

The Global Implications of the United States' Non-Participation in the 20th G20 Summit Held in South Africa

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Abstract

The absence of the United States from the 20th G20 Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa, marked a significant moment in the history of global economic governance. This seminar paper examines the political, economic, and strategic implications of America's unprecedented boycott of the forum. Using a qualitative analysis of official documents, media reports, and expert commentary, this study evaluates how U.S. non-participation affects global leadership dynamics, the efficacy of multilateralism, the strategic positioning of developing economies, and the consolidation of emerging power blocs. The paper argues that the U.S. absence, far from being a mere diplomatic footnote, acted as a catalyst for several pre-existing trends: it created a leadership vacuum that China and India sought to fill, empowered "middle powers" and the Global South to advance their agendas, and exposed the vulnerabilities of a global governance architecture heavily reliant on hegemonic engagement. The findings suggest that while the G20 demonstrated a degree of institutional resilience by proceeding and issuing a Leaders' Declaration, the event may accelerate a shift toward a more fragmented and multipolar world order, weakening traditional alliances and reshaping the balance of influence within the G20 and beyond.

Keywords: The Group of 20; International Forum; Regional Integration; Intercontinentalism; Functionalism

Introduction

The Group of Twenty (G20) stands as the world's premier forum for international economic cooperation. Comprising nineteen of the world's largest economies plus the European Union and the African Union, its members collectively account for approximately 85 percent of global economic output, 75 percent of global exports, and two-thirds of the world's population (Council on Foreign Relations [CFR], n.d.). Since its elevation to the leaders' level in 2008 to combat the global financial crisis (GFC), the G20 has been credited with "rescuing a global financial system in free fall" (Patrick, as cited in CFR, n.d.) and has evolved into a central pillar of international cooperation on issues ranging from financial regulation and climate change to global health and development (Bradford & Coulibaly, 2025).

Historically, the United States has played a dominant, if sometimes contentious, role in shaping G20 agendas and driving consensus. Its leadership has been instrumental in landmark agreements, including the creation of the Financial Stability Board in 2009 and the global minimum corporate tax deal in 2021 (CFR, n.d.). However, the 2025 G20 Summit, hosted for the first time on African soil in Johannesburg, South Africa, witnessed an unprecedented development, the United States government, under President Donald Trump, boycotted the meeting entirely. The official justification cited "human rights abuses" in South Africa, specifically resurrecting

discredited claims about the mistreatment and killing of white Afrikaners (Little, 2025; Real Instituto Elcano, 2025). This move was widely interpreted as an "insult to the host and the continent" (Real Instituto Elcano, 2025) and a "conscious repudiation of multilateral legitimacy" (FAF, 2025).

The U.S. absence was not merely passive; it was an active attempt to undermine the summit's authority. Washington pressured South Africa not to issue a final Leaders' Declaration and to accept a lesser "chair's statement," a move the host nation and other members resisted, viewing it as "coercion by absentia" (The Guardian, 2025; DW, 2025). This unprecedented situation raises profound questions about the future of global leadership, the resilience of multilateral institutions in a "post-hegemonic" world, and the emerging dynamics of international politics.

This paper examines the multifaceted implications of this American withdrawal, analyzing its impact on global governance structures, geopolitical rivalries, and the rising influence of the Global South from academic, political, and economic perspectives.

Literature Review

The literature on global governance consistently underscores the G20's role as a vital, albeit imperfect, steering committee for the world economy. Its effectiveness, however, is often linked to the engagement of its most powerful members. Scholars have argued that the G20 functions best when major powers, particularly the U.S., demonstrate strong commitment, as its informal structure relies on the political will of individual states for implementation (CFR, n.d.; Cooper, 2019). The G20's initial success during the 2008 GFC is attributed to this coordinated action, where members agreed to \$4 trillion in stimulus measures and rejected trade barriers (Bery, 2019; CFR, n.d.). Conversely, a "G-Zero" world—one lacking coordinated global leadership—has been warned of by analysts who see growing geopolitical tensions undermining the G20's cohesion (CFR, n.d.). The U.S. boycott in 2025 can be seen as the starkest manifestation of this trend, transforming the U.S. from a "stabilising presence" to an "unpredictable, selective and at times openly confrontational actor" (Real Instituto Elcano, 2025).

A significant body of literature examines the impact of great power rivalry, specifically between the United States and China, on multilateral institutions. Sagar (2024) argues that this rivalry adversely affects G20 leadership and its ability to provide global public goods (GPGs) due to increasing international polarization. The competition extends into technological, economic, and ideological realms, turning institutions into arenas for strategic contestation rather than cooperation (Sagar, 2024; Seidl, 2024). The U.S. withdrawal from the 2025 summit, therefore, cannot be viewed in isolation but as part of a broader pattern of American "withdrawal from multilateralism" and strategic "decoupling" from China, which in turn creates a vacuum in global governance (LAEX, 2025; Carnegie Endowment, 2022).

In parallel, a growing field of study focuses on South-South cooperation and the rise of the "Global South." This literature posits that as traditional Western powers disengage or lose relative influence, emerging powers like China, India, Brazil, and South Africa are increasingly shaping the global agenda (Bull, 2025; SAIIA, n.d.). These nations, often organized through forums like BRICS+, are no longer content with "playing supporting roles in a global order they did not create" (Medium, n.d.). The presidencies of India (2023), Brazil (2024), and South Africa (2025) have been pivotal in centering Global South priorities such as debt sustainability, development finance, and institutional reform. The rivalry between China and India for leadership of this bloc is a key dynamic, with China leveraging its economic might through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while India positions itself as a democratic "bridge" between the Global North and South (ISS Africa, 2024; Atlantic Council, n.d.). The U.S. absence in Johannesburg provided a fertile ground for these dynamics to play out, highlighting the agency of "middle powers" in navigating a divided world (Belfer Center, 2025).

Theoretical Framework

This study employs three core international relations theories to interpret the U.S. non-participation in the 2025 G20 Summit and its consequences.

a. Realism

From a realist perspective, states are rational actors primarily concerned with maximizing their relative power and security in an anarchic international system. Institutions are seen as reflections of the underlying power distribution, and states will only adhere to them as long as it serves their national interest. The U.S. withdrawal can be interpreted as a realist calculation that the costs of participation—such as being bound by commitments on climate financing or global tax reforms that are perceived as constraining national sovereignty—outweighed the benefits (G20 Utopia, n.d.). President Trump's justification for the boycott, while based on a fabricated narrative, served a domestic political purpose and asserted American unilateralism (Real Instituto Elcano, 2025). Furthermore, the simultaneous release of a U.S.-led Ukraine peace plan was a classic power play, attempting to shape global security outcomes outside the multilateral framework, reinforcing the realist view of the U.S. acting as a "predatory hegemon" (Real Instituto Elcano, 2025).

b. Liberal Institutionalism

Liberal institutionalists argue that institutions like the G20 are crucial for fostering cooperation, reducing transaction costs, and solving collective action problems that no single state can address alone. They provide platforms for dialogue, build trust, and establish norms of behavior. From this perspective, the U.S. absence represents a severe blow to the G20's institutional credibility and effectiveness. The theory posits that the withdrawal of the system's most powerful actor weakens the institution's capacity to enforce decisions and maintain global economic stability (ISS, 2019). The U.S. attempt to prevent the issuance of a Leaders' Declaration was a direct assault on the G20's core function of consensus-building (The Guardian, 2025). However, the fact that the remaining 20 members proceeded to issue a declaration demonstrates a degree of institutional resilience and a shared interest among other powers in preserving the multilateral system, even in a "post-hegemonic" context (Real Instituto Elcano, 2025).

c. Constructivism

Constructivism emphasizes the role of shared norms, identities, and ideas in shaping state behavior and the international system. A state's interests are not fixed but are constructed through social interaction. The U.S. non-participation signals a profound shift in its national identity and perceived global role—from the architect and sustainer of the post-war liberal order to a revisionist power skeptical of multilateral commitments (LAEX, 2025). This act challenges the established norm of great power responsibility. In response, other actors are constructing alternative norms. South Africa's presidency, themed "Solidarity, Equality, and Sustainability," and its framing as a "People's G20," sought to build a new consensus around the priorities of the Global South (The Presidency, 2025; Belfer Center, 2025). The convergence of Europe and the "Plural South" to salvage the summit declaration can be seen as a collective effort to defend the norm of multilateralism itself, not because a hegemon orchestrates it, but because they see intrinsic value in collective action (Real Instituto Elcano, 2025).

Methodology

This seminar paper adopts a qualitative, descriptive research design to provide a holistic interpretation of the political and economic implications of the U.S. non-participation in the 20th G20 Summit. The research is based on an in-depth analysis of secondary sources, drawing on a wide range of publicly available materials to construct a comprehensive narrative and analytical assessment. The primary methods of data collection and analysis include:

- **Content Analysis of Official Documents:** A systematic review of key documents related to the 2025 G20 Summit, including the final *G20 South Africa Summit: Leaders' Declaration* (2025) and preparatory statements from the South African presidency (e.g., DIRCO, 2025; The Presidency, 2025). This analysis identifies the key priorities, agreements, and points of contention that defined the summit in the absence of the U.S.
- **Analysis of Media Statements and Reports:** Examination of statements from government officials of participating and non-participating countries, as reported by credible international news outlets (e.g., Al Jazeera, The Guardian, Le Monde, DW). This provides insight into the diplomatic maneuvering, official justifications, and reactions surrounding the U.S. boycott.
- **Review of Academic and Policy Literature:** A comprehensive survey of recent academic journals, policy briefs, and in-depth analyses from reputable think tanks and research institutions. This includes publications from the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), Brookings Institution (Bradford & Coulibaly, 2025), Chatham House, South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA), Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs (Little, 2025), and others. This literature provides the theoretical grounding and expert context for the analysis.
- **Expert Commentary Synthesis:** Collation and analysis of commentary from leading scholars and analysts (e.g., Sagar, 2024; Real Instituto Elcano, 2025) who have written on the G20, U.S. foreign policy, U.S.-China relations, and the rise of the Global South. This allows for the integration of diverse, expert perspectives on the event's significance.

By triangulating these sources, this methodology allows for a robust and nuanced examination of the event's immediate impact and long-term consequences for global governance, avoiding reliance on a single perspective and ensuring the conclusions are well-supported by a diverse body of evidence.

Discussion of the Objectives

Objective 1: To examine how U.S. non-participation affects global leadership dynamics

The U.S. boycott of the Johannesburg summit created a conspicuous leadership vacuum in global governance. Historically, the G20 has operated under the de facto leadership of the U.S. or, at minimum, with its critical engagement. The 2025 absence was a stark departure, described as a move from a stabilizing force to a "predatory hegemon" using its power to disrupt rather than lead (Real Instituto Elcano, 2025). This vacuum did not remain empty. It provided a significant opportunity for other major powers to step forward. China, in particular, capitalized on the moment to position itself as a champion of multilateralism and a reliable partner for the Global South. With Premier Li Qiang representing President Xi Jinping, China presented itself as a "stable, predictable actor" committed to open trade and development, contrasting sharply with American unilateralism (Al Jazeera, 2025). Beijing used the summit to advance its institutional vision, promoting South-South knowledge production and positioning itself as an "intellectual and institutional architect" of a new economic order (Modern Diplomacy, 2025).

India also played a more assertive role, continuing its efforts from its 2023 presidency to act as a voice for the Global South. Prime Minister Narendra Modi pushed for institutional reforms to grant developing countries a stronger voice and emphasized equity in trade and access to critical minerals (Modern Diplomacy, 2025). This highlighted the ongoing competition between India and China for influence. While China focuses on economic and institutional power, India leverages its democratic credentials and its role as a "bridge" between the West and the developing world (ISS Africa, 2024; Atlantic Council, n.d.). The summit also amplified the collective

agency of "middle powers"—including host South Africa, Brazil, Indonesia, and Turkey—who demonstrated a shared interest in preventing the G20 from being paralyzed by great power politics (Belfer Center, 2025). The pragmatic collaboration between European nations and key Global South countries to issue a final declaration underscored a "coalition of the willing for institutional continuity," born of a shared necessity to preserve the forum (Real Instituto Elcano, 2025).

Objective 2: To assess the impact on global economic governance

The G20's core mandate is to ensure global economic and financial stability. The absence of the world's largest economy and the anchor of the global financial system inevitably weakened the summit's ability to deliver substantive outcomes. Discussions on critical issues like global minimum taxation, regulation of digital currencies, and climate financing lacked the necessary political and financial weight without U.S. participation (CFR, n.d.). While the final declaration mentioned sustainability 66 times and equality 44 times, its content was more a "catalogue of aspirations" than a concrete "roadmap of action" (Real Instituto Elcano, 2025). The gap between rhetoric and implementation, already a challenge for the G20, grew even larger without American buy-in.

On the issue of debt restructuring for low-income countries—a key priority for the South African presidency—progress was limited. The G20's Common Framework for Debt Treatments has been criticized for its slow implementation, partly due to divisions among lenders (CFR, n.d.). While the Johannesburg declaration reaffirmed commitments, the absence of the U.S., a major creditor and influential voice in the IMF and World Bank, hindered any breakthrough reforms. The African Union had called for a "universally accepted methodology for comparability of treatment" (CFR, n.d.), but achieving such a consensus without the U.S. at the table proved impossible. This institutional weakness highlights the G20's continued dependence on hegemonic power to enforce complex global economic policies, even as its members attempt to build a more multipolar framework.

Objective 3: To evaluate implications for developing countries and Africa

As the first G20 summit hosted on African soil and with the African Union (AU) participating as a new permanent member, the 2025 meeting was a landmark moment for the continent. South Africa, as host, skillfully used the platform to champion African priorities. President Cyril Ramaphosa stated the presidency was rooted in placing "Africa's growth and development at the heart of the G20's agenda" (The Presidency, 2025). Key issues pushed forward included debt relief, investment for a just energy transition, scaled-up disaster prevention, and ensuring beneficiation from critical minerals remains in producer countries (The Presidency, 2025).

The U.S. absence had a dual effect. On one hand, it allowed African priorities to gain more prominence without being overshadowed by a U.S.-centric agenda. On the other, it pushed African nations to form stronger alliances with other partners. China, already Africa's largest trading partner, used the summit to deepen its engagement, aligning its messaging with Africa's development needs and promoting itself as a key partner in green energy and infrastructure (Al Jazeera, 2025). India also strengthened its historical ties, reviving partnerships and leveraging its role in advocating for the AU's G20 membership to build trust (The Diplomat, 2025; ISS Africa, 2024). This dynamic may accelerate the trend of South-South cooperation, providing African nations with alternative sources of finance and technology (Bull, 2025). However, it also carries risks. Increased reliance on partners like China could exacerbate debt dependency and raises concerns about governance and transparency (ISS Africa, 2024). The absence of the U.S. limits the continent's ability to leverage competition between great powers and diversify its partnerships, potentially reducing its bargaining power in the long run.

Objective 4: To analyse consequences for geopolitical stability

The U.S. boycott did not occur in a geopolitical vacuum; it was a symptom and a catalyst of deepening global strategic rivalry. The G20 has increasingly become a forum where geopolitical fault lines are exposed, particularly the U.S.-China rivalry and divisions over Russia's war in Ukraine (CFR, n.d.; Sagar, 2024). The absence of President Trump, alongside the confirmed non-attendance of China's Xi Jinping and Russia's Vladimir Putin (who faces an ICC arrest warrant), signaled a fracturing of the world's most powerful leadership forum (CFR, n.d.).

In this context, the U.S. withdrawal was seen as ceding the stage to its rivals. It allowed China to promote its vision of global governance without a direct American counter-narrative on issues like AI governance and development finance (Atlantic Council, 2025). The summit saw a more visible coordination among BRICS members, particularly on the need to reform global governance institutions to make them more representative of the "underrepresented and unrepresented regions" like Africa, Asia, and Latin America (G20 South Africa Summit, 2025).

This alignment, while not a formal bloc, suggests a hardening of geopolitical divisions between a U.S.-led camp and a loosely aligned group of powers seeking to revise the existing international order. The U.S. move to release a unilateral Ukraine peace plan on the eve of the summit further alienated its European allies, who saw it as an attempt to circumvent multilateral norms and impose a solution favorable to Russia (Real Instituto Elcano, 2025). This fragmentation weakens the West's collective consensus and could lead to a more unstable and unpredictable international system where great powers pursue their interests through competing minilateral coalitions rather than broad-based multilateral forums.

Conclusion

The United States' non-participation in the 2025 G20 Summit in Johannesburg is far more than a diplomatic absence; it is a profound geopolitical signal with far-reaching implications. This paper has argued that the boycott served as a powerful illustration of a strategic recalibration in Washington, reflecting a turn away from multilateral leadership and toward a more unilateral, interest-driven foreign policy. The event highlighted the acute vulnerabilities of a global governance system that has long relied on American engagement, while simultaneously showcasing the growing agency of other global actors.

The immediate consequence was a weakening of the G20's capacity for substantive global economic governance, as evidenced by the aspirational rather than actionable outcomes on debt and climate finance. However, the summit also revealed a surprising degree of institutional resilience. Led by a pragmatic coalition of European and Global South nations, the G20 proved it could function, at least symbolically, without its traditional hegemon. This "mini rehearsal" for a "post-hegemonic" world (Real Instituto Elcano, 2025) accelerated the rise of alternative centers of influence. China and India stepped into the leadership vacuum, competing to shape the global agenda, while middle powers and the African continent, under South Africa's stewardship, successfully centered their own priorities. Ultimately, the 2025 summit may be remembered as a turning point—a moment that exposed the fragility of the old order and offered a fragile, imperfect, but tangible glimpse of a more multipolar and contested world to come.

Recommendations

1. The U.S. should re-engage with G20 platforms. To restore global confidence in multilateral cooperation and to avoid ceding influence to strategic rivals, the U.S. should recommit to its leadership role within the G20. This is particularly critical as the U.S. is scheduled to host the 2026 summit, which presents an opportunity to repair institutional damage and advance a collaborative agenda (Little, 2025).

2. African countries should leverage the current geopolitical landscape to strengthen continental bargaining power. The increased focus on the Global South provides an opportunity. African nations should work through the African Union to build on the momentum of the 2025 summit, diversify partnerships beyond traditional and emerging powers, and negotiate collectively on issues of debt, trade, and climate justice.

3. G20 members should institutionalize stronger mechanisms for continuity. To mitigate the impact of future abstentions by major powers, the G20 should explore reforms that enhance its institutional continuity. This could include strengthening the role of the Troika (past, present, and future presidencies) and creating a small, permanent secretariat to ensure a more consistent and less personality-driven agenda (Bradford & Coulibaly, 2025).

4. Global governance reforms should be accelerated. The summit's call for a more "representative, inclusive, efficient, effective, democratic and accountable" global governance system must be translated into action (G20 South Africa Summit, 2025). G20 members should actively push for reforms at the UN, IMF, and World Bank to give a greater voice to Africa, Latin America, and other underrepresented regions.

5. Research institutions should closely monitor the evolution of emerging power blocs. The shifting dynamics between China, India, the BRICS+, and other middle powers are reshaping global politics. Continued academic and policy research is essential to understand these new alignments, predict long-term geopolitical shifts, and inform effective diplomatic strategies for navigating an increasingly multipolar world.

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