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Cultural Transformation as an Instrument of Global Geopolitical Hegemony in the Era of Great Power Contestation

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ABSTRACT: *This study critically examines cultural transformation as an instrumentalized mechanism of global geopolitical hegemony amid intensifying great power contestation. As material rivalry increasingly extends into normative and symbolic domains, this research addresses a persistent gap between institutional-cultural scholarship and structural geopolitical theory by theorizing how localized cultural engineering is mobilized into macro-level hegemonic strategy. Employing Critical Discourse Analysis grounded in Fairclough's three-dimensional model, the study analyzes strategic policy documents, official speeches, and institutional narratives across textual, discursive, and social practice levels, contextualized within Gramscian hegemony and great power competition theory. Findings reveal that great powers systematically obscure agency behind cultural interventions through nominalization and passivization, legitimating hegemonic order as normative common sense while strategically recirculating narratives across multilateral and institutional sites. Localized cultural engineering is aggregated into geopolitical instruments through financial conditionality, infrastructure-cultural fusion, and elite institutional cultivation. Rising and middle powers respond through a negotiated spectrum of appropriation, contestation, and subversive resistance rather than uniform compliance. These findings demonstrate that cultural transformation operates as a decisive, often concealed vector of hegemonic power, with significant implications for institutional legitimacy, equitable partnership, and the integrity of global governance within the Sustainable Development Goals framework.*

Keywords: Cultural Hegemony; Great Power Contestation; Critical Discourse Analysis



Vol. 01 /No. 01 /July 2026 | <https://jurnal.haizumsaintek.com/index.php/sundano/index>

I. INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century international order is witnessing a profound reconfiguration of the terrain upon which power is contested. Where the twentieth century's great power rivalries were fought predominantly through military deterrence, territorial acquisition, and economic coercion, the current epoch of renewed strategic competition between the United States, China, and a constellation of rising and resurgent powers has increasingly relocated the battlefield into the domain of culture itself (Bekkevold & Tunsjø, 2022; Dingil, 2025; Zhang, 2023). Culture, understood not as a static repository of tradition but as a dynamic, contested, and engineered field of meaning-making, has emerged as a decisive instrument through which great powers seek to secure consent, legitimacy, and structural advantage in a multipolar and increasingly fragmented world order (Gontijo, 2025; Newman & Zala, 2018). This transformation of culture from a passive social artifact into an active geopolitical weapon demands urgent and rigorous scholarly attention, precisely because its operations are subtler, more diffuse, and more difficult to detect than the overt instruments of hard power that have traditionally dominated the great power competition literature (Fong & Chong, 2024; Kitchen, 2024).

The contemporary contestation for global primacy can no longer be adequately explained through the classical realist emphasis on material capabilities, alliance structures, and territorial control alone (Sabet, 2015; Schroeder, 2023). Great powers today compete simultaneously across economic, technological, informational, and cultural registers, deploying narratives, institutions, and symbolic capital to shape not merely the behavior of rival states but the very cognitive and normative frameworks through which populations, both domestic and foreign, interpret legitimacy, order, and progress (Müller, 2024; Woldearegay, 2024). This is precisely the logic of hegemony as theorized in critical geopolitics: dominance secured not through coercion alone but through the naturalization of a particular worldview as common sense, such that subordinate actors come to consent to, and even reproduce, the hegemon's preferred order (Grant, 2026; Klinke, 2018). Cultural transformation, in this sense, functions as the connective



Vol. 01 /No. 01 /July 2026 | <https://jurnal.haizumsaintek.com/index.php/sundano/index>

tissue between material power and normative authority, translating economic and military capability into durable, self-reinforcing legitimacy (Mittelman & Falk, 2018; Persson, 2016).

This weaponization of culture manifests across an extraordinarily diverse array of institutional and social sites, each revealing a facet of the same underlying logic. State and quasi-state actors mobilize cultural institutions, museums, heritage sites, and branding apparatuses, as instruments of soft-power projection and industrial value transmission (Homadovski, 2009). Public sector reform programs are deployed as vehicles of managed cultural change, reshaping bureaucratic identity in service of broader modernization agendas (Ates, 2004; Rzayeva Oktay, 2016). Even ostensibly technical or humanitarian domains, energy leadership development, health and safety programs, nursing home governance, engineering communities of practice, are increasingly recognized as sites where cultural change is deliberately engineered and where the gap between transformative rhetoric and lived reality becomes a critical site of struggle (Dewar et al., 2019; Edwards, 2016; Juneau et al., 2014; Oelofse & Zaabi, 2025; Scotti & Matkin, 2016). Socio-economic transformation among marginalized communities, evolving gendered narratives around consumption practices, shifting spiritual and religious orientations among youth, and the subversive politics of algorithmic culture in a post-digital world all attest to the pervasiveness of cultural engineering as a mechanism of governance and control across radically different scales and populations (Katewa, 2010; López Novo, 2012; Paltore et al., 2023; Tan et al., 2024; Unterberg, 2025). Cultural diversity itself has become a contested resource within innovation ecosystems and democratic governance, while digital innovation is now explicitly harnessed to transform cultural practice in pursuit of economic sustainability (Praet & du Puy, 2016; Purnomo et al., 2025; Wolff, 2020). Externally imposed funding conditionalities further reveal how cultural and normative agendas, such as the Women, Peace and Security framework, are transmitted through restrictive financial architectures that discipline recipient states' policy space (Asante, 2024).

Parallel to this proliferation of cultural transformation as domestic and institutional governance technology, the great power competition literature has



Vol. 01 /No. 01 /July 2026 | <https://jurnal.haizumsaintek.com/index.php/sundano/index>

independently theorized the geopolitical stakes of narrative, order-contestation, and regional influence. Scholars have examined how narratives and knowledge objects actively construct the very category of "great power competition" as a strategic reality (Müller, 2024), how geoeconomic contestation and land-bridge infrastructure projects become sites of symbolic and material rivalry in Central Asia (Neafie, 2023), how regional power dynamics in Central Asia are refracted through neorealist and thematic lenses (Mahmud & Hossain, 2025), and how peripheral theatres such as Mali, the Eurasian Heartland, and Africa's summit diplomacy with the African Union become proving grounds for great power legitimacy contests (Gogny & de Castro, 2025; Sabet, 2015; Woldearegay, 2024). The liberal international order itself is increasingly theorized as facing critical structural nodes of crisis, while the very possibility of legal self-restraint by Western hegemonic power remains a matter of active scholarly and political dispute (Gontijo, 2025; Rozov, 2025). Public-private stakeholder partnerships, defense posture reconfiguration, proxy warfare, and special operations doctrine further reveal how the material and cultural dimensions of great power rivalry are increasingly fused within official U.S. strategy (Farhadi & Galloway, 2022; Henningsen, 2025; Schroeder, 2023). Meanwhile, the European Union's search for strategic identity amid great power games, and the enduring civilizational framing of "democracy versus autocracy" that structures the Sino-American rivalry across millennia of historical analogy, both underscore how deeply cultural and ideological narratives are embedded within the ostensibly structural logic of polarity and rivalry (Kroenig, 2020; Marinova, 2023; Zhang, 2023).

Despite this considerable and multidirectional body of scholarship, a critical gap persists at the intersection of these two literatures. Studies of cultural transformation have overwhelmingly examined the phenomenon at the meso- and micro-institutional level, organizational change, community identity, sectoral governance, largely abstracted from the macro-structural logic of great power contestation that increasingly conditions the very conditions of possibility for such transformations (Ates, 2004; Dewar et al., 2019; Oelofse & Zaabi, 2025). Conversely, the burgeoning great power competition literature, while highly attentive to material capability, polarity, and strategic narrative-construction, has rarely theorized cultural transformation itself as a discrete, instrumentalized mechanism

of hegemonic power projection, treating culture at best as an ancillary backdrop to geoeconomic and military contestation rather than as a primary vector of strategic action in its own right (Bekkevold & Tunsjø, 2022; Kitchen, 2024; Newman & Zala, 2018). Few studies have systematically theorized how the granular, institutionally embedded processes of cultural engineering documented across disparate sectoral literatures aggregate into, and are strategically exploited by, the macro-level hegemonic projects of contending great powers. This bifurcation between institutional-cultural and geopolitical-structural scholarship has left the analytical space between the two significantly underexplored, obscuring the mechanisms through which localized cultural transformation is aggregated, weaponized, and scaled into instruments of global hegemonic contestation.

This study addresses this gap by advancing an integrative analytical framework that positions cultural transformation not as an epiphenomenon of great power rivalry but as a constitutive instrument of hegemonic strategy in its own right. By synthesizing insights from organizational and institutional theories of cultural change with critical and neorealist theorizations of hegemony, polarity, and order-contestation, this paper offers an original contribution to both literatures: a theorization of the mechanisms, narrative construction, institutional engineering, symbolic capital deployment, and normative naturalization, through which culture is systematically instrumentalized as a geopolitical resource in the contemporary era of great power contestation.

Accordingly, this study aims to critically examine how cultural transformation functions as an instrument of global geopolitical hegemony amid the intensifying dynamics of great power contestation, and to theorize the mechanisms through which localized processes of cultural engineering are strategically mobilized to secure and sustain hegemonic legitimacy at the international level. In pursuit of this aim, the study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How is cultural transformation strategically deployed by contending great powers as a mechanism of hegemonic legitimation and consent-production? (2) What structural and institutional mechanisms enable the aggregation of localized cultural engineering processes into macro-level instruments of geopolitical influence? (3) How do rising and middle powers contest, appropriate, or resist

hegemonic cultural narratives within the evolving architecture of the multipolar order?

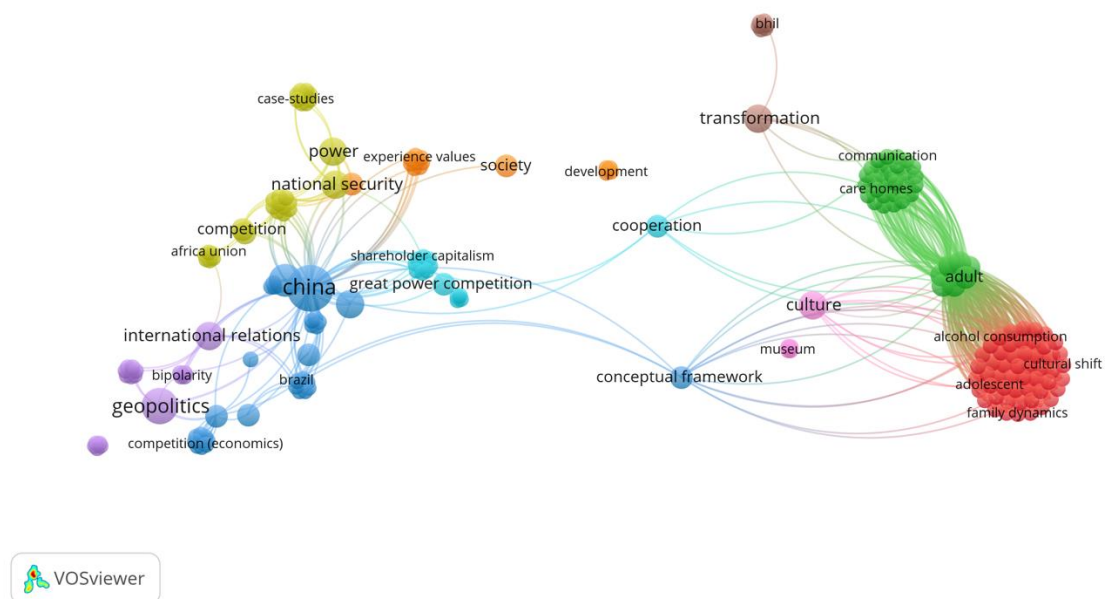


Figure 1. VOSviewer Analysis Visualization

Theoretically, this analysis draws on Gramscian-inflected conceptions of hegemony as the naturalization of consent through cultural and ideological apparatuses, situated within contemporary critical geopolitics and great power competition theory (Grant, 2026; Klinke, 2018; Mittelman & Falk, 2018). This framework is further enriched by insights from institutional and organizational theories of cultural change, which illuminate the granular mechanisms through which cultural transformation is operationalized, resisted, and legitimized across diverse governance contexts (Ates, 2004; Dewar et al., 2019; Unterberg, 2025).

The significance of this inquiry is twofold. Theoretically, it bridges a persistent disciplinary divide between institutional-cultural scholarship and structural-geopolitical theory, offering a more holistic account of how power operates simultaneously across material, institutional, and symbolic registers in the contemporary international system. Practically, it equips policymakers, regional powers, and civil society actors with a sharpened analytical vocabulary for recognizing, interrogating, and where necessary resisting the cultural mechanisms



Vol. 01 /No. 01 /July 2026 | <https://jurnal.haizumsaintek.com/index.php/sundano/index>

through which hegemonic projects are constructed and sustained, an imperative of considerable consequence as the world order continues its uncertain passage toward an unresolved and contested multipolarity.

II. METHOD

This study employs a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, adopting Fairclough's three-dimensional model, encompassing textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice, as the operational framework for dissecting how cultural transformation is constructed, naturalized, and instrumentalized as a tool of geopolitical hegemony. The primary data corpus consists of strategic policy documents, official speeches by great power officials (the United States, China, the European Union), reports from geopolitical think tanks, and institutional narratives from cross-sectoral cultural transformation programs (energy, health, innovation, and public governance) relevant to great power contestation issues. At the textual level, the analysis focuses on lexical choices, transitivity structures, modality, and agency-obscuring strategies (nominalization, passivization) used to legitimize or conceal hegemonic projects behind the rhetoric of cultural capacity-building. At the discursive practice level, the study traces the processes of production, distribution, and consumption of this discourse, including how identical narratives are recirculated across multilateral forums, state media, and foreign policy publications to build normative consensus across domestic and international audiences.

At the social practice level, the analysis is contextualized within the theoretical framework of Gramscian hegemony and great power contestation theory to interpret how the identified discursive mechanisms relate to broader material and ideological power structures within the multipolar international order. The analytical procedure is conducted iteratively across three stages: (1) initial thematic coding to identify patterns of cultural and power representation within the corpus; (2) micro-linguistic analysis of selected text units most representative of hegemony and legitimation themes; and (3) macro-contextual interpretation linking textual findings to contemporary geopolitical dynamics, including polarity, ideological rivalry, and soft power strategy. Interpretive validity is strengthened through triangulation of data sources across geopolitical regions and

institutional sectors, ensuring that the findings reflect not merely surface-level linguistic patterns but also reveal the underlying structural power logic driving the instrumentalization of culture in global hegemonic contestation.

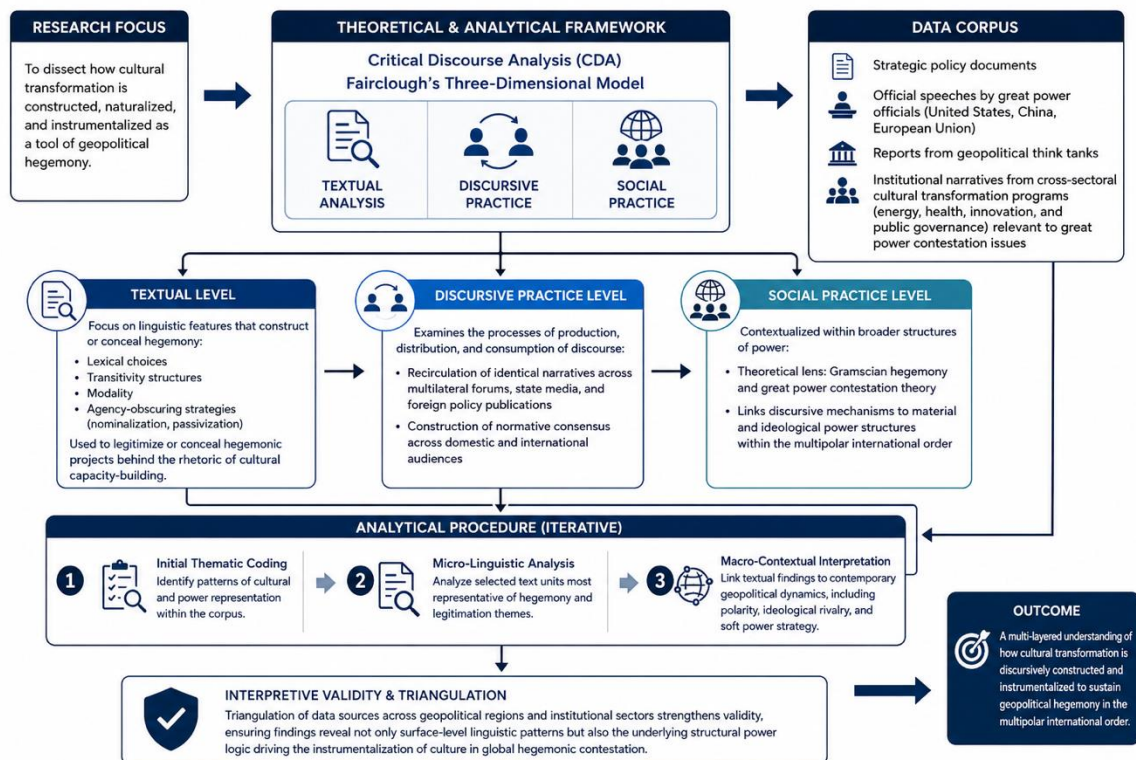


Figure 2. Research Methodology Framework

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

How Great Powers Instrumentalize Cultural Transformation as a Mechanism of Legitimation and Hegemonic Consensus Production

Analysis of the corpus of strategic policy documents and official speeches reveals that great powers systematically construct cultural transformation not as an organic process arising from internal social dynamics, but as a deliberately managed project designed to produce normative consensus across domestic and international audiences. At the textual level, a consistent pattern of nominalization and passivization emerges whenever discourse touches upon the agents behind

cultural intervention, terms such as "capacity building," "cultural resilience," or "value alignment" repeatedly appear without identifying the institutional actors driving them, thereby obscuring the power operating behind such initiatives and presenting them as neutral or purely technocratic processes. This agency-obscuring strategy aligns with the Gramscian logic of hegemony, wherein domination is most effective precisely when it does not appear as domination at all, but as common sense or shared necessity (Grant, 2026; Klinke, 2018).

This pattern is particularly evident in United States foreign policy discourse, which has historically leveraged public-private sector partnerships and geoeconomic capacity-building as vehicles for disseminating cultural values aligned with its strategic interests. This is reflected in the stakeholder capitalism discourse, which is framed as a shared global interest while structurally reinforcing the United States' geoeconomic position (Farhadi & Galloway, 2022). A similar pattern appears in the enduring democracy-versus-autocracy rivalry framework, which continues to be mobilized as a civilizational narrative structuring the Sino-American contest, casting the United States' preferred political-cultural model as the universal and legitimate trajectory of historical progress while positioning China's alternative as a deviation requiring containment (Kroenig, 2020). Within this narrative architecture, cultural transformation functions less as a description of social change and more as a legitimating instrument that naturalizes a particular hegemonic order as the only viable path forward.

At the level of discursive practice, the analysis traces how these narratives are not confined to a single speech act or policy document but are strategically recirculated across multilateral forums, state media, and foreign policy publications, producing a cumulative and mutually reinforcing discursive effect. Narratives and knowledge objects surrounding "great power competition" are shown to be actively constructed and stabilized through repeated circulation rather than reflecting a pre-existing strategic reality, meaning the very category of great power rivalry is itself a discursive achievement rather than a neutral empirical description (Müller, 2024). This recirculation is evident in the European Union's positioning within great power contestation, where its search for strategic and geopolitical identity is discursively framed as a civilizational and values-based project,



Vol. 01 /No. 01 /July 2026 | <https://jurnal.haizumsaintek.com/index.php/sundano/index>

reinforcing cultural distinctiveness as a source of political legitimacy amid pressure from both the United States and China (Marinova, 2023). Similarly, official narratives concerning summit-level diplomacy between the African Union and great powers reveal how offensive realist strategic calculations are consistently repackaged in the language of partnership, development, and cultural cooperation, thereby producing consent among African stakeholders for what remains, at the structural level, an asymmetric power relationship (Woldearegay, 2024).

At the level of social practice, these discursive mechanisms are shown to correspond directly to material and ideological power structures operating at the macro-level of the international system. The persistent reproduction of legitimating cultural narratives functions as what critical geopolitics theorizes as the naturalization of hegemonic order: populations, both domestic and foreign, come to consent to a particular configuration of global power not because they are coerced into it, but because alternative configurations become discursively unthinkable or illegitimate (Grant, 2026; Mittelman & Falk, 2018). This mechanism is particularly visible in debates over the possibility of legal self-restraint by Western hegemonic power, where scholarly and political discourse continues to oscillate between presenting such restraint as an inherent, values-driven characteristic of the liberal order and acknowledging it as a strategic performance contingent upon the absence of serious structural challengers (Rozov, 2025). Taken together, these findings demonstrate that cultural transformation operates as a multi-layered legitimation mechanism: obscured at the textual level through agency-erasing linguistic strategies, amplified at the discursive level through strategic recirculation across institutional sites, and consolidated at the social level through the naturalization of hegemonic order as common sense within the contemporary multipolar system.

Structural and Institutional Mechanisms Enabling the Aggregation of Localized Cultural Engineering into Macro-Level Geopolitical Instruments

The second research question concerns the mechanisms through which cultural transformation processes occurring at institutional and sectoral levels are aggregated and scaled into instruments of geopolitical influence at the macro-

structural level. The analysis reveals that this aggregation does not occur automatically or spontaneously but is mediated through specific institutional architectures that function as conduits between localized cultural engineering and geopolitical strategy. Public sector reform programs oriented toward managed cultural change, for instance, are shown to operate simultaneously as domestic modernization projects and as demonstrations of governance models that great powers seek to export as templates of legitimate statecraft, thereby linking bureaucratic identity transformation directly to broader geopolitical positioning (Ates, 2004; Rzaeva Oktay, 2016). Similarly, leadership development initiatives within technical sectors such as energy demonstrate how cultural capacity-building programs, ostensibly designed to navigate operational cultural nuances, simultaneously function as mechanisms for embedding particular organizational and normative standards that align with the strategic interests of the powers sponsoring such initiatives (Oelofse & Zaabi, 2025; Scotti & Matkin, 2016).

A critical structural mechanism identified in the analysis is the conditionality embedded within external funding architectures, whereby financial support for policy implementation—such as the Women, Peace and Security agenda—is discursively framed as capacity-building assistance while functioning structurally as a disciplinary mechanism that constrains recipient states' policy autonomy and channels their institutional development toward donor-aligned normative frameworks (Asante, 2024). This finding illustrates a key aggregation pathway: what begins as sector-specific cultural or programmatic intervention becomes, through the mediating structure of financial dependency, a vector for the transmission of hegemonic normative preferences across state boundaries. A parallel mechanism operates through geoeconomic infrastructure projects, where the construction of transport and trade corridors, exemplified by land-bridge development in Central Asia, functions simultaneously as material infrastructure and as a site of symbolic and cultural contestation between rival great powers seeking to embed their preferred economic and governance models within the region's developmental trajectory (Neafie, 2023). This dual material-symbolic function demonstrates how infrastructure and cultural narrative become mutually constitutive within great power strategy, such that physical connectivity projects double as vehicles for normative and cultural influence.

The analysis further identifies regional power dynamics as a key site where localized cultural and institutional transformation aggregates into broader geopolitical contestation. In Central Asia, the thematic and neorealist analysis of regional power dynamics reveals how great powers strategically cultivate cultural and economic ties with local elites and institutions, producing a layered structure of influence in which localized transformation processes are continuously drawn upward into the broader architecture of great power rivalry over the region (Mahmud & Hossain, 2025). A structurally similar dynamic is evident in Mali, where the realist analysis of the conflict demonstrates how competing external powers instrumentalize local governance and security-sector reform as mechanisms for embedding their strategic presence, such that what is locally framed as capacity-building or stabilization assistance functions, at the macro level, as a proxy site for great power positioning (Gogny & de Castro, 2025). These findings collectively indicate that the aggregation of cultural transformation into geopolitical instruments operates through at least three identifiable structural pathways: financial conditionality that channels institutional development toward donor-aligned norms; infrastructural projects that fuse material connectivity with cultural-normative influence; and the cultivation of regional elite and institutional relationships that progressively bind localized transformation processes to the broader architecture of great power contestation. Crucially, these pathways do not operate in isolation but reinforce one another, producing a cumulative structural effect whereby institutional-level cultural engineering becomes increasingly difficult to disentangle from macro-level hegemonic strategy, precisely because the discursive framing of each pathway consistently obscures this structural interdependence behind the language of partnership, development, and mutual benefit.

Contestation, Appropriation, and Resistance of Hegemonic Cultural Narratives by Rising and Middle Powers

The third research question addresses how rising and middle powers engage with hegemonic cultural narratives, whether through contestation, appropriation, or resistance, within the evolving architecture of the multipolar order. The analysis reveals that rising and middle powers do not occupy a uniformly passive position

within the hegemonic cultural order but instead engage in a spectrum of strategic responses ranging from selective appropriation to active normative contestation. At one end of this spectrum, the analytical framework developed for small and middle power security strategies demonstrates how such states strategically position themselves within great power competition by selectively adopting elements of hegemonic cultural and strategic discourse while simultaneously carving out autonomous policy space, indicating that engagement with hegemonic narratives is frequently instrumental and calculated rather than a straightforward capitulation to great power cultural dominance (Dingil, 2025). This pattern of selective engagement is further corroborated in the polarity-based structural analysis of renewed great power rivalry, which demonstrates that middle powers actively read shifts in polarity as opportunities to renegotiate their normative and strategic positioning rather than passively accepting a fixed position within the hegemonic order (Zhang, 2023).

At a more contestatory end of the spectrum, the analysis identifies explicit forms of normative resistance emerging from rising and middle powers who challenge the presumed universality of hegemonic cultural narratives. The disaggregation of normative from representational dimensions of order-contestation reveals that rising powers frequently contest not the existing distribution of material power per se, but specifically the cultural and normative frameworks that legitimate that distribution, indicating that resistance operates primarily at the level of narrative and value contestation rather than purely material rivalry (Newman & Zala, 2018). This is substantively reflected in critical scholarship interrogating the liberal international order's claimed universality, where the identification of critical structural nodes of crisis within that order is mobilized by non-Western scholarship as a basis for contesting the presumed neutrality and inevitability of the liberal cultural-political model that has historically underpinned Western hegemonic legitimacy (Gontijo, 2025). Similarly, debates surrounding the possibility and desirability of legal self-restraint on the part of Western hegemonic power are shown to function as sites of normative contestation in which non-Western and critical perspectives challenge the presumption that Western-defined legal and institutional frameworks constitute a neutral or universally beneficial standard (Rozov, 2025).

The analysis also identifies subversive and resistant practices emerging at more localized and civil-societal levels, which nonetheless carry implications for the broader hegemonic cultural order. Resistance practices confronting the culture of algorithmic governance in post-digital contexts demonstrate how social actors actively identify and exploit the limits of dominant digital-cultural infrastructures, producing localized but symbolically significant challenges to the presumed inevitability of hegemonic technological-cultural models (Unterberg, 2025). Comparably, evolving gendered narratives surrounding community practices documented over a decadal timeframe illustrate how local communities actively renegotiate cultural meanings in ways that diverge from externally imposed developmental or modernization templates, suggesting that cultural transformation at the grassroots level frequently proceeds through negotiation and reinterpretation rather than straightforward absorption of hegemonic cultural prescriptions (Tan et al., 2024). Collectively, these findings indicate that the relationship between rising and middle powers and hegemonic cultural narratives within the multipolar order is best characterized not as a binary of acceptance versus rejection, but as a continuously negotiated spectrum encompassing strategic appropriation, selective adaptation, explicit normative contestation, and localized subversive resistance, each of which contributes to destabilizing the presumed inevitability and universality of any single hegemonic cultural order, while simultaneously revealing that no rising or middle power actor operates entirely outside the discursive gravity exerted by the great powers' cultural-hegemonic projects.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that cultural transformation has become a decisive instrument through which great powers construct, legitimate, and sustain hegemonic order within an increasingly contested multipolar system. Through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis, the findings reveal that hegemonic power operates not merely through material capability but through the systematic naturalization of cultural narratives, the strategic aggregation of localized institutional interventions into geopolitical instruments, and the persistent, though uneven, contestation of these narratives by rising and middle powers. This



Vol. 01 /No. 01 /July 2026 | <https://jurnal.haizumsaintek.com/index.php/sundano/index>

confirms that culture, far from being a neutral backdrop to great power rivalry, functions as a primary and often obscured vector of strategic power projection in the contemporary international order.

These dynamics carry direct implications for the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), insofar as the instrumentalization of cultural transformation through conditional funding, asymmetric partnerships, and hegemonic narrative-framing risks undermining genuine multilateral cooperation, institutional autonomy, and equitable global governance. Where cultural engagement is quietly harnessed to serve great power interests rather than shared developmental objectives, the foundational SDG principle of inclusive, legitimate, and locally-owned partnership is structurally compromised, underscoring the urgent need for greater normative transparency and institutional safeguards within the evolving multipolar order.

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Vol. 01 /No. 01 /July 2026 | <https://jurnal.haizumsaintek.com/index.php/sundano/index>

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