceptance and wholesale rejection. Zimmermann (2025) shows that localisation may move sideways into other settings and upward into international arenas.

2.2 Contested cooperation, (dis)order and hedging strategies

International cooperation under strain is itself a research field. Morse and Keohane (2014) define contested multilateralism as the use of one institution to challenge the rules or mission of another. Its instruments are the threat of exit, the use of voice and the creation of alternative institutions. Contestation can mean regime shifting to a more favourable forum, or competitive regime creation in building a rival body.

For Morse and Keohane (2014) state power determines whether a coalition can identify credible outside options, their necessary condition for a successful challenge. Weak-state coalitions may manage only symbolic ones. The weak, however, can use the threat to walk to a different forum without having to carry it out. That may be a usable form of agency for a country with few material assets (Verdier, 2022). Further, competitive regime creation has its own limits. Parlar Dal and Dipama (2022) examine rising-power bids for legitimacy through new bodies such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. However, new bodies may inherit legitimacy deficits of their own. Faude and Parizek (2021) argue that contested multilateralism, though costly in the short run, can convey resolve and open the way to inter-institutional accommodation later. Cooper et al. (2025) describe a fragmentation in which informal bodies multiply beside formal ones. Some countries contest specific rules, and some contest the meaning of multilateralism itself. For a developing country, fragmentation multiplies the forums in which to seek a better deal. This is the politics of regime complexity (Alter & Meunier, 2009). Overlapping rules and no forum in charge leave room to forum-shop and to play one body against another.

Contestation now operates on the legitimacy of international cooperation itself. Delegitimation can be a deliberate strategy as well as a by-product of institutional failure. Zürn (2018a, 2018b) argues that global governance has produced its own politicisation and counter-institutionalisation. Hooghe et al. (2019) identify a nationalist backlash against immigration, free trade and international authority itself. These accounts sit inside a larger debate about the international (dis)order. Ikenberry (2018) reads the present as a crisis of the liberal order, with the United States now hostile to its own project. The order was bound to fail, on Mearsheimer's (2019) reading, and bounded orders under emerging multipolarity will replace it. Acharya (2017)

rejects that for a 'multiplex world' that is diverse but interlinked. Cooley and Nexon (2020) set out three pathways by which hegemony unravels. Defection by revisionist powers comes first, where Russia and China build parallel institutions and articulate counter-norms from above. Weaker countries exit and seek alternative patronage elsewhere. Counter-order movements, nationalist and illiberal, challenge the order from below and displace progressive transnational activism. A parallel literature on revisionism, legitimisation and status bears on the affirming-contesting distinction (Goddard, 2018; Larson & Shevchenko, 2019; Schweller, 1994).

Flockhart (2016, 2026) reads the current global transformation as a 'multi-order world'. Polarity-based thinking overlooks changes in values and identities, and the relational complexity that goes with them. Flockhart identifies three orders as already visible: the American-led liberal international order, the Russian-led Eurasian order and the Chinese-led Belt and Road order. Geopolitically, the multi-order perspective anticipates diminished scope for global multilateral governance and a greater role for order-specific governance.

Great power rivalry has generated named strategies: hedging, multi-alignment and soft balancing. Goh (2005) showed hedging to be a set of strategies that avoid choosing between great powers. Kuik (2016) refined the idea. He asked how weaker countries hedge and why, and located part of the answer in domestic legitimacy. A neighbouring concept is soft balancing. Pape (2005) argued that second-rank powers frustrate a dominant state without military confrontation, though the concept is contested and the idea was extended by Paul (2018) as a response to concentrated power. Nossel (2026) argues that it is hedging that has become the contemporary strategy amid the erosion of the post-Cold War liberal order.

Many countries now keep working relationships with rival powers at the same time and defer the choice of camp. 'Multi-alignment' has been used alongside hedging. It denotes the forging of partnerships across multiple, often rival, poles of power, with no binding commitment to any single bloc (Ishmael, 2023; Ishmael et al., 2025). Coalition is a recurring instrument. Developing countries have built and rebuilt negotiating groups in the climate talks. The Group of 77, the Alliance of Small Island States and the BASIC bloc (Brazil, South Africa, India and China) are the principal cases. This paper takes these groups to be held together as much by shared identity as by shared material interest. In trade, developing countries have used the World Trade Organization as a platform for collective bargaining (Narlikar, 2003). Alongside hedging and multi-alignment, discursive agency has been used to compensate for limited material agency. Fukuda-Parr and Muchhala (2020), for example, trace the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to Southern norm entrepreneurship. The standard account credits Northern design. Wunderlich (2020) widens norm entrepreneurship to include non-Western promoters.

The North-South binary accounts poorly for how country groupings position themselves. Abdenur (2021) finds the Group of 77's interests too diverse for the category to explain positions on climate and security though argues that the terms still capture structural conditions as long as heterogeneity is acknowledged. Haftel and Broude (2025) find UN bodies aligning differently: the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) sits closer to Southern developmental priorities, while the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL) affords Northern countries greater influence.

The category of middle powers has become more prominent in debate (see Jordaan, 2003; Patrick, 2026). The category is old. Holbraad (1971, 1984) placed middle powers at an intermediate position in the international hierarchy, building on Wight's (1978) ranking of country powers. Such countries pursue influence through coalition-building, multilateral institutions and normative leadership (Cooper et al., 1993).

3 A synthesised schema

A synthesised schema must answer two questions. One concerns the medium through which a country acts. The other concerns whether that action affirms or contests the prevailing order in a specific arena, rather than the international order in general.

The medium of agency is a continuum. It orders two things jointly: the instrument a country uses and the object that instrument is aimed at. The continuum runs from the material and institutional at one end to the ideational and discursive at the other, with degrees of each in between. At the material and institutional end sit trade weight, capital, votes and seats, brokerage in organisations and position in supply chains. Both are material: a tariff aimed at a trade rule. At the ideational and discursive end sit norms, frames, identities, knowledge production and agenda-setting through ideas. Both are ideational: a counter-frame aimed at a norm. Where the two diverge, the case falls between the poles rather than at either one.

The material and institutional pole gathers compulsory and institutional power. The continuum is a heuristic ordering. It makes no claim that the two media are watertight or that the concepts reduce to one or the other end of the continuum. Two concepts sit between the poles for a different reason. Strange's structural power shapes the rules of the game, so it works through institutions yet carries an ideational charge. Barnett and Duvall's (2005) productive power runs through the constitution of actors and meanings. It travels by meaning, whatever the holder's resource base. It leans to the ideational pole even when its holders are materially strong. The overlap does not unsettle the continuum. It orders the medium through which agency mainly travels in a given arena. The essence of each concept is a separate question.

The second continuum is that of orientation to order in a given arena. This runs from fully affirming at one end to fully contesting and degrees of each in between. This continuum draws on the work on contested multilateralism and norm contestation and adopts a reading of world order that is plural in actors and ideas. Affirming action stabilises and defends existing rules and norms. Contesting action revises, localises, displaces or replaces them. Contesting runs by degree, from reform inside the order at one edge to rupture at the other. The order here is specific to the arena.

The affirm-contest continuum draws from Wiener (2014) who treats contestation as constitutive of norms. Both contesting cells are graded. In the material and institutional cell the near edge is reform, which changes the rules from inside while leaving the order standing. The far edge is rupture, which breaks the rules. Exit lies at the far end of rupture, where a country abandons the rules altogether. In the ideational and discursive cell the near edge is reframing an existing norm and the far edge is advancing a rival one. The distinction matters. A state that reforms and a state that wrecks both contest, yet one mends the order and the other abandons it. The continuum records the difference as intensity rather than as kind.

The intersection of the two continua generates four strategic positions a country could take in a given arena (see Table A2). The two-by-two is an ideal-typical heuristic. Cells are porous and the two continua admit degrees. Most real foreign-policy behaviour is hybrid. One case is hybrid by construction. Where a country turns material instruments against an ideational object, instrument and object sit at opposite ends of the first continuum. The case then falls at its midpoint, on the contesting side. We set it out below as a position spanning the two contesting cells, and we name it norm imperialism.

This paper names the four cells of Table A2 for ease of explanation. The reformer cell takes its name from the near edge of its gradient, and the counter-norm entrepreneur cell from the mode that runs through it. 'Custodian power' is a strategy to hold the rules in place by material and institutional means. Tools include agenda setting, coalition building and management, peacekeeping, sanctions enforcement and niche diplomacy. The 'reformer power' cell takes the

same material weight against the rules and it runs by intensity. Reform changes the rules from inside, through voice reform and through parallel institutions and coalitions in the South. Rupture weaponises network position through chokepoints and the denial of access (Farrell & Newman, 2019). Exit ends the gradient. The two edges share a medium, material and institutional weight, and differ only in whether they mend the order or break it.

In the 'norm entrepreneur or antipreneur power' cell the strategy promotes or defends norms that affirm the order in that arena. The entrepreneur introduces new order-affirming norms. The antipreneur resists change to existing ones. In contrast, in the 'counter-norm entrepreneur power' cell the strategy contests the order's norms by ideational and symbolic means (Bettiza & Lewis, 2020). This cell runs by intensity in the same way as the reformer cell. At its near edge a country reframes an existing norm and works within its vocabulary. The far edge advances a rival norm and rejects that vocabulary. Tools include counter-framing, alternative knowledge production and claims of sovereignty and civilisational difference. The cell is defined by its medium and its orientation, and not by political content. Contestation here may be illiberal, as in the sovereignty claims of authoritarian powers, or emancipatory, as in Southern claims against rules written elsewhere.

Norm imperialism sits between the two contesting cells rather than inside either. Its instrument is material: funding cuts, tariffs and withdrawal. The object is ideational: the norm it seeks to displace. The first continuum orders instrument and object together, so a case that is material in one and ideational in the other lies at its midpoint. The position follows from the construction of the continuum rather than being added to it. We mark it as such in Table A2. This is the position existing typologies cannot hold, since each fixes a single medium and reads the object off it.

The four cells represent strategic positions for countries. As noted, a country is not fixed in one cell and may well hold the rules in place in one arena and press to change them in another.

The exemplars in Table A2 highlight empirical studies. Canada and Australia have pursued middle-power roles through issue-specific leadership and coalition management (Cooper et al., 1993). Norway, a small state, has sought international standing through peacekeeping and mediation (de Carvalho & Neumann, 2015).

In contrast, the BRICS¹ countries act as reformer powers in development finance. They founded the New Development Bank (NDB) (Alden & le Pere, 2024). The dominant voice in the international financial institutions has stayed with Western shareholders, which is what the reform contests (Vestergaard & Wade, 2013). The same agenda appears at a smaller scale in India, Brazil and South Africa, though IBSA's South-South ambitions are undermined by its members' contested standing in their own regions (Vieira & Alden, 2011).

The entrepreneur/antipreneur exemplars include Southern authorship of the SDGs in the development arena (Fukuda-Parr & Muchhala, 2020) and normative-power Europe, including the death-penalty abolition norm (Manners, 2002).

Russia and China are the counter-norm entrepreneur examples. They press illiberal counter-norms of sovereignty and civilisational order, and they penetrate the information environments of open societies (Bettiza & Lewis, 2020; Walker & Ludwig, 2017). The spanning position has one current exemplar, the US under Trump, which has forced the retreat of liberal norms across climate, aid and multilateral rule-making by material means (Sumner & Klingebiel, 2025).

1 BRICS began as four states: Brazil, Russia, India and China. South Africa joined and first attended a summit in April 2011. Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates acceded in 2024. Indonesia joined in 2025. Saudi Arabia was invited but has not confirmed accession. The Kazan summit of October 2024 created a partner-country status and invited thirteen countries.

Positions are not free. Each cell carries an 'entry fee', and so does the spanning position. The entry fee is the resources, broadly defined, an arena demands before a country can take up a position there. This is where capacity enters the account. Capacity governs which positions a country can afford to hold, without constituting agency itself. This limits who can hold a position. It implies coalition building. To hold rules in place, a state needs standing and coalition partners, backed by administrative capacity. Changing the rules by material weight calls for trade or financial heft, or a credible alternative forum. Norm promotion rests on convening power and knowledge production, while reframing or localisation depends on discursive skill and, often, a regional platform.

A country can occupy the cells it can pay for. The feasible set widens as fees fall or holdings rise. The contesting cells that require parallel institutions are open to large rising powers and stay largely closed to low-income countries.

The schema shows that affirming or contesting is not the same as pro-Western and anti-Western positions. A country can affirm a multilateral process while contesting the distribution of gains within it. Defending a rule does not mean endorsing the power that wrote it. Hedging, in this schema, is a refusal to commit to either orientation, a foot in the affirming and the contesting cells at once. What the schema calls the reform edge of the material contesting cell, the literature calls soft balancing. The rupture edge goes beyond it, into weaponised interdependence.

The schema's contribution is clearest against existing typologies that fix one continuum and leave the other implicit. The power-concept typologies generally set the medium. Nye separates coercion from attraction and Barnett and Duvall sort the channels through which power runs, but neither asks whether the agency affirms or contests the order. The contestation scholarship reverses the emphasis. Wiener (2014) and Bloomfield (2016) theorise how norms are contested and defended. Bettiza and Lewis (2020) set out four modes of contestation, all ideational and all contesting: counter-norm entrepreneurship, liberal performance, liberal mimicry and civilisational essentialisation.

The US pivot matters for the schema because of its breadth: the same actor now contests trade, climate, aid and rule-making at the same time. It is the simultaneity that is the issue. A country facing defection in one arena can route around it by shifting forum, and that option narrows when the same actor contests trade, climate, aid and rule-making together. Hedging and forum-shopping both assume a fallback that stays affirming.

The schema places the US pivot at the spanning position. In trade and multilateral finance, the US sits at the rupture edge of the material contesting cell. It breaks rules through tariffs and defunding, with exit held in reserve (see Table A2). In climate, aid and multilateral rule-making the object changes and the instruments do not. Funding cuts, tariffs and withdrawal force the retreat of norms the administration opposes. Material means are turned against an ideational object, which is the spanning position defined above. The US is the clearest current occupant of it. In sum, the schema records this as one position rather than as two cell entries. Cooley and Nexon (2020) theorise the unravelling of a hegemon's order through the conduct of other actors. Bettiza and Lewis (2020) theorise the ideational contestation of liberal norms by authoritarian powers. Neither account specifies the coercive displacement of liberal norms by the power that wrote them. The spanning position identifies that positioning.

What the schema does not do is predict which cell a country will pick. That choice depends on how elites define their interests. Political economy shapes that definition: domestic politics, economic structure, global economic integration and bilateral ties. Those lie outside the schema.

4 Implications

The implications arising from the schema concern countries' strategy and positioning. Conventional policy prescriptions are a different exercise. Each type of country faces a different decision. The US shift changes the price of positions before it changes preferences. Vacated custodian seats lower the entry fee for affirming action, and the loss of US finance and market access raises the fee for contestation among the countries most exposed to it.

For a small low-income country, the menu is narrowest. A low-income country needs to choose its arena before its orientation, then commit where its stronger medium is rewarded. Trade weight (for example in critical minerals), votes at international institutions or brokerage point to material agency. Ideational agency means convening power, knowledge production and regional standing. What remains is coalition entrepreneurship, the pooling of voice that a single weak state cannot wield alone.

Coalitions lower the price of contestation. For example, Narlikar (2003) traces the mechanism in trade, where developing countries bargained as a bloc. Aid and market access are the fallback and their withdrawal cuts both the resources for contestation and the value of affirming a rule the largest actor no longer enforces. Contestation pays best where it builds to accommodation later (Faude & Parizek, 2021) and leaves a fallback in place.

Rising and emerging powers face a much wider menu. They hold the material weight that the contesting cells demand: parallel institutions and alternative forums, plus the capital to fund them. That same weight now buys a custodian role the US has left behind. A rising power that wants influence at low cost can take the affirming seat in an arena the US has vacated. It can use brokerage and convening to hold the rules in place. A parallel body costs more and inherits a legitimacy deficit. The vacated seat is cheaper for now. Whether it stays cheaper depends on whether affirming still delivers, since a rule the largest actor no longer enforces carries a lower return to the state that defends it.

Northern countries face a different problem: coalition-building as the existing alignments fracture. The pairing that once linked Northern donors to Southern recipients no longer holds. The largest Northern actor has switched sides and the aid cuts have eroded the relationships that carried it. The aid reversal is deeper than lost capacity. Defending the order now requires contesting the largest Northern actor, which puts nominal allies in opposing cells of the same arena.

A donor that wishes to defend the order will look for partners among countries it once treated as challengers. Pairing with a Southern provider in a single sector is one route. The aid cuts have depleted a material instrument of Northern influence and normative standing will be slow to rebuild. The task is to concentrate the medium that remains where the arena rewards it and to take coalitions from unfamiliar quarters. Coalition entrepreneurship would be one option.

Middle powers are well placed to take on that coalition entrepreneurship as they have pursued influence through coalition-building and normative leadership before (Cooper et al., 1993). They hold agency on both dimensions of the schema. They can also reaffirm norms once treated as universal, on human rights, climate responsibility, gender equality and democratic governance. Where such norms carry benefits other countries can see, adoption does not depend on US conduct.

5 Conclusion

All countries face an international cooperation architecture in which the rules are increasingly contested. The second Trump administration has moved the largest holder of material weight, and a principal author of the rules, from affirming to contesting. It has done so in trade, climate, aid and multilateral rule-making at once. This breadth is what resets the calculus for all countries.

Given the US pivot, this paper has developed a schema of countries' agency in a fragmenting order. Its first contribution is to join the medium of agency to the orientation to order. Three things follow. Orientation becomes a property of a country in an arena rather than a disposition of the country itself. That departs from Schweller (1994) and the revisionism literature. Norm imperialism becomes visible as the position that arises when instrument and object come apart, and we take the second Trump administration to occupy it. Last, the entry fee specifies the resources an arena demands before a country can hold a position there.

The schema shows that the US pivot is not a uniform shock across country types. The entry fee may fall in the arenas the US has vacated, where custodian seats stand open to rising and middle powers at lower cost. In contrast, it may rise for the low-income countries whose room to contest was financed by the resources now withdrawn. The schema has limits. It does not cover how interests are developed by elites, and relatedly, how domestic politics and economic structures, together with bilateral relations, decide where a country locates its interest. Further, the schema does not place non-state actors. It holds them at the edge of view, yet the ideational and discursive medium rests on productive power, which advocacy networks may exercise as much as states.

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Annex

Table A1: Concepts of country agency

Concept	Key reference(s)	Definition
Direct-influence concepts (what one actor does to another)		
Hard, soft power and smart power	Nye (1990, 2004, 2009, 2011)	Hard power coerces or induces through military force or economic sanctions. Soft power achieves outcomes through attraction, drawing on culture, political values and foreign policy. Smart power is the capacity to combine the coercion and payment of hard power with the attraction of soft power into an effective strategy for a given setting.
Sharp power	Walker and Ludwig (2017)	Authoritarian techniques that penetrate the political and information environments of open societies through distraction and manipulation.
Compulsory power	Barnett and Duvall (2005)	The direct control of one actor over the conditions of existence or actions of another.
Structural and institutional concepts (the architecture within which actors operate)		
Structural power (control of structures)	Strange (1988)	The capacity to shape the structures of the global political economy across security, production, finance and knowledge.
Structural power (constitution of actors)	Barnett and Duvall (2005)	Power working through the direct, mutually constitutive relations between social positions that allocate actors unequal capacities and identities.
Institutional power	Barnett and Duvall (2005)	Indirect control exercised through the formal and informal rules and procedures of institutions.
Network power	Hafner-Burton, Kahler and Montgomery (2009)	Power derived from an actor's position within a web of relations, working through access, brokerage and exit.
Normative and discursive concepts (norms and ideas, with a direction of agency)		
Normative power	Manners (2002)	The capacity to shape what passes for normal in world politics. Some hold that such power reflects the underlying distribution of capabilities (Hyde-Price, 2006).
Productive power	Barnett and Duvall (2005)	Power working through the diffuse systems of meaning that constitute actors and their self-understandings.
Norm entrepreneurship	Finnemore and Sikkink (1998)	The promotion of new norms through a life cycle of emergence, cascade and internalisation.
Norm antipreneurship	Bloomfield (2016)	Resistance to new norms by actors who defend the status quo.
Norm imperialism	Sumner and Klingebiel (2025) and definition developed here.	The use of state power to displace an existing norm and impose its opposite by material coercion. Its instrument is material and its object is a norm.
Localisation	Acharya (2004); Zimmermann (2025)	The reconstruction of foreign norms to fit local beliefs, through grafting, framing and pruning. Localisation may move sideways into other settings and upward into international arenas.
Contestation	Wiener (2014; 2018)	Critical engagement with norms, as reactive contestation (objecting to a breach) or proactive contestation (clarifying meaning and implementation).

Source: Author based on references cited.

Table A2: Strategies and tools for exercising country agency in a fragmenting order

		Orientation to order	
		Order-affirming	Order-contesting
Medium of agency	Material/ institutional	Custodian power Strategy: work within institutions to hold the rules in place. Tools: agenda setting, coalition building and management, peacekeeping, sanctions enforcement and niche diplomacy. Exemplars: Canada, Australia and Norway inside multilateral bodies, in peacekeeping and niche diplomacy (de Carvalho & Neumann, 2015; Cooper, Higgott & Nossal, 1993)	Reformer power Strategy: use material and institutional weight against the rules, along a gradient from reform at the near edge to rupture at the far edge, ending in exit. Tools (reform edge): voice reform, parallel institutions (e.g. NDB, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (IIB)), South-South coalitions, network brokerage outside Western hubs. Tools (rupture edge): weaponised interdependence through chokepoints and the denial of financial and supply-chain access (Farrell & Newman, 2019). Exemplars at the reform edge: BRICS in development finance in establishing the New Development Bank (Alden & le Pere, 2024). Exemplars at the rupture edge: the US under Trump in trade and multilateral finance, through tariffs, the defunding of international organisations and withdrawal from agreements (Klingebiel & Sumner, 2026).
	Ideational/ discursive	Norm entrepreneur or antipreneur power Strategy: promote norms that reinforce the order, or resist changes to order-affirming norms. Tools: norm promotion and cascading, advocacy and knowledge production aligned with prevailing frames. Exemplars: Southern authorship of the SDGs in the development arena (Fukuda-Parr & Muchhala, 2020), normative-power Europe and the death-penalty abolition norm (Manners, 2002).	Counter-norm entrepreneur power Strategy: contest the order's norms in an arena by ideational and symbolic means. The cell runs by intensity, from reframing an existing norm at the near edge to advancing a rival norm at the far edge. This mirrors the reform-to-rupture gradient of the material contesting cell. The cell is defined by its medium and its orientation, and not by political content, so contestation here may be illiberal or emancipatory. Tools: counter-framing, alternative knowledge production, claims of sovereignty and civilisational difference, and sharp-power information manipulation. Exemplars: Russia and China promoting illiberal counter-norms of sovereignty and civilisational order, and penetrating the information environments of open societies (Bettiza & Lewis, 2020; Walker & Ludwig, 2017).

Note: The table places a country in an arena rather than a country as such. The medium of agency continuum orders instrument and object together. A case that is material in instrument and ideational in object falls at its midpoint. Norm imperialism is such a case and it spans both order-contesting cells. Its strategy: displace an existing norm and impose its opposite by material coercion. Its tools: funding cuts, tariffs and the withdrawal of market access and membership, aimed at forcing the retreat of a norm rather than at breaking a market or financial rule. Exemplar: the US under Trump across climate, aid and multilateral rule-making (Klingebiel & Sumner, 2026; Sumner & Klingebiel, 2025).

Source: Author based on references cited.