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ศีลธรรมแบบเลือกปฏิบัติและความชอบธรรมแบบหลายขั้ว: เศรษฐศาสตร์การเมืองเชิงพฤติกรรมว่าด้วยความไว้วางใจ อธิปไตย และความมั่นคงนอกเหนือระเบียบเสรีนิยมที่นำโดยตะวันตก

Selective Moralism and Multipolar Legitimacy: A Behavioural Political Economy of Trust, Sovereignty, and Security Beyond the Western-Led Liberal Order

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มุ่งสร้างทฤษฎีว่าด้วยการโต้แย้งระเบียบระหว่างประเทศ ผ่านมุมมองเศรษฐศาสตร์การเมืองเชิงพฤติกรรมในมิติของความไว้วางใจอธิปไตยความมั่นคง และความชอบธรรมทางศีลธรรมในยุคหลายขั้วอำนาจ บทความนี้มีความเห็นที่ต่างออกไปจากกลุ่มนักสัจนิยมตะวันตกหรือกลุ่มผู้นิยมการถ่วงดุลอำนาจจากภายนอกที่มักตีความว่าความท้าทายต่อระเบียบระหว่างประเทศคือ การปฏิเสธบรรทัดฐานสากลโดยรัฐที่ไม่ใช่ตะวันตกแต่บทความนี้ชี้ให้เห็นว่า รัฐที่ไม่ใช่ตะวันตกกำลังโต้แย้งสิ่งที่พวกเขาตระหนักว่าเป็นความย้อนแย้งของตะวันตกในการเลือกบังคับใช้บรรทัดฐานทางศีลธรรมที่อ้างว่าเป็นสากลโดยกลุ่มอำนาจเสรีนิยม บทความนี้ใช้วิธีการสังเคราะห์แนวคิดและวิพากษ์วรรณกรรมงานวิจัยด้านความชอบธรรม และความไว้วางใจบรรทัดฐานระหว่างประเทศและวัฒนธรรมระเบียบโลกเสรีนิยมทฤษฎีความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างประเทศเชิงวิพากษ์ และภาวะหลายขั้วอำนาจในเชิงมโนทัศน์บทความนี้พิจารณาความชอบธรรมในฐานะสินทรัพย์เชิงพฤติกรรมและเชิงความสัมพันธ์ซึ่งตั้งอยู่บนพื้นฐานของการรับรู้ถึงความคงเส้นคงวาความเป็นธรรมในเชิงกระบวนการการยับยั้งชั่งใจ และการต่างตอบแทนในการตรวจสอบบทความนี้ได้นำเสนอ"แบบจำลองการโต้แย้งความชอบธรรมเชิงพฤติกรรม" (Behavioural Legitimacy Contestation Model)ซึ่งเชื่อมโยงการรับรู้เรื่องความไม่สอดคล้องทางศีลธรรมเข้ากับการเสื่อมถอยของความไว้วางใจ การโต้แย้งความชอบธรรมการอ้างสิทธิ์ในอธิปไตยทางเลือกและวาทกรรมความมั่นคงในโลกหลายขั้วอำนาจแบบจำลองนี้ยังอธิบายว่าเหตุใดการอ้างสิทธิ์ด้านอธิปไตย การไม่แทรกแซง เอกราชทางอารยธรรม และความมั่นคงยังคงสามารถดึงดูดแนวร่วมได้แม้ว่ารัฐที่สนับสนุนประเด็นเหล่านี้อาจมีความบกพร่องทางศีลธรรมในตัวเองก็ตามบทความนี้โต้แย้งว่าวิกฤตของระเบียบเสรีนิยมที่นำโดยตะวันตกไม่ได้เป็นเพียงวิกฤตของการเปลี่ยนผ่านอำนาจหรือความเสื่อมถอยของ

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สถาบันเท่านั้น แต่ยังเป็นวิกฤตของความน่าเชื่อถือทางศีลธรรม สำหรับรัฐมหาอำนาจระดับกลางและสังคมในเอเชียนัยสำคัญเชิงพฤติกรรมคือทางออกไม่ใช่การแทนที่การผูกขาดการอ้างสิทธิ์ทางศีลธรรมหนึ่งด้วยอีกสถาบันหนึ่งแต่คือการทำให้การอ้างสิทธิ์แห่งอำนาจทั้งหมดอยู่ภายใต้เกณฑ์มาตรฐานเดียวกัน ทั้งในด้านความคงเส้นคงวา การยับยั้งชั่งใจ ความรับผิดชอบ และผลกระทบต่อสังคม

คำสำคัญ: ความชอบธรรม,ความมั่นคง,ความไว้วางใจ,ระเบียบหลายขั้ว,เศรษฐศาสตร์การเมืองเชิงพฤติกรรม

Abstract

This article theorizes contestation over international order in behavioural political economy terms of trust, sovereignty, security, and moral legitimacy in a multipolar age. Unlike Western Realists or Offshore Balancers who interpret challenges to international order as outright rejection of international norms by non-Western states, this article posits that non-Western states are contesting perceived Western hypocrisy in the selective enforcement of purportedly universal moral norms by liberal powers. The article advances conceptual synthesis and literature critique of research on legitimacy and trust, international norms and culture, liberal international order, Global International Relations scholarship and multipolarity. Conceptually, the article approaches legitimacy as a behavioural and relational asset predicated on perceptions of consistency, procedural fairness, restraint and reciprocity in scrutiny. Findings: The article conceptualizes the Behavioural Legitimacy Contestation Model. The model dynamically connects perceived moral inconsistency with trust erosion, legitimacy contestation, sovereignty alternative claiming and multipolar security narratives. The model also suggests why sovereignty, non-intervention, civilizational independence and security appeals can still garner constituencies even when the states championing those causes may themselves be morally contestable. This article argues that the crisis of Western-led liberal order is not only a crisis of power transition or institutional sclerosis; it is also crisis of moral credibility. For Asian middle powers and societies, the behavioural implication is that the solution is not to replace one monopoly of moral claim with another, but to hold all claims of power to the same criteria of consistency, restraint, accountability and social consequence. The argument has practical relevance for regional social science and policy analysis.

Keywords: Behavioural political economy, Legitimacy, Multipolarity, Security, Trust

I. Introduction

Characterizations of the emerging international order as multipolar, fragmented, or post-Western are apt. But they risk remaining overly material. They point to economic rebalancing, the military ascendance of rising powers, BRICS-plus platforms, or diplomacy's Western declinism. But the transformation runs deeper than that: behavioural and moral. Order at the international level depends

not simply on force, markets, contracts, and institutions, but also on trust. Trust that rules are upheld with sufficient regularity to make cooperation worthwhile and credible.

Take as a starting point one obvious but underappreciated point: legitimacy is generated not by moral rhetoric alone. Moral rhetoric matters, but it matters most when supported by practicable consistency. International relations is filled with principled language that accrues power over others when those others believe it will be applied to them. Said differently, if the rhetoric of democracy and human rights, sovereign equality, humanitarianism, and rules-based order is enforced rigidly against adversaries but discounted when it benefits friends, then its ability to generate positive norms weakens. The erosion is not just diplomatic. It is behavioural: a change in how states, peoples, and institutions view authority itself.

Few criticisms of the liberal order have been trumpeted more effectively in recent years than this one. Non-Western governments have built entire constituencies—and political narratives—around the gap between principled language and inconsistent practice. To be sure, these governments do not constitute a moral bloc. Russia and China, Iran and the governments of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa all have their own ideological preferences, institutional features, strategic habits, and domestic sources of legitimacy. Collapsing these narratives into one another would be a mistake. But they often make the same arguments. Calls for Westphalian sovereignty. Insistence on non-interference. Appeals to historical victimhood. Defenses of security autonomy. Emphasis on civilizational respect. Resistance to any external moral hierarchy.

Such claims have at times been rightful. They have also been selectively used, strategic, and coercive. If a rising power can rightly call out Western hypocrisy in one domain, it can just as easily participate in double standards of its own. Highlighting this fact is not the same as taking sides. The challenge for students of world order is not determining which side has a greater claim to morality. The challenge is understanding how perceptions of these double standards are operationalized into political capital and translated into real-world trust, mistrust, legitimacy, and security narratives.

With this in mind, the article attempts to answer two questions: How does perceived “selective moralism” influence trust and legitimacy in the international order? And how do non-Western states translate that perception into alternative sovereignty and security claims? The goal is not to validate the positions of non-Western states on every issue. Neither is it to defend every liberal principle in the face of authoritarian challenge. Instead, the goal is to understand how such contestation becomes possible. This article takes the form of a conceptual article rather than an empirical investigation. It reviews the literature on trust, legitimacy, norms, liberal order, and Global International Relations (IR) theory. Then, it develops a conceptual model for future empirical work. This model—which I term the Behavioural Legitimacy Contestation Model—unpacks how perceptions of liberal moral inconsistency lead to (1) trust erosion, which enables (2) legitimacy contestation, which in turn encourages (3) alternative sovereignty and security narratives in the international system.

II. Content

II.I Conceptual foundations: trust, legitimacy, sovereignty, and security

Trust is one of those variables often treated as peripheral to international politics when, in reality, it is foundational to how any order claiming to be rule-based operates. Coercion can produce order for a time, but sheer power is the negation of legitimacy. For an order to be legitimate, actors must have some reason to trust that institutions and norms are not just tools of domination. Trust is not friendship. It is, rather, a set of expectations that others will act in predictably and restrained ways even when conditions are unfavorable. Without trust, rules are seen as tactics not obligations (Hardin, 2002; Kydd, 2005).

Legitimacy suffers from a similar myopia. Suchman (1995) defines legitimacy as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions.” The strength of this definition is that it understands legitimacy as something broader than legal formality. One can have the law on one's side and still suffer from legitimacy deficits if relevant audiences believe one's actions to be hypocriticalal or self-interested. Buchanan and Keohane (2006) suggest something similar with regards to global governance institutions: to be legitimate they must have public standards by which principled criticism and reform are possible even if people disagree about what justice requires. Sovereignty both anchors and reveals these differences in international relations. Legally, sovereignty is technical, but in practice it functions as a moral language.

For Western liberal internationalism, sovereignty has been made conditional in all but name. States should respect human rights. They should uphold democratic norms. They should assume responsibility to protect their populations. For many non-Western states, sovereignty is framed defensively as protection from domination, intervention, hierarchy, and externally imposed ideas about good governance. Neither view is neutral. Both imbue political authority with moral meaning. This conflict is therefore behavioural as well. Actors judge one another’s actions against these meanings to decide whether sovereignty is being upheld, violated, or suspended for the interests of power. The same can be said for security. Where classical security was about territorial defence and survival, contemporary security covers humanitarian protection, regime security, economic security, identity, technological autonomy, and societal security. As security language grows to incorporate new issues, it becomes more susceptible to moralistic rhetoric. States can now justify intervention not just on national interest, but on the grounds that they are protecting civilians, combating terrorism, defending civilization, preserving sovereignty, or maintaining international order. Expanding the language of security only increases doubt about intentions. If one state can argue that their security is at stake to justify action, so can everyone else.

At that point rivals will begin accusing one another of moral selectivity. International norms shape these debates. Finnemore and Sikkink’s (1998) classic study demonstrates that norms emerge, cascade, and become internalized through social interaction. The importance of this finding is that norms cannot be “activated” like a creditor calls in a favor. Successful norms require persuasion,

repeated demonstration, credibility, institutionalization, and receptive audiences. If those audiences believe norm entrepreneurs are applying rules and standards selectively, they will begin to devalue the norm itself. Moral authority is a scarce resource in politics. It can be built up with consistent behaviour and restraint, but overuse, hypocrisy, or selective enforcement can squander it. The liberal order married material power with moral authority. Liberal hegemony, as Ikenberry (2011) defines it, is rule-based but built around institutions, openness, and liberal ethics.

From a realist perspective, John Mearsheimer (2019) argues that the post-Cold War liberal order was unsustainable because it overreached, carried liberal expectations too far, and took nationalism, sovereignty, and power politics too lightly. Liberal idealism exposed faults at the heart of liberal hegemony. These are two very different books, but they leave us with the same problem: liberal order requires both power and legitimacy to function. When these things come into conflict, the order collapses into contestation.

II.II Selective moralism as a behavioural political economy problem

By selective moralism, I simply mean the perception of asymmetric morality in international politics. I do not mean to suggest that moral discourse is always hypocriticalal, nor do I mean to suggest that all great powers are equally guilty of all transgressions against whatever principles one cares to measure. Selective moralism means that whenever audiences see a discrepancy between universalist claims and particular applications, they suspect moralpolitik is being used to disguise strategic interests. Why is this politically consequential? As we know, legitimacy relies not just upon what institutions claim, it relies upon what audiences think about these claims.

This is why behavioural political economy offers an important corrective to mainstream scholarship—it concerns itself with perceptions, incentives, narratives, and trust. If political economy asks who gets what, when, and how, behavioural political economy also asks how actors perceive what is fair, what is risky, what is status, what is humiliation, what is recognition, and who is credible. States and publics react to perceived double standards. States and publics react to symbolic exclusion. States and publics react to threat narratives. States and publics react to status injuries. Kahneman's Thinking, Fast and Slow (2011) is not a theory of international relations. But it does teach us that how we frame decisions matters, and that perception can become a powerful driver of decision-making, even when information is unclear or contested. Nowhere is selective moralism more destructive than when attached to high-cost security decisions. Sanctions, wars of regime change, military deployments, surveillance; all of these policies come at some significant cost. Ideally, humanitarian intervention is supposed to be an exception to this rule. In practice, it is not.

The point is that if it appears that humanitarian intervention, or sanctions, or democracy promotion, or counterterrorism, or human rights pressure are applied to one's adversaries but not one's friends, then the moral argument does not entirely lose credibility but it starts losing credibility. When that happens, rival states can begin to make the case that the competition is not moral responsibility versus power politics, but rather inclusion versus hierarchy. They can then make the case that they are truly defending sovereign equality against liberal attempts to differentiate states based on Western-

defined values. Even when these countries might violate their own commitments to restraint or justice, they have shifted the behavioural context of the debate.

Audiences now question the motive of the original violator, not simply whether the violation occurred. You may still defeat the liberal argument on the merits, but you first must convince enough people that the liberal camp is not applying its own standards consistently. This is what “challenge narratives” from Russia and China often seek to do. They are less interested in persuading everyone that human rights don’t matter, the rule of law does not matter, or liberal values don’t matter. They know that would be a lost cause. Instead, they are primarily interested in changing how people interpret these values—who gets to define them, and whose authority is valid in enforcing them? To the extent they can inject doubt and suspicion about Western intentions, they do not need to win the argument over values. Instead they can shift the argument to the credibility of the actors who promote those values. There is a clear sequence to loss of trust.

First, inconsistent behaviour is perceived. Second, audiences revise their beliefs about the motive of the promoting state. Third, future “rules” are discounted as strategic. Fourth, audiences become more receptive to alternative counter-narratives that promote their own sovereignty, dignity, and freedom from hierarchy. Fifth, alternative counter-norms become institutionalized through media cooperation, education, diplomacy, regional organizations, defense partnerships, and so forth. To be clear, this does not mean that every domestic audience in the developing world begins reproducing propaganda from Russia and China. It just means that enough people begin to doubt the credibility of the existing liberal order that alternative explanations become more believable. Like I said earlier: legitimacy politics often works in the grey area between belief and suspicion. Let enough people suspect that their government is not applying its own principles, and over time you will diminish its ability to promote rules in the first place. Suspicions are harder to correct than false beliefs. And this is the behavioural consequence of so-called selective moralism. If the decline of the West cannot simply be explained by power transitions, then we should pay more attention to how Western institutions managed perceptions and trust. A country may have every material advantage it needs—hard military power, economic leverage, diplomatic ties, media reach, etc. But if the way it uses those tools causes people to question its credibility, its soft power begins to wither long before hard power erodes (Nye, 1990).

Empirically, this pattern is visible in recurring controversies over sanctions, humanitarian intervention, democracy promotion, and human-rights conditionality. Economic sanctions and arms embargoes, for example, are frequently presented as instruments of norm enforcement, yet their perceived legitimacy depends heavily on whether comparable violations by strategically important partners are examined with the same intensity as violations by adversaries (Erickson, 2020). When a state is punished publicly for breaching a norm while an allied or geopolitically useful state receives quieter diplomatic management for conduct viewed by external audiences as similar, the behavioural effect is not simply disagreement over policy. It is a revision of belief about the motives of the rule-enforcing actor. The audience begins to suspect that the rule is not a common obligation but a selective instrument of hierarchy.

The same logic operates in debates over humanitarian intervention and civilian protection. Liberal powers may invoke human rights, democracy, or the protection of civilians as universal

principles in one crisis, while describing civilian harm, repression, or emergency rule in allied contexts as unfortunate, complex, or strategically unavoidable. This does not prove that the underlying principles are invalid. Rather, it shows why legitimacy becomes fragile when moral language is attached to unequal scrutiny. As Finnemore (2009) argues in relation to unipolar legitimacy, hypocrisy is politically costly because powerful actors need social recognition as well as material capacity. More recent work on the hypocrisy charge similarly suggests that accusations of double standards have become central to contestation over the future of liberal international order (Lawson & Zarakol, 2023). In behavioural political economy terms, the crucial variable is therefore not only whether a norm has been violated, but whether the distribution of criticism, punishment, and restraint is perceived as reciprocal.

II.III Non-Western sovereignty and security claims in a multipolar world

These non-Western claims should not be viewed monolithically. Nor should they be conflated with anti-Western ideology. They are numerous, contingent, strategic, and often contradictory. But they do have something of a family resemblance. They often include critiques that the liberal order has used universalist language to sustain unequal power, that interventionist language has unsettled societies around the world, that sanctions can harm civilian populations along with regimes, and that models of domestic politics should not be imposed from outside. These critiques gain purchase because they bridge interests and identity, geopolitics and moral psychology. From Russia, we often hear security narratives of Western encirclement, civilizational competition with the West, and resistance to a NATO-centric order.

From China we often hear about sovereignty, economic development, non-interference, and civilizational pluralism. From Iran we often hear rhetoric about resistance to domination, regional self-management, and hypocrisy in the Western double standard towards the Middle East. States across Asia, Africa and the Middle East may not endorse each position fully, but often share similar doubts about the enforcement of liberal rules. It creates not a single anti-Western coalition but greater receptivity for multipolar claims about legitimacy. Part of why these claims become powerful is because they are stigmatizing. Zarakol's (2011) book demonstrates how many states that have found themselves on the wrong side of Western definitions of modernity have been socialized through status anxiety and unequal recognition. Adler-Nissen's (2014) study of stigma power similarly argues that order is constructed not only through attempts to stigmatize others, but also through the strategies of states that have been stigmatized. Both works offer insight into why Western dominance is often so emotionally resonant - and non-Western resentment so potent - in world politics. They are useful because they expand our understanding of interests. If interests include fear of humiliation, then morality matters. If standing is integral to state interests, then recognition and rank become integral to politics. The potency of non-Western claims depends on whether they can make good on their own universalist pretensions.

Non-Western states undermine their claims about sovereignty when they violate someone else's sovereignty, or make claims about security when they crack down on legitimate social movements. I think this point bears repeating. Critics of Western hypocrisy should not be permitted to excuse non-Western hypocrisy. Behavioural political economy applies a consistent lens to all centres

of power. The objective is not to identify which group of states is more morally legitimate. It is to understand how all states use moral arguments to generate trust, justify power, and manage legitimacy. This has particular salience for middle powers and societies in Asia. Southeast Asian governments have often found themselves harmed when great powers make international morality into a weapon. They want rules of international order, but also need room to conduct pragmatic diplomacy. They seek sovereignty, but also require security against violence and coercion. They want to maintain relations with Western organizations, but also need autonomy to avoid becoming someone else's client.

This is why the diplomatic practices we associate with ASEAN – informal, non-interference, consensus-oriented, pragmatic pluralism – have proven politically salient even as they often appear intolerably messy or ineffective to outsiders. For these reasons, I think the Thai situation and broader Southeast Asian experience can provide important insights for the question of legitimacy in world politics. Southeast Asia has historically had to maintain its own independent course among greater powers, without becoming wholly subservient to any one empire or singular moral premise. That is not to say the region avoids wrongdoing, or that power dynamics within the region have been fair or just. But it does suggest that questions of legitimacy often require managing multiple dependencies, exercising restraint against great powers, and applying a measure of contextual judgment. The impulse to frame international politics in binary oppositions – whether that is liberal universalism versus anti-Western sovereignty, democrats versus autocrats, freedom versus tyranny – often fails to capture the social experience of living in a middle power. To that end, Global International Relations makes a helpful intervention. Acharya's (2014) core argument is that IR should move past its narrow Western-centric focus to take seriously the regional worlds, local experiences, and agency of non-Western actors.

That does not mean universal rules have no place. But it does mean universalism claims become harder to make if one civilization or geopolitical bloc monopolizes their authoritative interpretation. Part of building a global social science is showing how people living in different historical experiences of colonialism, foreign intervention, economic development, and security dependency understand these concepts in different ways. In this regard, I like the concept of multipolar legitimacy more than simply multipolar power. Multipolar power refers to the distribution of material capabilities. Multipolar legitimacy refers to the distribution of moral authority. The world could become materially multipolar but maintain strong moral hierarchy. Or the world could become more morally plural, but retain major power imbalances. Today we are seeing both occur in different arenas simultaneously. Non-Western states challenge Western authority both by building material counter-sources of power, but also by disputing who gets to assign moral meaning to order.

II.IV Reciprocal credibility as a standard for social science and policy

Selective moralism works best when there is hypocrisy to attack. The most durable response to selective moralism is not counter-selectivity. It is reciprocal credibility. Reciprocal credibility means subjecting the moral claims of Western and non-Western actors to the same standards of analysis. This is not moral equivalence in the face of aggression, repression, or mass violence. To the contrary, it

simply requires that judgment be equal, evidence-driven, transparent, and mutually accountable. The first implication is conceptual clarity. Scholars and policymakers should ask three separate questions that are often posed as one. Is a given moral principle valid? Is it applied consistently by a given actor? Do rival actors exploit accusations of selectivity to serve their interests? All three questions are important. Yet each requires its own body of evidence. A moral principle can be valid even when applied selectively. An accusation of selectivity can be valid even when raised by a hypocriticalal actor. And an alternative claim of sovereignty can involve both legitimate grievance and strategic calculation.

The second implication is institutional self-reflection. Organizations that wield moral authority should view credibility as capital. When spent, it cannot be bought back with louder or more righteous proclamations. Restoring lost credibility requires observable consistency, procedural integrity, and a capacity for constructive self-criticism. International organizations and powerful states should think twice before asserting universal moral standards that they are unwilling to hold themselves to. Claiming selective immunity from criticism is one of the quickest ways to lose legitimacy.

The third implication is symmetrical criticism. Neither Western nor non-Western moral claims should be immune from criticism. Analysts should subject all arguments to the same basic questions. Does the claim promote human dignity? Does it limit or enable violence? Does it respect popular agency? Does it hold allies to the same standard as adversaries? Does it allow for accountability? Willingness to ask these questions of everyone does not mean every debate can be settled. But it does lower the likelihood that our scholarship will replicate great power preference.

The fourth implication is regional nuance. Just because a norm is universal does not mean it should be analyzed as ahistorical. Colonialism, foreign intervention, exploitative economics, and externally imposed regime change are facts of recent history throughout Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. Ignoring these memories does not make them disappear, and analysts who do often miss why sovereignty-first arguments remain rhetorically powerful. The goal should not be to defend sovereignty, but to understand why it commands such strong moral protections in many regions. The final implication is empirical exploration. Scholars could one day test this model by tracing speeches, media framing, roll call voting on diplomatic resolutions, debates over sanctions, public opinion, and regional security pronouncements for when accusations of selectivism rise and fall in political prominence. The framework below is designed to help make this possible.

III. Conclusion

This article has argued that contemporary contestation over international order is not only a struggle over material power. It is also a struggle over trust, moral credibility, sovereignty, and legitimacy. Non-Western states contest the Western-led liberal order not only because they seek power, but because they can mobilize a widespread perception that moral principles have been applied selectively. Whether these claims are always sincere is a separate question. The central point is that they become politically effective when they attach themselves to real or perceived inconsistencies in the existing order.

The behavioural political economy perspective developed here shows how selective moralism affects international politics through perception. When audiences perceive inconsistency, trust erodes.

When trust erodes, legitimacy becomes contestable. When legitimacy becomes contestable, alternative narratives of sovereignty and security become more persuasive. This sequence helps explain why multipolarity is not only a redistribution of capabilities, but also a redistribution of moral authority.

The article has also argued against replacing one moral hierarchy with another. A serious critique of Western selectivity must also examine non-Western selectivity. Sovereignty cannot be used as an unlimited shield against accountability, just as human rights cannot be used as a selective instrument of geopolitical pressure. The most defensible standard is not Western monopoly or non-Western reversal, but reciprocal consistency.

For social science, the implication is clear: legitimacy must be studied as a behavioural resource. It is produced through credible conduct, damaged through inconsistency, and contested through narratives that connect grievance, identity, and security. For policy, the implication is equally clear: international order will not be stabilized by moral language unless that language is believable to those outside the power centre that speaks it. In a multipolar world, moral authority must be earned under conditions of scrutiny. It can no longer simply be declared.

The limitation of this article is that it proposes a conceptual model rather than testing it through original field data. That limitation is also its purpose. The model offers a structured framework that future research can apply to speeches, media systems, public opinion, regional diplomacy, and security controversies. Its value lies in clarifying the mechanism through which moral inconsistency becomes a source of political power.

IV. New Knowledge

Table 1
Behavioural Legitimacy Contestation Model

Stage	Behavioural mechanism	Observable implication
1. Perceived moral inconsistency	Audiences observe a gap between universal principles and selective application.	Moral claims begin to lose credibility.
2. Trust erosion	Actors revise beliefs about the motives of rule-promoting states or institutions.	Rules are interpreted as strategic instruments rather than common obligations.
3. Legitimacy contestation	Rival actors challenge the authority of existing moral judges.	Alternative interpretations of order become plausible.
4. Alternative sovereignty claims	States frame sovereignty, non-interference, and civilizational autonomy as protective norms.	Audiences become more receptive to non-Western narratives.
5. Multipolar security narratives	Security is redefined as protection from domination, intervention, hierarchy, and dependency.	The struggle over order becomes a struggle over moral authority as well as power.

The model can be applied to different empirical cases. It can be used to study diplomatic discourses, media coverage, public opinion, debates over sanctions, controversies over humanitarian intervention, and regional security rhetoric. It also allows analysts to trace claims from Western and non-Western states with the same internal logic. The article therefore does not take a position on who gets to own morality, but explains the processes through which actors gain and lose credibility and translate it into politics. Applied to real-world questions, the model offers scholars and policymakers a

three-part test for future claims of moral authority: consistency, reciprocity, and consequence. Do critics apply this principle consistently among allies and adversaries? Are the claimants willing to submit themselves to the same analysis? Does the claim help to reduce human suffering, or simply offer a rhetorical cover for the powerful? The three tests allow scholars to apply the argument made here to future social science inquiries.

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