

An Issue Area Approach to Defending Global Governance

Christian E. Rieck

**GGI Briefing
No. 2/2026**



**GLOBAL
GOVERNANCE
INSTITUTE**

About The Global Governance Institute (GGI)

The Global Governance Institute (GGI) is an independent, non-profit research and education institute based in Brussels. GGI brings together policy-makers, scholars and practitioners from the world's leading institutions in order to devise, strengthen and improve forward-looking approaches to global governance.

Our mission is to promote comprehensive research, cutting-edge analysis and innovative advice on core policy issues, informed by a truly global perspective. This also includes raising awareness about major challenges of global governance among the general public.

Our vision is a more equitable, peaceful and sustainable global order based on effective but accountable international organizations, the global rule of law and the empowerment of the individual across borders and cultures. GGI places particular emphasis on the improvement of the United Nations system and its mutual reinforcement with strong regional organisations.

About the Author

Dr. Christian E. Rieck is a Non-Resident Senior Fellow in the Peace and Security section, and Associate Professor for Development and Defence at the Chair of War Studies at the University of Potsdam with a focus on German foreign relations and European defence, and Academic Coordinator for its programs in War Studies.

Global Governance Institute
Cours Saint Michel 30A
1040 Brussels, Belgium

info@globalgovernance.eu
www.globalgovernance.eu

GGI Briefing Series

Published 2 July 2026
© Global Governance Institute

How to cite: Christian E. Rieck (2026) An Issue Area Approach to Defending Global Governance, GGI Briefing 2/2026, Brussels: Global Governance Institute.

The Global Governance Institute (GGI) ASBL is a non-profit association registered under Belgian law. Registration No. 831.178.152

An Issue Area Approach to Defending Global Governance*

Christian E. Rieck**

Coexistence: Great Power Rivalry and Cooperation

The world order seems to be reverting fast to a concert of great powers, an oligopoly of competing global hegemony focused on the national interest and the use of raw power to maximize it (*Machtpolitik*). Along the way they dismantle multilateral fora “to take back control” and carve up the world into spheres of influence “in the interest of national security”. A world order that is based primarily on great powers that show uncooperative behavior toward weaker powers will be a less comfortable place for liberal middle powers such as Germany, Australia, or Japan (Lake 2011).

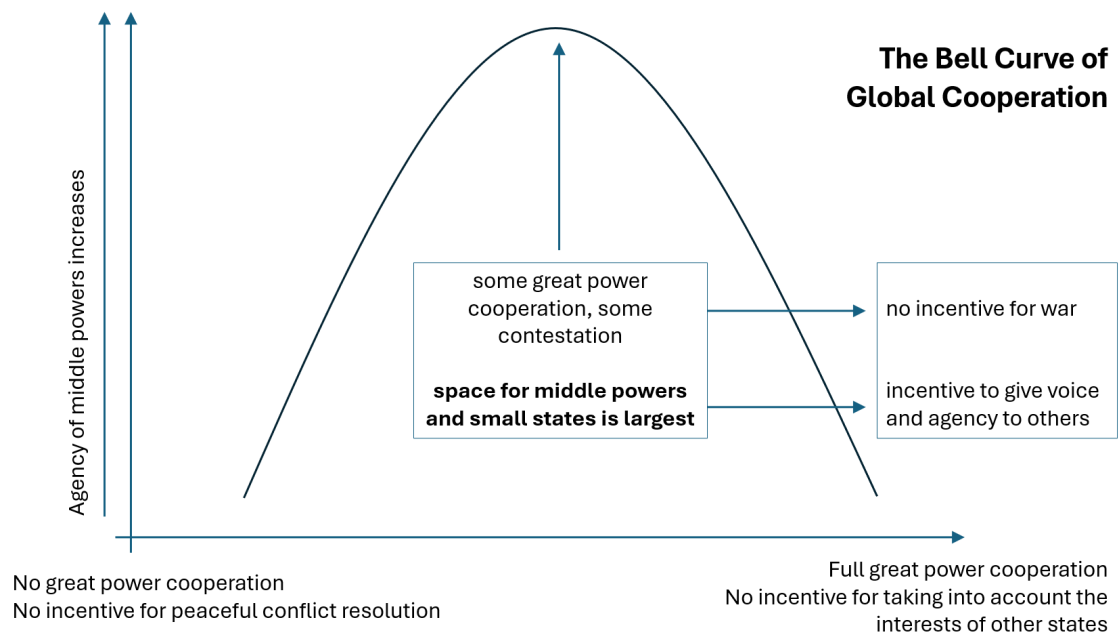
The quality of relations between the major powers is crucial in this emerging world system. The more these relations

deteriorate, the greater the risk of confrontation (including military confrontation), which would be extremely costly for all parties involved, great power or not. Conversely, if relations between the great powers become too close and deep, this would have a strong negative impact on the opportunities for middle powers and smaller states to have a say in how the world is run, both within international organizations and outside of them (Corbett/Yi-chong/Weller 2021). This would then effectively be a true concert of great powers, in which almost all decision-making power would be concentrated in an oligopoly of major powers. In sum, the new world order will show elements of great power rivalry and great power cooperation (Haass/Kupchan 2021). The challenge for liberal middle powers will be to identify and stabilize the “sweet spot” where their agency to influence the new world order is largest.

* This briefing is a condensed version of a book chapter the author wrote for the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung in early 2026. It originally appeared as “Why Institutions Still Matter” in a collection of essays edited by Gunter Rieck Moncayo, titled “Global Economic Governance in a Fragmented World. How Geopolitics Shapes International Cooperation and Its Institutions”. It is published here with the express consent of the foundation. <https://www.kas.de/en/single-title/-/content/global-economic-governance-in-a-fragmented-world-1>

** Associate Professor of War Studies at the University of Potsdam, and Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the Global Governance Institute, Brussels

Figure 1: The bell curve of global cooperation.



This new world order could degrade into great power politics without smaller states and against international organizations; especially within spheres of influence it would also pit great powers against the smaller ones. Spheres of influence are essentially very steep hierarchies in which non-hegemonic states enjoy only conditional sovereignty, dependent on decisions taken in the capital of the regional hegemon. The world is witnessing a renaissance of transactionalism, bilateralism, and presidential diplomacy, all trends that strengthen the executive branch of government vis-à-vis parliaments and have been discernible for some time. This prospect has been pushing more dependent states in the Global South towards a policy of multi-alignment (Ben Hammouda 2024), potentially

reducing the number of stakeholders for the rules-based international order. Furthermore, this style of great power foreign policy is increasingly at the expense of universalism and multilateralism, central pillars of the post-war order since 1945 (MacMillan 2025).

Against this backdrop, this briefing assumes that – even though the structures of regional and global governance settings are the most important determinants of state behavior – multilateral frameworks are still malleable, creating space for political leadership to break through political gridlock and increase their legitimacy and effectiveness (Wendt 1992). On an abstract level, it will then identify foreign policy instruments which can be deployed by liberal middle powers to strengthen

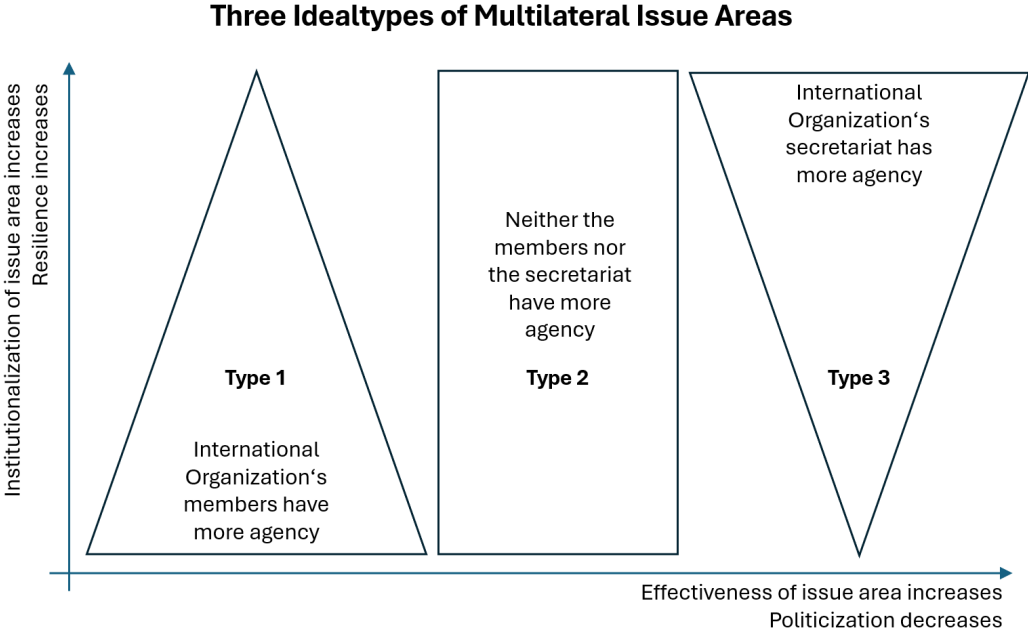
international political frameworks that govern specific issue areas. After all, not just the great powers have the necessary agency to make or break global governance (Eisentraut 2025).

Three Ideal Types: The Structure of Issue Areas in Global Governance

The hypothesis this briefing will propose is that the legitimacy and the effectiveness of issue area frameworks strongly depend on how they are

structured, regionally and, by extension, globally. As these frameworks are malleable, influencing their design will affect the “balance of power” within them, leading to policy outputs of varying quality. The main proposition here is that “secretariats” – secretaries-general and their staff in international organizations, rotating presidencies in more informal governance frameworks – will work more diligently towards the fulfillment of the organization’s mandate than member states focused on the maximization of their national interest.

Figure 2: Three ideal types of multilateral issue areas.



“Bottom-up issue areas” (type 1) are member state-driven frameworks, with weak or no secretariats. Examples are the G7/G20 that deal with many different issue areas under the same (informal) framework, or the Paris Climate Accords (climate) and Agenda

2030 (sustainability) that have no central enforcement mechanism. The more comprehensive and politically sensitive the issue area, the more politicized it tends to be. Legitimacy and effectiveness are then a function of (elusive) member state consensuses on

particular questions. “Top-down issue areas” (type 3), by contrast, are secretariat-driven frameworks, such as the WHO (despite the row over COVID-19), or more arcane technical international organizations like the Universal Postal Union (global postal policies and standards) or the International Labour Organization (anti-slavery, labor standards). The OECD also deals with many different issue areas, but falls into this category, as its workings are technical and overwhelmingly apolitical. The more technical and niche the issue area is, the less politicized it tends to be. Here, the legitimacy of an issue area depends on its effectiveness. Finally, “mixed issue areas” (type 2) show a balance between member states and the secretariat, as in the case of the Antarctic Treaty System, although climate change and the great power rivalry are already starting to gridlock the most controversial topics (resource extraction, environmental protection), pushing it towards type 1. Another case in point is the WTO, which has degraded from type 3, now that its effective dispute settlement mechanism has been gridlocked.

International cooperation (regional and global) yields the best results if certain conditions are met: cooperation frameworks need to be seen by their member states as (1) demonstrating *effectiveness* as an arena for constructive debate and a creator of norms, and (2) enjoying *legitimacy* so these norms and critiques of enforcement by members will be accepted. Also, these frameworks need to (3) offer opportunities for

leadership so that ambitious members (presidential diplomacy) may use them to demonstrate that they are responsible stakeholders, as well as (4) generate some level of *followership*, a function not simply of the acceptance of individual members’ leadership ambitions, but of high enough levels of trust between members more generally.

Clearly, global governance suffers from deficits in all four conditions, gridlocked as many issue area frameworks seem today (Hale et al. 2013). Great powers can also cause great harm to the rules-based international order – but they have always demonstrated a willingness to engage in institutionalized international cooperation because broad thematic alliances are able to solve transnational problems in a cost-effective manner, and because this also increases the levels of adherence to agreed rules. If the overarching goal of liberal middle powers is to increase the legitimacy of those mechanisms, they should work towards increasing their output effectiveness – commonly a contribution to global public goods in the form of a functioning regulatory framework of a given global governance issue area (trade, health, climate etc.). Top-down issue area frameworks are to be expected in more cooperative (regional and global) systems than in steeply hierarchical orders. However, the world order is not yet such a steep hierarchy, so that the potential benefits of cooperation are still higher than the costs.

From Theory to Action: Global Gridlock and Effective Multilateralism

How can these theoretical propositions inform political practice? The central foreign policy goal for liberal middle powers interested in protecting the rules-based international order must be to re-legitimize multilateral problem-solving mechanisms – be they centered on international organizations such as the WTO or on more informal governance frameworks such as the G7. Re-legitimation should focus on the output side of these mechanisms, i.e. increasing their ability to function well so that they can generate and enforce norms and rules. The German Federal Government (and many others) calls this “effective multilateralism” (Bundesregierung 2021). This foreign policy goal becomes more achievable the more amenable the global framework conditions are. Or, put differently: The lower the polarity of the world order and, by extension, the tendency towards conflict within the global governance mechanisms in question, the larger the policy space for liberal middle powers to use their agency to strengthen these mechanisms (the “sweet spot”). So, liberal middle powers should invest in both specific global governance mechanisms as well as in the quality of the world system as a whole:

- Invest in open channels of communication with the great powers to serve as interlocutors should the quality of relations between them sour. This can happen through “special relationships” in the case of allies and

close like-minded partners, or through dynamic economic, technological and political relations in other cases if core interests are not compromised.

- Accept and encourage multi-aligners to take on the role of buffer states in the multipolar world, as this will contribute to a lowering of the overall polarity of the world order. This should start with but also go beyond public proclamations of respect for multi-aligners’ sovereignty – without any conditionality and without an expectation of getting anything in return. In short, this respect and encouragement should not be transactional in nature.

- Actively offer partnership to multi-aligners to keep them from being sucked into the orbit of illiberal states wanting to overturn the rules-based international order. This can be done by bundling traditional foreign policy instruments and tailoring them to meet the demands of the partner state in question, depending on its level of development. Instruments include development cooperation, science diplomacy, technological cooperation, political dialog on sensitive issues such as critical minerals, and the loosening of export restrictions.

- Invest in regional problem-solving mechanisms wherever possible, as this should deepen the cooperation culture in the world regions and help keep regional powers cooperative and liberal-minded towards their regions. Cooperative hegemons at home are more likely to be cooperative global

powers as well. This can be achieved by becoming an observer state to like-minded regional organizations (including regional development banks), and by contributing to the agenda-setting and funding of such mechanisms.

- Actively engage international organizations and more informal clubs by using the liberal middle powers' agency to set a global agenda across platforms for the strengthening of the rules-based international order. This should include funding increases for international organizations and policy coordination frameworks on the global governance level to increase output in as many issue areas as possible. Thematic coalitions of the willing, while useful in cases of sustained gridlock, are a distant second-best option if the overall goal is to increase the effectiveness of global governance.

- Move global governance issue areas towards deeper institutionalization (ideally type 3), but without the onus of more bureaucratization. If this is not achievable, then liberal middle powers should at least aim to realize a balance between secretariat and member states (type 2). This can be achieved through a concerted push for institutional reform to strengthen secretariats and make them more autonomous from member states to improve the production of global public goods.

- Accordingly, resist the push by transactional powers to downgrade

global governance mechanisms to a member state-driven issue area (type 1). In any given global governance framework, increasing the role of member states vis-à-vis the secretariat may look like a strengthening of input legitimacy under the guise of “democratization”, but it leads to less institutionalization, more gridlock and, thus, less effectiveness.

Outlook: Liberal Middle Powers as Role Models

The liberal world order with its universally applicable principles and inclusive international organizations – which, from a global perspective, leads to more efficient results in the production of global goods than a purely transactional world order in which major powers can freely exploit their potential for coercion – has more supporters than it currently appears (Spektor 2025). Liberal middle powers such as Germany and her peer nations around the world have an important role model function in their dealings with their neighboring states as well as with their partners in international organizations, a result of their role-conceptions (Wehner 2020). As they tend to be neither detached powers nor regional dominators (Prys 2010), their leadership ambitions tend to have at least some regional backing. The good news is that together they can exert major influence on the world order at all levels of global governance – so that it not only becomes multipolar but also remains multilateral. It is still “no one’s world” (Kupchan 2012).

Bibliography

Ben Hammouda, Hakim (2024): *Multi-alignment and De-risking: The Global South Response to World Fragmentation*, Ifri.

Bundesregierung (2021): *Gemeinsam für die Menschen. Weißbuch Multilateralismus der Bundesregierung*, Bundesregierung.

Corbett, Jack / Yi-chong, Xu / Weller, Patrick (2021): *International Organizations and Small States: Participation, Legitimacy and Vulnerability*, Bristol.

Eisentraut, Sophie (2025): *Going South? Leadership on Global Public Goods*, Munich Security Conference.

Haass, Richard N. / Kupchan, Charles A. (2021): "The New Concert of Powers. How to Prevent Catastrophe and Promote Stability in a Multipolar World", in: *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2021-03-23/new-concert-powers>

Hale, Thomas / Held, David / Young, Kevin (2013): *Gridlock. Why Global Cooperation is Failing when We Need It Most*, polity.

Kupchan, Charles A. (2012): *No One's World: The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn*, Oxford.

Lake, David A. (2011): *Hierarchy in International Relations*, Cornell.

MacMillan, Margaret (2025): "Stress Test. Can a Troubled Order Survive a Disruptive Leader?", in: *Foreign Affairs* 1/2025, pp. 8-15.

Prys, Miriam (2010): "Hegemony, Domination, Detachment: Differences in Regional Powerhood", in: *International Studies Review* 12(4), pp. 479-504.

Spektor, Matias (2025): "The Rise of the Non-Aligned. Who Wins in a Multipolar World?", in: *Foreign Affairs* 1/2025, pp. 40-47.

Wehner, Leslie E. (2020): "The Narration of Roles in Foreign Policy Analysis", in: *Journal of International Relations and Development* 23(2), pp. 359-384.

Wendt, Alexander (1992): "Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics", in: *International Organization* 46(2), pp. 391-425.