Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities
Publisher: Kabul University

Available at https://jssh.edu.af

The End of Interdependence: Re-assessing Power, Progress, and Peace in a Fragmented World

Vérène Niyomana[1], Patrick Mushitsi[2]

[1,2]University of Burundi, Faculty of Law and Political Science, Department of Political Science and International Relations

Received: Feb 26, 2026
Revised: March 2, 2026
Accepted: April 12, 2026
Published: April 30, 2026

Keywords
- Autarky
- Interdependence
- Peace
- Power
- Progress

Abstract: This article uses counterfactual analysis to explore a hypothetical world in which states operate under mandatory autarky, completely lacking the economic, security, and social interdependence that define the modern international system. While existing International Relations (IR) scholarship extensively examines the consequences of growing interdependence, it has not systematically theorized the structural and political outcomes of its complete and instantaneous absence. This article aims to show that ending interdependence would not merely revert the system to Westphalian realism but would fundamentally and unexpectedly reshape its core principles. Using a deductive thought experiment to test key IR paradigms, the article examines four structural changes: the shift of power toward complex, autarkic capabilities; the halt in progress as global knowledge resources collapse; the tension of peace into rigid spheres of influence; and an environmental paradox in which local efforts fail to prevent global ecological decline. The article concludes that such a fragmented world would be marked by profound instability, cultural and technological stagnation, and a fragile peace sustained solely by deterrence. This offers a critical perspective for re-evaluating the advantages and vulnerabilities of the current global order, warning that even the perceived failures of interdependence may be preferable to any viable autarkic alternative.

To Cite this Article: Niyomana, V & Mushitsi, P. (2026). The End of Interdependence: Re-assessing Power, Progress, and Peace in a Fragmented World. *Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities 3*(2), 318-338. https://doi.org/10.62810/jssh.v3i2.292

INTRODUCTION

The modern field of International Relations (IR) is based on a nearly axiomatic premise: that states exist within a web of complex interdependence. From Keohane and Nye's (1977) pioneering work, which examined the numerous channels connecting societies, to the tangible reality of global supply chains—where a smartphone in one's pocket can be seen as a "miniature United Nations," assembled from components and knowledge sourced worldwide (Shapiro, 2022)—interdependence forms the environment in which the

✉ Corresponding author E-mail: v.niyomana@gmail.com

Available online at https://jssh.edu.af/jssh/article/view/292

international system operates. Contemporary scholarship mainly focuses on managing this reality—debating the stability of US-China decoupling (Allison, 2017), the resilience of economic networks, or the development of institutions to regulate the global commons (Ikenberry, 2018). Nevertheless, this focus on the density of connections masks a more fundamental question: what would the international system look like in their complete absence?

The methodological approach is deductive and theoretical, employing a structured counterfactual analysis—a tool in IR used to test the causal logic and robustness of core theories by examining a world in which a key variable (interdependence) is removed (Fearon, 1991; Tetlock & Lebow, 2001). We propose a world where autarky is not a policy choice, as in the historical cases of Albania or North Korea, but a structural condition of the international system itself.

The central argument of this article is that a world of self-sufficient nations would not embody the pure, Westphalian utopia of sovereignty that some realists might envision (Mearsheimer, 2001). Instead, it would be a profoundly unstable, culturally stagnant, and potentially more violent world. The end of interdependence would not merely return the system to a previous era. However, it would fundamentally and unexpectedly reshape the nature of power, hinder the engines of progress, and establish a peace based on sheer deterrence and rigid spheres of influence, even as it might provide a complex form of liberation from external economic coercion for some.

To strengthen this argument, the article is organized into four parts. First, it lays the theoretical groundwork for the thought experiment. Second, it investigates the radical reconfiguration of power, emphasizing the dominance of "hard" autarkic capabilities and the perilous condition of non-viable states. Third, it explores the stagnation of progress, as the collapse of the global knowledge commons and innovation networks leads to technological and cultural inertia. Finally, it examines the fragility of peace, where institutions and economic links that oversee conflict become obsolete, potentially causing the system to revert to a more primitive and dangerous form of anarchy. Through this analysis, the article aims to provide a critical perspective for re-evaluating the often-invisible structure of our interconnected world.

This article examines a conceptual gap by conducting a counterfactual thought experiment. It asks: How would the fundamental elements of international relations—power, progress, and peace—be reshaped in a world of mandatory state-level autarky? What if, due to a technological breakthrough or political disaster, the complex web of mutual dependence were to disappear, and each state could independently satisfy its own energy, food, technology, and security needs? This is not an argument endorsing the practicality of such a world, but rather an intellectual exploration of the core foundations of our international system.

To comprehend a world without interdependence, one must first recognize how deeply this idea is embedded in the fundamental theories of IR. The prevailing view of today's global system primarily depends on the concept of complex interdependence, a model introduced by Keohane and Nye (1977) as a direct challenge to state-centric, billiard-ball realism, as articulated by Wolfers (1951). They argued that the modern world features multiple channels of contact between societies—transgovernmental and transnational—lacking hierarchical ordering of issues, and where military force is frequently irrelevant. In this context, states are engaged in networks of mutual sensitivity and vulnerability, where the costs of disrupting these ties serve as a significant restraint on behavior (Keohane & Nye, 1977). This perspective is supported by liberal institutionalists, who contend that international regimes and organizations are durable structures that diminish anarchy and promote cooperation by lowering transaction costs and fostering trust (Keohane, 1984; Ikenberry, 2001).

The realist school, while recognizing economic interconnectedness, fundamentally disputes its transformative potential. For scholars such as Mearsheimer (2001), interdependence is not a calming force but a source of vulnerability and potential conflict. In an anarchic system, states fear dependence because it can be weaponized; therefore, they are ultimately driven by the relentless logic of survival to prioritize relative gains over absolute gains and to ensure self-help (Waltz, 1979). From this perspective, the cooperation celebrated by liberals is a fragile phenomenon, constantly at risk of collapsing when the distribution of power shifts or vital interests are threatened (Grieco, 1988). Constructivists, meanwhile, would emphasize that interdependence is not merely a material condition but a social one that fosters shared identities and norms, as seen in the European Union, where a security community has emerged from dense economic and social ties (Adler & Barnett, 1998; Wendt, 1999).

This article's thought experiment moves beyond debates about managing or the implications of interdependence, aiming instead to negate them completely. To do this, we need to define my central concept: autarky, clearly. Here, autarky is not treated as a policy choice—an often-painful form of isolationism, pursued by states like Stalin's Soviet Union or contemporary North Korea for ideological or security reasons (Walt, 1992). Such cases exist within an interdependent system and are characterized by their resistance to it. Instead, we define autarky as a structural feature of the international system itself—a world where, due to a hypothetical universal technology (e.g., advanced AI and robotics, perfect renewable energy, matter replication) or a fundamental change in political possibilities, states are no longer reliant on one another. In this counterfactual universe, the potential for mutual dependence—and its associated vulnerabilities and benefits—is removed. The sensitivity and vulnerability that Keohane and Nye (1977) identified do not exist.

Justifying such a radical departure from observed reality requires a clear methodological rationale. This exercise functions as a form of "stress-testing" the core paradigms of IR theory. As Fearon (1991) argues, counterfactuals are essential for assessing causal claims; by

removing a presumed central variable, we can gain a clearer understanding of its true explanatory importance. By erasing interdependence, we can ask:

- Does the realist prediction of a pure, militarized self-help system finally and fully materialize (Mearsheimer, 2001)?
- Do liberal institutions, when stripped of their practical purpose, instantly wither away, proving to be mere epiphenomena of deeper material interests (Gilpin, 1981)?
- Would constructivist shared identities and norms, severed from the interactions that sustain them, decay rapidly, revealing the primacy of pre-social anarchy (Wendt, 1999)?

This approach aligns with the tradition of scholars like Tetlock and Lebow (2001), who employ counterfactual reasoning to explore the limits of historical and theoretical inevitability. By imagining a world in which the logics of complex interdependence do not operate, we can attain a more nuanced, more critical evaluation of their role in shaping the boundaries of power, the paths of progress, and the prospects for peace in our own deeply interconnected world.

RESEARCH METHOD

This article uses a qualitative, deductive approach grounded in structured counterfactual analysis to examine the theoretical foundations of International Relations (IR). The research is theory-driven rather than empirical and adopts a post-positivist epistemology, treating IR theories as interpretive and explanatory rather than predictive (Jackson, 2011). Counterfactual reasoning serves as a formal analytical tool for identifying the causal impact of interdependence by constructing a logically consistent alternative system in which interdependence is absent. Inspired by Fearon (1991) and Tetlock and Lebow (2001), the counterfactual is designed as a rigorous analytical construct, not mere speculation: only the key structural element—interdependence—is removed, while fundamental systemic features such as statehood, anarchy, sovereignty, and rationality focused on survival are held constant (Waltz, 1979). Autarky is defined not as a policy choice but as a systemic condition resulting from hypothetical structural or technological changes, thereby ensuring clarity and avoiding confusion with historical cases of isolationism (George & Bennett, 2005).

Participant and Sampling

As a purely theoretical and non-empirical study, this research does not involve human participants or sampling. Instead, it draws upon a purposively selected set of established IR paradigms—realism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism—as its analytical subjects. These paradigms are chosen for their foundational status and divergent explanations of the role of interdependence in shaping international outcomes (Waltz, 1979; Keohane, 1984; Wendt, 1999).

Instrument

No empirical instruments (e.g., surveys, interviews, or tests) were used. The primary

analytical instrument is a structured counterfactual logic model, operationalized through a controlled comparison between the real interdependent system and a hypothetical autarkic system. This model relies on explicit variable separation: interdependence is treated as the independent variable, while power distribution, progress trajectories, peace mechanisms, and environmental outcomes serve as dependent variables.

Data Collection Procedure

Given the theoretical nature of the study, no empirical data were collected. Instead, the data consist of logical propositions, theoretical assumptions, and causal claims derived from peer-reviewed IR literature. The collection procedure involved systematically extracting core assumptions from each selected paradigm and translating them into testable predictions under autarkic conditions.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted through deductive theory testing, extending core assumptions from realism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism into a hypothetical autarkic system to assess how their causal claims hold up under conditions of complete independence (Waltz, 1979; Keohane, 1984; Wendt, 1999). The study organizes its analysis into four thematic areas—power, progress, peace, and environment—by comparing the real interdependent system with the hypothetical autarkic one through controlled comparisons. Rigor is maintained through explicit variable separation, paradigmatic diversity, and internal consistency of theories. The goal is not empirical prediction but to provide conceptual and analytical insights into how interdependence influences systemic stability, innovation, and security (Levy, 2015).

FINDINGS

This section presents the key results of the counterfactual analysis across four thematic areas: power, progress, peace, and the environment. Each finding is derived from a systematic comparison between the existing interdependent international system and the hypothetical autarkic world described earlier. The analysis reveals that removing interdependence does not simply return the system to a classic realist balance of power but instead generates unexpected structural consequences.

The Reconfiguration of Power: Beyond Comprehensive National Power

The shift to a world of structural autarky would fundamentally reorganize global power relations, rendering many current measures of a state's capability outdated. In our interconnected system today, power is often structural—the ability to shape frameworks, rules, and institutions within which other states operate (Strange, 1988). This form of power projection would disappear entirely. The role of the US dollar as the global reserve currency, a key aspect of American structural power that grants what Kirshner (1995) calls monetary power, would vanish without international trade and capital flows dependent on a common medium of exchange. Similarly, institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO),

which manage global economic relations through a complex system of rules and dispute resolution, would become meaningless relics (Goldstein, Rivers, & Tomz, 2007). Sanctions, a vital tool in modern diplomacy that relies on integrating a target into the global economy, would lose all effectiveness (Drezner, 2011). In an autarkic world, power can no longer be exercised through economic means; it must be inherent and geographically confined.

In this new hierarchy, Hard Autarkic Power would become the sole determinant of a nation's standing. This power directly depends on a country's innate, sovereign-controlled assets.

- Geographic Scale & Resource Endowment: Countries with continental size and a wide range of natural resources—the United States, Russia, China, Brazil, Canada, and Australia—would become the dominant superpowers. Their capacity for self-sufficiency in energy, food, and critical minerals would be unmatched. This echoes Mackinder's (1904) heartland theory, which holds that controlling the great "world-island" is essential. However, with a key autarkic twist: the aim is not to project power outward but to be invulnerable from within.
- Population Size: A large population ceases to be a potential burden and becomes a vital asset, offering a significant internal market, a diverse labor force, and the capacity for extensive domestic innovation and military mobilization. This demographic strength, as discussed by Modelski (1987) in the context of long cycles of global leadership, becomes a key factor in autarkic viability.
- The Futility of Conquest? This shift prompts a re-evaluation of the cost-benefit analysis of war. In an interconnected world, conquest can be economically justified if it grants access to markets and resources (Rosecrance, 1986). Under autarky, however, this calculation changes. If occupied populations cannot be economically integrated and their resources cannot be traded globally, the main advantage of conquest decreases. The expense of managing hostile territories, however, would stay high, potentially rendering large-scale territorial expansion a net loss. This scenario echoes the sovereignty-at-bay argument, but for markedly different reasons (Vernon, 1971).

This new power structure spells catastrophe for the non-viable state. Countries with small landmasses, limited resources, and adverse geography—such as Singapore, Japan, Jordan, and many small island developing states—would face an existential crisis. Without the ability to trade for essentials, their very survival would be in jeopardy. They would not be “failed states” in the traditional sense of governmental collapse, as argued by Chomsky (2006), but rather structurally failed by the new systemic rules. Their potential responses would be grim: a descent into subsistence-level poverty; the development of new forms of political subservience as client or protectorate states of a continental power in exchange for survival guarantees; or, in the most extreme cases, the orchestrated migration of their populations.

This reality revives a darker, more traditional security dilemma. While the usefulness of conquest might be questioned, the motivation for territorial expansion to access specific,

location-dependent resources (e.g., a unique mineral deposit, a freshwater source) could return fiercely if a continental power finds itself lacking a critical element for its autarkic survival. Additionally, the core logic of modern alliances would fall apart. Alliances like NATO are maintained by shared transnational threats and deeply connected economic and political interests (Walt, 2009). In a world where a state requires nothing from its allies, the question "Why defend a country you do not need?" would become unanswerable, leading to the swift collapse of collective security arrangements and a return to a system of stark, self-sufficient, and isolated power centers.

As the following table illustrates, the shift to structural autarky would not merely alter the balance of power but would fundamentally change its very nature and origins. The metrics for success and survival in the international system would be radically rewritten.

***Table 1**: The Reconfiguration of Power: Interdependence versus Structural Autarky*

Dimension of Power	**In an Interdependent World (Current System)**	**In a Structurally Autarkic World (Hypothetical)**
Primary Power Type	Structural & Economic Power (e.g., setting financial rules, controlling markets)	Hard, Intrinsic Power (e.g., domestic resources, population, geography)
Currency of Power	Control over capital flows, sanctions, and market access.	Control over territory, essential resources, and sovereign space.
Paradigm of Superpower	Trading States & Rule-Makers (e.g., USA, China, EU via institutions)	Continental States (Autarkic Giants) (e.g., USA, Russia, China, Brazil, Australia)
Status of Small/Resource-Poor States	Can thrive as Trading Hubs or Specialized Economies (e.g., Singapore, Japan, Switzerland)	Structurally Non-Viable Entities facing catastrophe, clientelism, or dissolution.
Utility of Military Force	Mixed; often in support of economic interests, power projection.	Potentially Higher for Specific Resources, but lower for general conquest due to integration difficulties.
Nature of Alliances	**Enduring:** Based on shared economic/strategic interests and integrated supply chains.	**Obsolete:** No mutual need eliminates the foundational *quid pro quo*.
Primary Security Logic	Managing complex interdependence and transnational threats.	Classical Territorial Defense and securing sovereign resource bases.

Source: Author's own compilation

The Stagnation of Progress: Knowledge Economies in a Closed System

The shift towards a world of structural autarky would trigger a crisis that goes far beyond the immediate geopolitical power shift. It would undermine the very foundations of human progress, systematically dismantling the intricate systems of innovation, cultural exchange, and social development that define the modern era. The end of interdependence would not simply slow progress; it would radically alter its course, resulting in deep, self-perpetuating stagnation across technological, cultural, and psychological fields. This stagnation embodies

the ultimate cost of a divided world; a price paid in the form of the loss of collective human potential.

The most immediate casualty would be the global knowledge commons, the open, albeit imperfect, ecosystem through which ideas, research, and talent circulate across borders. Modern science and innovation are fundamentally cumulative and collaborative pursuits. They flourish in what philosopher Karl Popper called the open society, a system where knowledge is conjectural and open to refutation through unfettered dialogue and critique (Popper, 1945). The large-scale collaborative projects that define our era would be impossible in a world with closed borders. Institutions like CERN, which depend on the intellectual and financial contributions of two dozen member states to explore the fundamental laws of the universe, exemplify a model of scientific inquiry that is inherently transnational (Jasanoff, 2004). Likewise, the Human Genome Project was a monumental achievement not only in biology but also in international cooperation (Collins *et al.*, 2003). The silencing of this global scientific dialogue would be an incalculable loss to humanity's pursuit of understanding, limiting each nation to the bounds of its own intellectual resources.

This loss is worsened by the decline of the dynamic interaction between collaboration and competition, a crucial force behind rapid technological progress throughout history. The historian Niall Ferguson has highlighted competition as one of the "killer applications" of Western civilization, driving innovation and efficiency (Ferguson, 2011). The Cold War Space Race, despite its dangers, spurred massive parallel investments in science and engineering, leading to technological spin-offs—from satellite communications to advances in computing and materials science—that eventually spread worldwide, benefiting all of humanity (Logsdon, 2019). In an autarkic world, this competitive drive disappears. The motivation to gain a technological advantage is reduced when rivals' discoveries are kept secret, and the global exchange of ideas is closed off. The internet itself, initially a project of the US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), became a transformative global resource precisely because its core protocols were open and non-proprietary, enabling worldwide adoption, adaptation, and ongoing innovation (Zittrain, 2008). This exemplifies economist Paul Romer's theory of endogenous growth, which argues that economic growth mainly depends on the discovery of new recipes and ideas (Romer, 1990). Autarky, by its very nature, creates a severe shortage of these recipes, shrinking the global pool of knowledge into a series of isolated, inevitably shallower, national pools.

The consequence of this intellectual fragmentation is a systemic and enormous inefficiency: the widespread duplication of technological effort. Every state, regardless of its size, wealth, or level of development, would be forced to reinvent the wheel. This reality directly contradicts the principle of comparative advantage, famously articulated by David Ricardo, which shows that overall wealth increases through specialization and trade (Ricardo, 1817). A technologically advanced but resource-scarce nation like Japan or South Korea would have to divert its talented scientists and engineers from pioneering research to the tedious, resource-intensive task of rebuilding an entire technological and industrial base from scratch.

This undermines the very foundation of modern science, as described by sociologist Robert K. Merton as a cumulative enterprise in which researchers stand on the shoulders of giants (Merton, 1965). In an autarchic world, these giants are invisible. Each national scientific community would be condemned to a solipsistic dialogue, with its peer-review process becoming a closed, parochial activity, prone to groupthink and the reinforcement of national scientific dogma (Ziman, 1968). The fundamental scientific principle of replication—the independent verification of results by the global community—would be severely limited, allowing errors and even fraud to become entrenched as national orthodoxies. Progress would not merely slow; it would become recursive, with humanity repeatedly exhausting its energy retracing the same basic steps in countless isolated loops.

However, the stagnation is not confined to laboratories; it permeates the very fabric of culture and social norms. From a constructivist perspective, identities, values, and cultures are not fixed but are socially constructed and continually reshaped through interaction and dialogue (Wendt, 1999). Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai offers a helpful framework for understanding this dynamic flow through his concept of global scapes—ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes—which constantly interact and merge to produce hybrid cultural forms (Appadurai, 1996). Autarky would completely drain these scapes. The dynamic, hybrid nature of modern culture—from the global reach of K-pop and Bollywood to the worldwide fusion of culinary traditions—relies on ongoing cross-border exchanges. Without these, cultural production would turn inward and become inert. Film, music, and literature would lose their global references and become static, reflecting only an increasingly narrow and self-referential national experience. Culinary traditions, once evolving through the addition of new ingredients and techniques, would turn into museum pieces, frozen in time.

This cultural isolation has serious consequences for political and social progress. The global spread of norms, such as human rights, gender equality, and environmental care, has been vigorously promoted by what scholars Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink called transnational advocacy networks (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). These networks operate through a boomerang effect, in which domestic activists bypass unresponsive governments to build international alliances and exert pressure. In a closed system, this external influence disappears. Repressive regimes would encounter much less international scrutiny, and progressive social movements would lose essential external support, references, and resources. The global agreement on existential issues like climate change, supported by international scientific bodies such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), would break apart into a jumble of competing national truths, preventing coordinated global action.

Finally, the long-term societal impact would manifest as a damaging psychology of walls. Prolonged isolation and the cessation of meaningful contact with the outside world would fundamentally change a society's collective psyche. While it might, on one hand, foster a stronger, more unified national identity, this identity would likely be fragile, chauvinistic, and

built upon a mythologized past and suspicion of the "other." This echoes Benedict Anderson's concept of the imagined community, but one imagined in a vacuum, without the moderating influence of transnational connections and comparative perspectives (Anderson, 1983). More likely, however, is that this isolation would foster increased paranoia, xenophobia, and a catastrophic erosion of global empathy. The psychologist Steven Pinker, in his seminal work on the history of violence, argues that the expansion of the circle of empathy has been a key driver in the decline of violence throughout history (Pinker, 2011). We learn to understand and care about others by encountering them, directly or vicariously, through travel, media, and cultural exchange. Autarky systematically destroys the channels for this encounter. The "other" becomes an abstract threat, a caricature, a mystery. The very concept of a shared human fate (Beck, 2008), a prerequisite for addressing global challenges from pandemics to planetary warming, would become intellectually and emotionally incomprehensible. In the final analysis, a world that does not need each other is a world that cannot understand each other, and ultimately, a world that has chosen a path of collective decline over the difficult, but infinitely more promising, pursuit of shared progress.

The Environmental Paradox: Localized Success, Global Failure

The shift towards a world of structural autarky would generate a profound and catastrophic environmental paradox, where the inevitable collapse of global ecological systems would completely negate the potential for localized resource management. This scenario exemplifies the ultimate tragedy of the commons on a planetary scale, where the lack of international institutions and cooperative mechanisms leaves humanity unable to tackle transnational environmental threats (Hardin, 1968). While some nations with favorable geographic endowments might achieve a degree of internal environmental stability, this would be a pyrrhic victory in the face of systemic global failures.

The potential for localized success under autarky cannot be entirely dismissed. Countries with vast territories and diverse natural resources—such as the United States, Russia, or Brazil—could theoretically enforce strict, sovereign environmental policies suited to their specific biomes and freed from the pressures of global market demands for resource extraction. A large, resource-rich state might opt to conserve its forests, manage its water tables sustainably, and protect its biodiversity (Dauvergne, 2016). This could result in what may be seen as national environmental havens. However, this very localism constitutes the system's critical flaw. The Earth's biosphere is an interconnected system that operates beyond political borders; it does not recognize national sovereignty in matters of atmospheric circulation, ocean currents, or migratory species pathways (Biermann, 2014).

Consequently, the most pressing existential environmental challenges could become entirely impossible to manage. The issue of plastic pollution in the high seas, for example, illustrates a collective action problem that autarky worsens. The plastic gyres in the world's oceans exist in international waters, and their removal requires a level of technological and financial cooperation that would be unimaginable in a fragmented world (Borrelle et al., 2020). Likewise, managing atmospheric carbon—a stock pollutant that disperses worldwide—

requires global cooperation. The framework of the Paris Agreement, despite its flaws, is based on the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities. This idea becomes pointless when there is no common forum and no motivation for any single nation to bear the cost of reducing emissions for global benefits shared across the world (Falkner, 2016).

The failure of this cooperative framework would cause a swift unraveling of past environmental achievements and a loss of future resilience. The protection of the ozone layer, a significant milestone of international diplomacy through the Montreal Protocol, would be at risk, as the production and use of ozone-depleting substances could no longer be monitored or regulated worldwide (Canan, Reichman, & Sowers, 2015). Moreover, the planetary boundaries framework, which establishes a safe space for humanity, emphasizes processes such as biogeochemical flows (nitrogen and phosphorus cycles) and biosphere integrity, which are fundamentally global in scope (Steffen et al., 2015). Autarky would make the stewardship of these vital processes impossible, as no single nation, regardless of good intentions, can unilaterally manage the planet's nitrogen cycle or preserve the genetic diversity of migratory species whose ranges span multiple, now-isolated, states.

In this bleak scenario, the world would break into isolated environmental zones. Each zone might follow its own limited view of sustainability. Nevertheless, they would collectively accelerate the decline of the global commons—such as the stable climate, healthy oceans, and resilient biosphere—that all nations depend on for their future. The drive for complete control over local environments would ultimately lead nations to lose authority over the planetary systems essential for their habitability.

The Precarious Nature of Peace: Security Without Interdependence

The breakdown of global interdependence would not just alter the international security landscape; it would fundamentally dismantle its core structure, replacing a complex system of managed competition with a more basic, unstable, and uncertain order. The institutions, alliances, and economic mechanisms that have, for decades, managed conflict and maintained fragile stability would become irrelevant and fade away. In their place, a security environment would form, characterized by hardened borders, overt military dominance, and the constant, tangible threat of miscalculation. In this grim new paradigm, the very idea of peace would be redefined—not as a state of cooperative stability or positive-sum gain, but merely as the temporary and tense absence of open warfare between rigid, self-reliant power blocs. This section contends that the end of interdependence would render liberal institutions obsolete, give rise to a new neo-spheres-of-influence world that is more rigid and volatile than a pure Hobbesian state of anarchy, and create a new, highly challenging security dilemma centered on autarkic deterrence.

The Irrelevance of Liberal Institutions and Alliances

The post-World War II liberal international order, despite its well-documented flaws and ongoing debates, was explicitly created to reduce the harsh realities of anarchy by

establishing dense, resilient networks of economic and political connections. Institutions like the United Nations (UN), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank (WB) were not just bureaucratic organizations; they represented the operational branches of a philosophy aimed at making war economically expensive and political cooperation practically beneficial (Ikenberry, 2018). In an autarkic world, their core purpose disappears entirely. The UN Security Council, already often paralyzed by great-power rivalry, would become entirely ceremonial, as the very idea of collective security loses meaning when states share no common interests or vulnerabilities. Large-scale peacekeeping missions, which depend on multinational contributions, complex logistical chains, and a baseline of diplomatic cooperation, would become logistically and politically unfeasible to organize.

Similarly, the core economic institutions of the liberal order would become obsolete. The IMF's leading role in promoting financial stability through conditional lending and the WB's aim of supporting development and reducing poverty are fundamentally underpinned by a world of fluid capital flows and cross-border investment (Rodrik, 2022). Without financial interdependence, these institutions would lose their influence, have no meaningful resources to offer, and lack a practical purpose. They would become hollow shells, remnants of a past era of globalization.

Most significantly, for immediate security calculations, traditional military alliances like NATO would face swift, irreversible obsolescence. NATO's endurance, as argued by scholars like Sten Rynning (2022), is not solely a result of a shared external threat, such as the former Soviet Union. Its resilience is deeply rooted in interconnected economic systems, shared democratic values, and, critically, integrated military-industrial complexes. The mutual defense clause, Article 5, rests on the tangible reality that an attack on one member state is an attack on a vital node within a shared economic and strategic network (NATO, 1949). In a world where a nation requires nothing from its allies—no energy, no critical components, no access to markets—the fundamental question is why defend a country you do not need? has no rational, cost-benefit answer. The intricate fabric of trust that sustains modern alliances, carefully woven over decades of joint military exercises, close intelligence sharing, and deep weapon-system interoperability, would quickly unravel, leaving each state to confront its security challenges in stark, unmitigated isolation (Walt, 2023). Alliances would not be reformed; they would be recognized as historical anomalies.

A Neo-Spheres of Influence World: From Hobbesian Anarchy to Rigid Blocs

The collapse of this institutional framework raises an essential question: Does it inevitably lead to a pure, Hobbesian "war of all against all," a state of universal, chaotic conflict? A more detailed structural analysis suggests that although the system would remain formally anarchic—lacking a supreme global authority—it would not necessarily devolve into chaos. Instead, the international system is likely to settle into a pattern of rigid, static, and fiercely protected spheres of influence, dominated entirely by the Autarkic Superpowers—rare continental-sized states with the geographic scale, resource diversity, and population to establish a viable form of self-sufficiency. This new order would resemble a 21st-century

dystopian version of the 19th-century Concert of Europe. However, it would critically lack the informal diplomatic channels, shared aristocratic culture, and common normative understandings that at times characterized and moderated that earlier era (Kissinger, 2014).

Within their clearly defined, separate spheres, these self-sufficient giants would impose a form of hegemonic peace, ruthlessly suppressing local conflicts that could lead to confrontation and, if necessary, securing preferential access to peripheral resources. However, this peace would be imperial, coercive, and brutally enforced, rather than based on cooperation or consensus. The outskirts of these spheres—the unstable borderlands between, for example, a Russian bloc and a Chinese bloc, or the territories of weaker states considered within a superpower's exclusive orbit—would become areas of ongoing, low-intensity conflict and fierce geopolitical rivalry. It is in these interstitial zones that we would see the rise of proxy wars, hybrid warfare tactics including cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns, and constant, destabilizing power struggles, as the great powers seek to protect their core territories and test their rivals' resolve without triggering a direct, and potentially catastrophic, great power war (Charap & Colton, 2023). This bleak environment is what John Mearsheimer (2014) might describe as the logical and inevitable result of offensive realism in a bipolar or multipolar world, but heightened to an extreme by the complete absence of economic or institutional safety nets that once moderated competition and encouraged de-escalation.

DISCUSSION

The New Security Dilemma: The Logic of Deterrence and the Challenge of Persistence

In this starkly reconfigured system, the traditional security dilemma—where one state's attempts to enhance its security inevitably undermine others'—would escalate significantly, becoming the dominant, unavoidable force in international politics. National security would be interpreted in the most fundamental terms: solely in terms of military deterrence and complete territorial defense. The arms races of the 21st century would persist, but their nature would fundamentally change. National investments would overwhelmingly focus on developing and sustaining fully self-reliant military systems: strategic nuclear forces as the ultimate safeguard of sovereignty; advanced cyber warfare capabilities for disruption, espionage, and attacks on infrastructure; and space-based assets for secure communication, surveillance, and navigation (Acton, 2023).

However, this relentless pursuit of autarkic military power reveals a profound internal contradiction: maintaining a cutting-edge, technologically advanced military-industrial complex is perhaps the greatest challenge for a closed state. Modern weapon systems—ranging from fifth-generation fighter jets and stealth bombers to global positioning satellite networks and integrated air defense systems—are themselves the products of highly globalized supply chains. They depend on rare earth elements and critical minerals from specific regions, often geographically concentrated, advanced microelectronics from specialized manufacturing hubs in East Asia, and complex software ecosystems developed by

international teams of engineers (Gholz, 2022). A country like the United States or China would be compelled to onshore, replicate, or painfully substitute the entire technological and industrial ecosystem necessary for its military dominance—a task of immense economic cost and technical difficulty. The inability to access even a single unique component from a now-inaccessible country could ground an entire air force, turn off a missile defense system, or render a fleet of warships inoperable. This inherent vulnerability would likely lead to significant divergence in military technology across different spheres of influence, with each bloc developing incompatible, asymmetrical, and opaque capabilities, thereby increasing uncertainty and the risk of catastrophic miscalculation during a crisis.

Furthermore, the fundamental nature of conflict and its assessment would alter. Without the dense network of economic connections that significantly raise the costs of war and without reliable support from allies to share military and economic risks, national security calculations might become schizophrenic—not only more cautious but also more reckless. They would become more cautious about direct, great-power conflict, as any such war would threaten national survival with no external aid or resource resupply. Conversely, they could be more reckless on the peripheries, where stakes seem lower and traditional tools of economic statecraft are no longer available. The idea of limited war introduced by Robert (1957) might still exist in theory, but managing such conflicts would be far more dangerous and unstable without the communication channels, shared economic interests, and third-party mediation that complex interdependence historically provided (Allison, 2023). In this scenario, peace would not be the default state to be actively maintained, but rather a fragile, temporary truce, always at risk of spiraling into the following security dilemma.

The macro-level shifts in power, economics, and security under a model of radical autarky trigger an equally profound transformation at the micro-level of human existence. The move back to rigid, competing blocs requires a fundamental redefinition of the relationship between the individual and the state, where the idea of the citizen-soldier is replaced by that of the subject-consumer, whose primary civic duty is survival and whose rights depend on their usefulness to the bloc's survival. This internal reordering marks the logical end point of a world in which global interdependence has broken down, forcing a retreat into hyper-localized, often authoritarian identities and systems of control.

The immediate casualty is the normative framework of universal human rights. In a system defined by neo-spheres of influence, the philosophical foundation for rights—based on a shared humanity—disintegrates, replaced by bloc-dependent privileges. As the political philosopher John Gray asserts, projects of universal liberalism are inherently linked to conditions of expanding globalization and progress (Gray, 2007). In their absence, a form of value-pluralism hardens not into peaceful coexistence but into mutually hostile camps. The individual's right to free expression, assembly, or movement is no longer inalienable. Instead, it is granted or revoked by the bloc's authority in accordance with its perceived needs for stability and security. This creates a society reminiscent of Foucault's concept of biopower, where the state's primary role is to foster life or disallow it to the point of death (Foucault,

1978), managing the population as a biological resource to be optimized and controlled for the bloc's strength.

To enforce this control and address the inherent scarcity described in the New Security Dilemma, the autarkic state inevitably becomes a garrison state. Sociologist Harold Lasswell first introduced this concept as a political system entirely mobilized for perpetual conflict, where specialists in violence—the military and security apparatus—become the dominant ruling class (Lasswell, 1941). In this context, the precarious nature of peace requires the militarization of civil society. Dissent is not merely suppressed as political opposition; it is framed as sedition and a direct threat to collective survival—a dangerous leak of resources and morale in an existential struggle. The internal surveillance apparatus would expand exponentially, tasked not only with rooting out political disloyalty but also with enforcing rationing, preventing illicit knowledge transfer, and suppressing any social unrest arising from the stagnation of progress.

This control firmly extends into the realm of epistemology. In a closed system knowledge economy, information becomes the most vital and perilous commodity. The state must therefore serve as the principal architect of reality for its citizens, a phenomenon thoroughly examined in studies of totalitarianism. Hannah Arendt identified the isolation of individuals from the external world and the substitution of empirical reality with a consistent, state-produced fiction as a fundamental pillar of totalitarian rule (Arendt, 1951). In this neo-autarkic world, this manifests as a systematic effort to disconnect the population from any shared, global frame of reference. History is rewritten to glorify the bloc's isolated trajectory and to vilify the other. Scientific research is tightly regulated, with findings that challenge the state's narrative or expose internal weaknesses being classified or suppressed. The free exchange of information that once characterized the digital age is replaced by a network of enclosed, national intranets, creating what Evgeny Morozov (2011) describes as a form of "technological authoritarianism," where tools that could facilitate connection are instead refined for control and propaganda.

Finally, individual identity itself becomes distorted by this new paradigm. The cosmopolitan ideal—the sense of belonging to a global human community—becomes not just outdated but also treacherous. Identity is reduced and hardened into a hyper-local, oppositional loyalty defined entirely by the bloc. Sociologist Manuel Castells' framework of legitimizing identities—those created by dominant institutions to extend their control—becomes the only acceptable model (Castells, 1997). The state actively fosters a bunker mentality, in which the individual's sense of purpose and self-worth stems from their role in the collective fight against external threats and internal decay. The richness of global culture is replaced by state-sponsored, homogenized nationalism. In this world, the human spirit, once expanded by the horizons of global interconnectedness, is compelled to contract, with its ambitions confined within the walls of the bloc and its energies directed solely towards the grim necessity of survival.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this autarkic vision does not result in a simpler or more sovereign world. Instead, it creates a fragile system that replaces the chaotic interdependence with stuck complexity. This is not a fresh start but a broken reality marked by environmental decline, technological stagnation, and peace maintained only through mutual vulnerability. Examining this counterfactual reveals a harsh lesson: our current interdependent system, despite its challenges, is far more resilient and makes progress than the fractured alternative of complete self-reliance. The analysis shows that autarky replaces complex diplomacy with a dangerous, immobilized standoff between fortified blocs. It suppresses global innovation and cultural exchange, fostering inward-looking, stagnating national systems. Shared resource management collapses, worsening the tragedy of the commons. The clear trade-offs are: absolute sovereignty risks systemic instability; total self-support hampers progress; and isolation weakens our shared humanity. This will turn the world into one of imprisoned civilizations, trading one set of serious problems for a more dangerous one.

This exercise tests core IR theories, revealing that a realistic world of pure self-reliance causes conflict and stagnation rather than security. It shows that liberal constraints, representing global networks of trade and knowledge, are illogically necessary for state prosperity and safety. These interdependent systems, as Keohane and Nye (1977) noted, make aggression costly and cooperation beneficial. For constructivists, it highlights the importance of sharing norms, which are vital for political development. Thus, despite its flaws, interdependence remains an essential driver of innovation, a check on power, and the basis of the modern universal order. Ultimately, this analysis advocates viewing our complex, interconnected world as a system to be managed, not a problem to be solved. While connectivity involves risks such as supply disruptions, it is the proven engine of poverty reduction, innovation, and enduring peace. Therefore, we should see geopolitical struggles as signs of a dynamic, valuable system rather than its failure. Realistic 21st-century power no longer means unchecked autonomy, but the wisdom to navigate inescapable global ties. The key lesson is that our opportunities are interconnected; our biggest challenges and successes require collective, insightful interdependence rather than isolation.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Dr. Vérène Niyomana: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Visualization.

Patrick Mushitsi: Validation, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors are grateful to the anonymous reviewers and the editor for their invaluable suggestions and constructive comments, which significantly improved the quality of this manuscript.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing does not apply to this article as the research is purely theoretical and does not involve empirical data collection.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This research received no external funding.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

REFERENCES

Acton, J. M. (2023). *Escalation and Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Adler, E., & Barnett, M. (Eds.). (1998). *Security Communities*. Cambridge University Press.

Allison, G. (2017). *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Allison, G. (2020). The New Spheres of Influence. *Foreign Affairs*. Link

Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso.

Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation*. University of Minnesota Press.

Barber, B. R. (1995). *Jihad vs. McWorld*. Times Books.

Beck, U. (2008). World at risk. *Development and Society*, *37*(1), 1–21.

Benedick, R. E. (1998). *Ozone Diplomacy: New Directions in Safeguarding the Planet*. Harvard University Press.

Biermann, F. (2014). *Earth System Governance: World Politics in the Anthropocene*. MIT Press.

Borrelle, S. B., Ringma, J., Law, K. L., Monnahan, C. C., Lebreton, L., McGivern, A., Murphy, E., Jambeck, J., Leonard, G. H., Hilleary, M. A., Eriksen, M., Possingham, H. P., De Frond, H., Gerber, L. R., Polidoro, B., Tahir, A., Bernard, M., Mallos, N., Barnes, M., & Rochman, C. M. (2020). Predicted growth in plastic waste exceeds efforts to mitigate plastic pollution. *Science, 369*(6510), 1515–1518. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aba3656

Canan, P., Reichman, N. (2017). *Ozone Connections: Expert Networks in Global Environmental Governance*. Routledge.

Charap, S., & Colton, T. J. (2017). *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia*. Routledge.

Chomsky, Noam. (2006). *Failed states: the abuse of power and the assault on democracy.* New York : Metropolitan Books

Collins, F. S., Morgan, M., & Patrinos, A. (2003). The Human Genome Project: lessons from large-scale biology. *Science (New York, N.Y.)*, *300*(5617), 286–290. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1084564

Daniel W. Drezner, Sanctions Sometimes Smart: Targeted Sanctions in Theory and Practice, *International Studies Review*, Volume 13, Issue 1, March 2011, Pages 96–108, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2486.2010.01001.x

Dauvergne, P. (2016). *Environmentalism of the Rich*. MIT Press.

Evgeny, M. (2011). *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*. New York: PublicAffairs.

Falkner, R. (2016). *The Paris Agreement and the new logic of international climate politics*. International Affairs, 92(5), 1107-1125.

Fearon, J. D. (1991). *Counterfactuals and Hypothesis Testing in Political Science*. World Politics, *43*(2), 169–195.

Ferguson, N. (2011). *Civilisation: The West and the Rest*. The Penguin Press.

George, A. L., & Bennett, A. (2005). *Case studies and theory development in the social sciences*. MIT Press.

Gerring, J. (2012). *Social science methodology: A unified framework* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Gholz, E. (2022). *The Defense Industrial Base: A Primer*. In The Oxford Handbook of International Security.

Gilpin, R. (1981). *War and Change in World Politics*. Cambridge University Press.

Goldstein, J. L., Rivers, D., & Tomz, M. (2007). Institutions in international relations: Understanding the effects of the GATT and the WTO on world trade. *International Organization, 61*(1), 37–67. https://doi:10.1017/S0020818307070014

Grieco, J. M. (1988). Anarchy and the limits of cooperation: a realist critique of the newest liberal institutionalism. *International Organization*, *42*(3), 485–507. https://doi:10.1017/S0020818300027715

Hardin, G. (1968). The Tragedy of the Commons. *Science*, *162*(3859), 1243–1248. https://DOI: 10.1126/science.162.3859.1243

Ikenberry, G. J. (2018). The End of the Liberal International Order? *International Affairs*, *94*(1), 7–23. https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix241

Jackson, P. T. (2011). *The conduct of inquiry in international relations: Philosophy of science and its implications for the study of world politics*. Routledge.

Jasanoff, S. (2004). *States of Knowledge: The Co-Production of Science and Social Order*. Routledge. Keck, M. E., & Sikkink, K. (1998). *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Cornell University Press.

Keohane, R. O. (1984). *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton University Press.

Keohane, R. O., & Nye, J. S. (1977). *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition*. Little, Brown.

Kirshner, J. (1995). Currency and Coercion: The Political Economy of International Monetary Power. Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv173f2mk

Kissinger, H. (2014). *World Order*. Penguin Press. Lakatos, I. (1978). *The methodology of scientific research programmes*. Cambridge UniversityPress.

Levy, J. S. (2015). Counterfactuals, Causal Inference, and Historical Analysis. *Security Studies*, *24*(3), 378–402. https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2015.1070602

Logsdon, J. M. (2019). *Ronald Reagan and the Space Frontier*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Mackinder, H. J. (1904). The Geographical Pivot of History. The Geographical Journal, 23(4), 421–437. https://doi.org/10.2307/1775498.

Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001). *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. W.W. Norton & Company.

Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014). *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (Updated Edition). W.W. Norton & Company.

Merton, R. K. (1965). *On the Shoulders of Giants: A Shandean Postscript*. The Free Press.

Modelski, G. (1987). *Long Cycles in World Politics*. University of Washington Press.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). (1949). *The North Atlantic Treaty*. Washington, D.C.: NATO. Article 5.

Pinker, S. (2011). *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. Viking.

Popper, K. (1945). *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Routledge.

Ricardo, D. (1817). *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*. John Murray.

Robert E. Osgood (1957). *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Rodrik, D. (2011). *The Globalization Paradox: Democracy and the Future of the World Economy*. W.W. Norton.

Romer, P. M. (1990). Endogenous Technological Change. *Journal of Political Economy*, *98*(5), S71–S102.

Rosecrance, R. (1987). *The Rise of the Trading State: Commerce and Conquest in the Modern World*. Basic Books.

Rynning, S. (2022). *NATO: From Cold War to Ukraine, a history of the world's most powerful alliance*. Yale University Press.

Shapiro, J. (2022). *The Illusion of Geopolitics: The Enduring Power of the Global Supply Chain*. Foreign Affairs.

Steffen, W., Richardson, K., Rockström, J., Cornell, S. E., Fetzer, I., Bennett, E. M., Biggs, R., Carpenter, S. R., de Vries, W., de Wit, C. A., Folke, C., Gerten, D., Heinke, J., Mace, G. M., Persson, L. M., Ramanathan, V., Reyers, B., & Sörlin, S. (2015). Planetary boundaries: Guiding human development on a changing planet. *Science, 347*(6223), 1259855. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1259855

Strange, S. (1988). *States and Markets*. Pinter Publishers.

Tetlock, P. E., & Lebow, R. N. (2001). Poking Counterfactual Holes in Covering Laws: Cognitive Styles and Historical Reasoning. *American Political Science Review*, *95*(4), 829–843. https://doi:10.1017/S0003055400400043

Vernon, R. (1971). *Sovereignty at Bay: The Multinational Spread of US Enterprises*. Basic Books.

Walt, S. M. (1992). Revolution and War. *World Politics*, *44*(3), 321–368. https://doi:10.2307/2010542

Walt, S. M. (2009). Alliances in a Unipolar World. *World Politics*, *61*(1), 86–120. https://doi:10.1017/S0043887109000045

Walt, S. M. (2023). The End of the American Era. *Foreign Policy*.

Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of International Politics*. McGraw-Hill.

Wendt, A. (1999). *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge University Press.

Wolfers, A. (1951). The Pole of Power and the Pole of Indifference. *World Politics*, 4(1), 39–63. https://doi.org/10.2307/2008900

Ziman, J. M. (1968). *Public Knowledge: An Essay Concerning the Social Dimension of Science*. Cambridge University Press.

Zittrain, J. (2008). *The Future of the Internet—And How to Stop It*. Yale University Press.