

The Impact of Colonialism on International Relations: A Critical Review of the Post-Colonial Era

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Abstract

Colonialism's legacy continues to shape international relations, with far-reaching impacts on global politics, economies, and cultures. The post-colonial era has seen the emergence of new nations, but the imprint of colonialism remains. This review critically examines colonialism's impact on international relations, exploring how historical injustices and power imbalances persist. By analyzing key debates and theories, we uncover the complexities of post-colonial international relations. Colonialism created enduring power disparities, shaping global governance and institutions. The legacy of exploitation and domination continues to influence international relations, with former colonial powers often maintaining significant influence. Post-colonial states face challenges in asserting sovereignty and achieving economic development. Dependency theory and world-systems theory highlight the structural inequalities perpetuated by colonialism. The review also examines the role of international law, diplomacy, and global economic systems in reinforcing or challenging these dynamics. Key issues include territorial disputes, resource extraction, and cultural imperialism. Colonialism's impact on international relations remains profound, with ongoing implications for global inequality and cooperation. Addressing these legacies requires acknowledging historical injustices and promoting equitable international frameworks. By understanding colonialism's enduring influence, we can better navigate contemporary global challenges.

Keywords: Colonialism, Post-Colonial Era, International Relations, Global Power Structures, Decolonization and Neo-Colonialism.

Introduction

Colonialism has profoundly shaped the structures, norms, and practices of the modern international system, leaving legacies that continue to influence global politics. Post-colonial scholarship in international relations (IR) emphasizes that colonial power dynamics did not simply vanish with formal independence; instead, they have been reproduced in economic hierarchies, diplomatic practices, and epistemic frameworks [1]. These legacies are particularly evident in the persistence of structural inequalities between states, where former colonial powers retain disproportionate influence in global decision-making and economic arrangements [2]. By framing colonialism as an enduring process rather than a historical artifact, post-colonial approaches challenge conventional IR theory, highlighting how historical exploitation continues to shape contemporary international interactions [3].

The transition from colonial rule to formal sovereignty in the mid-20th century transformed the political landscape of the international system but did not dismantle existing power asymmetries. Newly independent states inherited borders, institutions, and economies shaped by colonial priorities, often characterized by resource dependence, export-oriented

production, and limited industrial capacity [4]. Moreover, global institutions such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank, while ostensibly neutral, often perpetuated structural inequalities rooted in colonial history, constraining the policy autonomy of post-colonial states [5]. These persistent imbalances illustrate how decolonization reconfigured political authority without fundamentally transforming the hierarchies established under colonial rule.

Colonialism has also left a lasting imprint on the theory and practice of international relations. Mainstream IR scholarship historically centered on Western experiences and epistemologies, marginalizing non-Western perspectives and obscuring the historical roots of global inequalities [2]. By privileging Eurocentric narratives, conventional IR frameworks often reproduce colonial logics, including assumptions about modernity, development, and state capacity [1]. Post-colonial IR scholarship, by contrast, foregrounds the experiences of formerly colonized societies, emphasizing the ongoing influence of historical exploitation on contemporary political and economic outcomes [3].

This critical perspective highlights the need to examine not only material structures but also the knowledge systems and

discourses through which global power is legitimized. Contemporary international relations continue to bear the imprint of colonial legacies in both institutional and political spheres. Colonial borders, administrative systems, and governance frameworks have lasting effects on political identity, conflict, and diplomacy, particularly in Africa and Asia [6]. Former colonial powers continue to exert influence through formal and informal mechanisms within global institutions, while debates over reparations and historical accountability illustrate the political salience of colonial history in current global affairs [7]. Moreover, contemporary forms of economic dependence, cultural hegemony, and strategic influence often reflect neo-colonial dynamics, reinforcing the argument that colonialism is not merely a historical phenomenon but an ongoing process shaping international relations [5].

This review critically examines the enduring impact of colonialism on international relations in the post-colonial era, highlighting the ways in which historical colonial structures continue to shape state interactions, global governance arrangements, and normative frameworks. Rather than viewing colonialism as a completed historical phase, the review conceptualizes it as a continuing influence that affects economic patterns, diplomatic hierarchies, and the production of knowledge in international politics. The analysis synthesizes historical, institutional, and theoretical perspectives to illuminate persistent inequalities in power, access, and representation within the international system. In particular, the review evaluates how post-colonial states navigate structural constraints inherited from colonial rule and how these constraints influence policy choices, development trajectories, and participation in global decision-making. By incorporating post-colonial perspectives, the review highlights alternative frameworks for understanding international relations that challenge dominant Eurocentric assumptions and foreground the experiences of formerly colonized societies. Ultimately, the purpose of this review is to demonstrate that a comprehensive understanding of contemporary global politics requires sustained engagement with colonial legacies and their ongoing effects on political, economic, and epistemic relations. It also aims to provide a critical foundation for rethinking how international relations theory and practice can evolve toward greater equity, inclusivity, and historical accountability.

Colonial Power Structures and Global Hierarchies

European colonialism created entrenched global hierarchies by restructuring political authority and economic organization in ways that advantaged colonial powers and disadvantaged colonized regions. Colonial domination was not limited to territorial conquest; it systematically reconfigured local governance, economic production, and social relations to serve imperial interests [1]. This resulted in a global political economy in which wealth, institutions, and decision-making authority were concentrated in the hands of former colonial states, while colonized territories were incorporated into subordinate roles focused on resource extraction and labor exploitation. These hierarchical structures became embedded in formal and informal systems of international relations, including diplomatic norms and institutional practices. Economically, colonial power structures established patterns that reinforced dependency rather than autonomous development.

Colonized economies were often reorganized around the export of raw materials and the import of manufactured goods, perpetuating unequal exchange relationships long after political independence [8]. These patterns persisted through post-colonial international economic systems, contributing to enduring disparities in industrial capacity and economic diversification between former colonies and colonizing powers. The result is a multilayered economic hierarchy in which post-colonial states often remain vulnerable to global market shifts and dependent on external capital flows, trade preferences, and investment decisions shaped by dominant economies. Such inequalities are not random outcomes but legacies of historical power imbalances that have been reproduced in the global economic order [8].

Colonial institutions also influenced political authority and governance structures in post-colonial states. Administrative boundaries and centralized governance models introduced during colonial rule frequently disregarded pre-colonial political configurations, contributing to ongoing governance challenges, identity conflicts, and interstate tensions in many regions [6]. For instance, colonial systems often imposed top-down bureaucratic structures that prioritized extraction and control rather than participatory governance, setting the stage for political instability and uneven access to authority after independence. These institutional legacies can be linked to contemporary patterns of civil and political conflict; quantitative research indicates that post-colonial societies are statistically more prone to civil violence compared with non-colonized states, highlighting how colonial governance choices continue to reverberate in domestic political dynamics [9]. Normatively, colonial power structures shaped global hierarchies by embedding Eurocentric concepts of sovereignty, development, and international legitimacy into the conceptual foundations of international relations. Mainstream IR frameworks historically centered Western epistemologies, often treating Western models of statehood and governance as universal standards against which all others are measured [2]. These epistemic hierarchies continue to privilege certain forms of political organization in global discourse and limit the visibility of alternative governance traditions and knowledge systems. Furthermore, colonialism's normative imprint extends beyond formal state interactions into cultural and educational domains, where Western standards and practices have become benchmarks for global legitimacy [10].

Beyond structural and epistemic hierarchies, the endurance of colonial power dynamics is visible in contemporary debates about global governance and unequal participation in international institutions. Former colonial powers maintain disproportionate influence in key international organizations, shaping agendas on security, trade, and development cooperation in ways that reflect historical power disparities. Analyses of post-colonial inequality, for example, argue for the need to decolonize global governance structures to address structural disadvantages that trace back to colonial expeditions and institutional design [8]. These observations underscore that colonial power relations did not disappear with independence but were institutionalized in patterns of global authority and interaction that continue to define international relations in the post-colonial era [8].

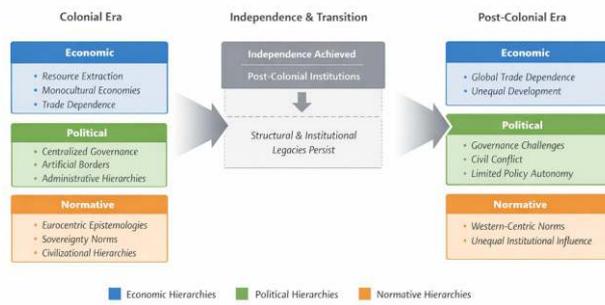


Figure 1. Continuity of colonial power structures into post-colonial global hierarchies. The figure illustrates how colonial-era economic, political, and normative hierarchies have persisted through decolonization into the post-colonial era. Economic structures show continued dependency and unequal development; political structures reflect governance challenges and institutional legacies; and normative structures highlight the lasting influence of Eurocentric norms and international hierarchies. Arrows indicate the direct continuity of these colonial legacies into contemporary global relations.

Decolonization and the Reordering of International Relations

The mid-20th century remains a defining moment in the transformation of the international system. The dismantling of colonial empires created an unprecedented wave of sovereign states across Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, fundamentally changing the diplomatic order that had previously been dominated by European powers. A pivotal development was the United Nations General Assembly's Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples (Resolution 1514, 1960), which explicitly anchored decolonization in international law by affirming both the universal right to self-determination and the incompatibility of colonial domination with fundamental human rights [11]. This normative foundation enabled dozens of emerging states to claim legal equality and seek full integration into global governance structures [12]. However, scholars argue that formal independence was only the first step in a much longer and more complex transformation. Newly sovereign governments often inherited colonially defined territorial boundaries that ignored ethnic, linguistic, or historical community divisions, conditions that have complicated nation-building and contributed to internal tensions in places like Cameroon and beyond [13]. Contemporary research also highlights how colonial legacies inform ongoing state-society relations and security narratives in post-colonial contexts, revealing structural continuities in governance and political authority that persist long after independence [13]. The international geopolitical environment of the Cold War further shaped post-colonial trajectories.

Newly independent states were pressured to align with either the United States or the Soviet Union, often at the cost of strategic autonomy, even while such alignments sometimes brought crucial economic and military support. The geopolitical “choice” extended beyond formal blocs to voting patterns in international forums and to new forms of global engagement. This phenomenon is an area of current debate in IR scholarship regarding the rise of the Global South as strategic actors and how this shapes global governance in the 21st century [14, 15]. Decolonization also transformed normative frameworks in world politics. The dramatic expansion of UN membership in the 1960s and 1970s enhanced the collective voice of post-colonial states, prompting new coalitions and voting blocs within global institutions that challenged Western dominance. This shift influenced debates not only on development and economic justice but also on human rights, sovereignty, and global resource distribution. Contemporary analyses emphasize how these processes contributed to the redefinition of sovereignty in international law and practice, while also uncovering persistent inequalities rooted in economic dependencies and structural barriers [16].

A recent strand of scholarship goes beyond political and diplomatic dimensions to examine how coloniality as a persistent structure of power continues to shape both global governance and knowledge production. Critics argue that traditional IR paradigms often retain Eurocentric assumptions about sovereignty, statehood, and development that marginalize alternative epistemologies from the Global South. Decolonial theorists in the field call for a pluriversal reimagining of international relations concepts, where the discipline's foundational terms like “sovereignty” are revisited to include non-Western understandings of communal belonging and political authority [16]. Empirical research also explores how post-colonial states engage with global institutions in ways that reflect continuing legacies of colonization, including patterns of international funding and contributions to multilateral organizations. One recent study shows that countries emerging from particularly fragile or constrained decolonization experiences may use engagement with international bodies strategically to build capacity and reinforce legitimacy on the world stage [17]. Finally, decolonization is increasingly treated as unfinished both politically and intellectually. Contemporary conflicts over autonomy in places still listed as Non-Self-Governing Territories, debates over the conceptual framing of sovereignty and intervention, and movements within IR scholarship to decenter Eurocentric frameworks all illustrate that the effects of colonialism and the aspirations of decolonization continue to be negotiated rather than fully resolved [12].

Table 1. Selected post-colonial States: Year of independence and former colonial power

Country	Year of Independence	Former Colonial Power	UN Membership	Region
India	1947	United Kingdom	1945*	Asia
Pakistan	1947	United Kingdom	1947	Asia
Indonesia	1949	Netherlands	1950	Asia
Ghana	1957	United Kingdom	1957	Africa
Algeria	1962	France	1962	Africa
Kenya	1963	United Kingdom	1963	Africa
Jamaica	1962	United Kingdom	1962	Caribbean
Nigeria	1960	United Kingdom	1960	Africa
Congo (DRC)	1960	Belgium	1960	Africa
Bangladesh	1971	Pakistan/UK	1974	Pakistan/UK

Modified from [11, 18]

Post-Colonial State Relations in the Cold War Era

The Cold War fundamentally shaped the international relations of post-colonial states by embedding their emergence into a global system structured by bipolar rivalry. Decolonization unfolded alongside the intensification of ideological, military, and economic competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, making it impossible for newly independent states to enter an ideologically neutral international environment. Rather than a simple transfer of sovereignty, post-colonial independence coincided with the restructuring of global power, in which superpowers sought influence across Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean [19, 20]. As a result, post-colonial international relations were marked by strategic maneuvering, constrained autonomy, and experimentation with alternative geopolitical alignments that challenged the dominance of the Cold War blocs. One of the most significant diplomatic responses to these pressures was the emergence of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which institutionalized collective resistance to formal bloc alignment. Rooted in the Bandung Conference of 1955 and formally established in 1961, NAM represented an effort by post-colonial leaders to preserve sovereignty while engaging the international system on their own terms. Scholarly analyses emphasize that NAM was not a rejection of global engagement but a strategic framework through which post-colonial states negotiated aid, security, and diplomatic recognition without permanent allegiance to either superpower [21, 22]. This approach allowed many states to assert political agency and shape international norms, particularly in debates surrounding imperialism, racial hierarchy, and global inequality.

Despite these efforts, Cold War dynamics significantly penetrated the domestic and foreign policies of post-colonial states. Superpower competition translated into military assistance, development aid, and ideological influence that often shaped internal political trajectories. In many cases, alignment choices, whether explicit or implicit, affected regime stability, economic development strategies, and patterns of regional conflict. Studies of Cold War decolonization demonstrate that external intervention frequently complicated state consolidation, particularly in regions where nationalist movements intersected with ideological competition [20, 23]. Thus, while sovereignty was formally achieved, its exercise was often mediated by structural dependencies within the Cold War system. Post-colonial states also transformed international institutions during this period, particularly through expanded participation in the United Nations. The rapid increase in UN membership following decolonization altered voting dynamics and elevated issues such as self-determination, economic justice, and anti-imperialism within global governance structures. However, these institutions remained embedded within Cold War power hierarchies, limiting the extent to which post-colonial states could reshape decision-making processes [19, 24]. Nonetheless, collective action by post-colonial states contributed to the emergence of new diplomatic coalitions and normative frameworks that challenged Eurocentric dominance in international relations.

Overall, the Cold War era represented a formative phase in post-colonial international relations, defined by both constraint and creativity. While superpower rivalry imposed structural limitations on autonomy, post-colonial states actively engaged, resisted, and reshaped global politics through non-alignment, institutional participation, and regional cooperation. Contemporary scholarship underscores that post-colonial actors were not merely passive arenas of Cold War conflict but

central participants in redefining international order during the second half of the twentieth century [22, 25].

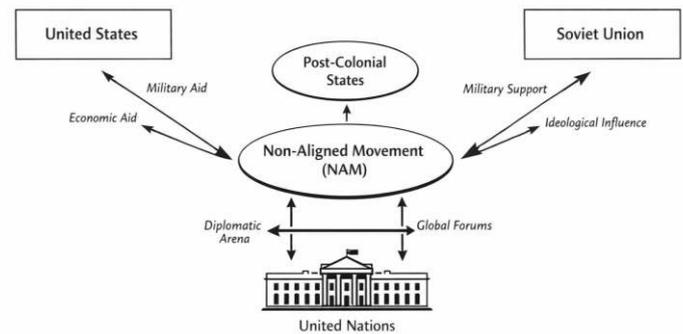


Figure 2. Cold war geopolitical dynamics and post-colonial state positioning. The figure depicts the strategic positioning of post-colonial states within the bipolar international system of the Cold War. It highlights how newly independent states navigated competing pressures from the United States and the Soviet Union while seeking autonomy through mechanisms such as the Non-Aligned Movement and multilateral institutions. The directional flows represent political, economic, and military influence shaping post-colonial international relations during the mid-twentieth century.

Enduring Economic and Institutional Legacies

The economic and institutional legacies of colonialism have persisted long after formal political independence, shaping patterns of inequality and global governance structures that disadvantage many post-colonial states. Colonial economic systems were primarily designed for resource extraction and the integration of colonies into European markets as suppliers of raw materials and consumers of manufactured goods, rather than as diversified economies capable of autonomous development. This entrenched pattern has produced continuing economic dependency, whereby many post-colonial states remain locked into global value chains that prioritize export of primary commodities and import of finished goods, perpetuating trade imbalances and limiting industrialization [8, 26]. Dependency theory offers a useful lens to understand how colonial economic structures endure within the global political economy. Scholars argue that former colonies often inherit economic systems that were oriented toward serving metropolitan interests, leading to patterns of unequal exchange and structural rigidity that constrain post-colonial development [27]. These structural features, such as specialization in low-value primary commodities, lack of technological capacity, and dependency on foreign investment, create persistent vulnerabilities to global market fluctuations and external policy pressures [27]. As a result, political independence did not automatically translate into economic sovereignty, and many states continue to operate within a global system marked by core-periphery dynamics inherited from colonial trade and production patterns [28].

The role of global governance institutions further reflects the endurance of colonial institutional legacies. International financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank play significant roles in shaping economic policy in post-colonial states, often through structural adjustment programs and conditional lending that prioritize fiscal austerity and market liberalization over domestic development priorities. Systematic reviews of IMF programs indicate that these interventions are associated with increases in income inequality, reduced social spending, and worse health outcomes in many borrowing countries [29]. Such outcomes suggest that global governance mechanisms, structured around Western-led economic norms, can reinforce rather than ameliorate post-colonial economic dependencies and inequalities.

Empirical evidence further supports the claim that colonial institutional legacies have long-lasting effects on economic development trajectories. Historical institutionalism research finds remarkable persistence in global socioeconomic hierarchies, noting that former colonial powers and their ex-colonies often occupy divergent positions in the global economy long after independence [30]. This persistence reflects path-dependent trajectories established under colonial rule, where institutions, trade patterns, and governance capacities set during the colonial period continue to influence contemporary economic outcomes. For many ex-colonial states, the lack of capital, technology, and institutional coherence has limited competitiveness in global markets, perpetuating inequality between developed and developing nations [5].

Post-colonial structural inequality also manifests in sectors beyond traditional commodities. Research on academic and research collaboration highlights how international knowledge economies can reproduce colonial dependency patterns, with institutions in the Global South often dependent on partnerships with institutions in the Global North that shape research agendas, resource allocations, and academic visibility [10]. Such patterns illustrate that colonial legacies are not confined to trade and finance but extend into institutional hierarchies across global governance, economic policy, and knowledge production. Taken together, these economic and institutional legacies reveal how colonial structures have produced enduring forms of dependency and inequality. Post-colonial states often confront global systems that replicate historical imbalances, reinforcing structural disadvantages in trade, governance, and institutional participation. Recognizing these enduring legacies is critical for understanding why political independence alone has not resulted in substantive economic transformation or equitable integration within the international system.

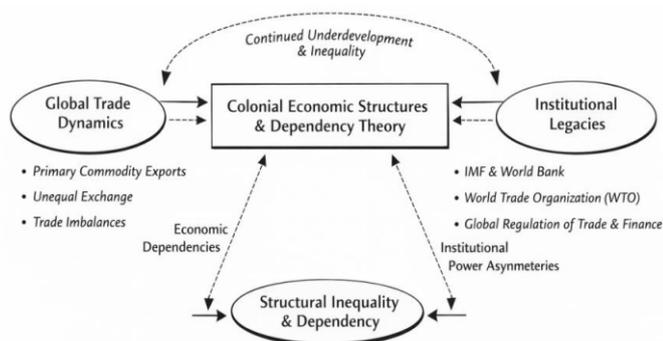


Figure 3. Enduring economic and institutional legacies of colonialism. The figure illustrates how colonial economic and institutional structures continue to shape post-colonial states' positions in the global system. It highlights the pathways of dependency, the role of international financial and governance institutions (e.g., IMF, World Bank), and the mechanisms through which structural inequalities are reproduced in trade, finance, and knowledge systems. The diagram emphasizes the persistence of colonial legacies in constraining economic autonomy and perpetuating unequal global hierarchies.

Contemporary Post-Colonial Dynamics in Global Politics: Neo-Colonialism, Globalization, and Power Asymmetries

Contemporary international relations continue to reflect enduring legacies of colonialism through neo-colonial economic structures, globalization mechanisms that reinforce inequality, and institutional power asymmetries that shape the global order. Although formal political independence was achieved across much of the Global South in the mid-20th century, many former colonies remain entangled in structural relationships that limit genuine autonomy and perpetuate unequal development trajectories [26, 31].

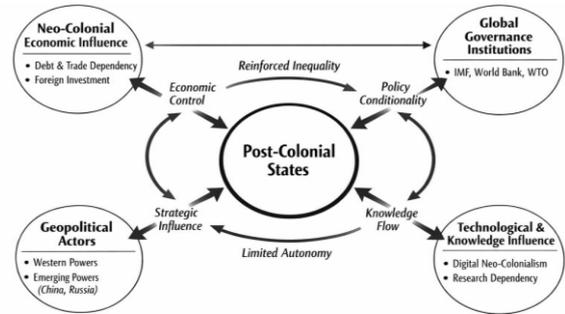


Figure 4. Contemporary post-colonial dynamics in global politics. The figure conceptualizes how neo-colonial economic practices, globalization processes, global governance institutions, and geopolitical actors interact to reproduce power asymmetries affecting post-colonial states. Arrows represent reinforcing feedback loops that sustain structural inequality and constrain political and economic autonomy in the contemporary international system.

Neo-Colonialism as Structural Continuity.

Neo-colonialism describes the ongoing economic and political influence that powerful states and global actors exert over supposedly independent states, maintaining structural dominance without direct territorial control. This framework traces how mechanisms such as foreign debt dependency, profit repatriation, and integration into unequal global capitalism reproduce patterns of extraction and dependency that resemble colonial relations [26]. The persistence of neo-colonial dynamics is not only visible in financial flows but also in international trade systems that favor industrialized states while constraining policy space for developing economies. For instance, unequal terms of trade and liberalization pressures often require post-colonial states to open markets on conditions that prioritize foreign capital over domestic development [31].

Globalization and Unequal Integration.

Globalization has interconnected economies worldwide, but scholars argue that this process frequently reinforces historical disparities rather than dissolving them. Global market integration tends to benefit countries with established capital, technological capabilities, and institutional influence, while peripheral states often remain producers of raw materials or low-value manufactures, perpetuating core-periphery divisions rooted in colonial economic patterns [31, 32]. For example, research on post-colonial states in Africa demonstrates that imperial and neo-colonial economic dominance has left many nations with structurally weak economies that struggle to diversify, resulting in continued vulnerability to external market shocks and global demand fluctuations [32].

Institutional Power Asymmetries in Global Governance.

Power imbalances are also reproduced within global governance institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and World Trade Organization (WTO). These institutions often reflect the interests of wealthier states, both in their governance structures and policy prescriptions, limiting the influence of post-colonial and developing states in shaping global norms and rules [33]. For example, the IMF and World Bank's conditional lending policies have been criticized for prioritizing neoliberal reforms that can undermine domestic social investments and sovereign policy space in borrowing countries, reinforcing dependency dynamics rooted in unequal structural power relations. Table 2, synthesizes the principal mechanisms through which contemporary post-colonial power asymmetries are sustained, linking economic, institutional, geopolitical, and technological dimensions to their systemic effects on post-colonial states.

Table 2. Mechanisms of Contemporary Post-Colonial Power Asymmetries

Dimensions	Core mechanism	Effect on post colonial states
Neo-colonial economics	Debt, trade dependency, capital extraction	Limits policy autonomy and development options
Globalization	Unequal market integration	Reinforces core-periphery hierarchies
Global governance	Institutional bias in IMF, World Bank, WTO	Marginalizes Global South influence
Geopolitical competition	Strategic influence by major powers	Shapes alignments and domestic priorities
Technology and knowledge	Digital and epistemic dominance	Reproduces dependency in innovation and data

Cultural and Technological Dimensions of Neo-Colonialism

Beyond economics and governance, neo-colonial influence operates in cultural and technological spheres. Scholarship on digital neo-colonialism highlights how generative AI and technology platforms developed predominantly in the Global North can embed Western cultural norms and epistemologies, marginalizing local languages, knowledge systems, and educational priorities [10, 34]. This form of technological dominance replicates power asymmetries by shaping the narratives and technological frameworks through which global societies engage with information, knowledge, and economic opportunities. Overall, contemporary post-colonial dynamics in global politics reflect a complex interplay of economic, institutional, ideological, and technological forces that sustain structural inequalities and asymmetrical power relations rooted in colonial history. Understanding these dynamics requires a multifaceted approach that recognizes how neo-colonial mechanisms adapt to globalizing forces while continuing to shape the trajectories of post-colonial states in the 21st century.

Conclusion

The enduring impact of colonialism continues to shape the structures, practices, and power relations of modern international relations in profound ways. Despite the formal end of empire, the international system remains marked by asymmetries rooted in historical patterns of domination, extraction, and governance. These legacies are evident in global economic arrangements, institutional hierarchies, and diplomatic norms that privilege certain states while constraining the autonomy and development trajectories of others. Understanding these continuities is essential for explaining persistent inequalities and uneven influence within contemporary global politics. At the systemic level, colonial-era frameworks have left lasting imprints on global governance, influencing how authority, legitimacy, and participation are distributed across international institutions.

Many post-colonial states continue to operate within rules and norms they had little role in shaping, limiting their capacity to advance alternative models of development or security. As a result, international relations remain structured by unequal bargaining power, selective multilateralism, and recurring tensions between sovereignty and external influence. Looking ahead, the future of international relations will depend on the extent to which these inherited structures are critically reassessed and transformed. Emerging powers, shifting geopolitical alignments, and growing demands for institutional reform present opportunities to renegotiate global norms and decision-making processes. Addressing the colonial roots of contemporary inequalities is not only a matter of historical reckoning but also a prerequisite for building a more inclusive, equitable, and resilient international order capable of responding to global challenges in the twenty-first century.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declared that there are no conflicts of interest.

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