Journal of Liberty and International Affairs · Volume 12 · Number 2 · 2026 · eISSN 1857-9760
Published online by the Institute for Research and European Studies at www.e-jlia.com

Copyright © 2026 The author/s
This work is licensed under the CC BY 4.0 license
(*) Corresponding author
Non-Peer-Reviewed
Book review
DOI: https://doi.org/10.47305/jlia.2025.2379
Received: 27.05.2026 • Accepted: 03.09.2026 • Published: 24.09.2026
Pages: 193-199

The Triangle of Power: Rebalancing the New World Order

By Alexander Stubb (Author) (Publisher: Biteback Publishing 2026)

Li Yang[1*], Long Ting[2*]

[1]Department of Oriental Cultures and Languages, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium ✉ yangyali.li@ugent.be
[2]Department of Interdisciplinary Study of Law, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium ✉ ting.long@ugent.be

Stubb's book is a strategic diagnosis of the end of the post-Cold War order and the reconfiguration of global politics. As Finland's president and a long-standing practitioner of European affairs, Stubb writes not as a detached academic observer, but as a scholar-statesman situated on the front line of Europe's security crisis. He treats Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine as a historical watershed and argues that the emerging order will be shaped by the interaction among the Global West, the Global East and the Global South (Stubb, 2026). Unlike many accounts that reduce contemporary international politics to US–China rivalry, the book's strongest contribution is to place the Global South at the center of global order transformation. Yet this clear triangular framework also carries a risk of theoretical simplification: the Global West, the Global East and the Global South are not homogeneous or symmetrical strategic blocs, but three different kinds of political formation.

The book is organized around three moves: the erosion of the post-Cold War order, the relative positions of the Global West, the Global East and the Global South, and the dynamics of competition, conflict and cooperation (Stubb, 2026). Stubb's central claim is that competition is unavoidable, but its outcome depends on whether it can be channeled into more representative and credible rules. Methodologically, the volume is best read as a practitioner-informed exercise in strategic diagnosis rather than as a systematically designed empirical study. Stubb develops his case primarily through geopolitical interpretation and reflections grounded in statecraft, which gives the argument immediacy and policy relevance but leaves some of its broad regional categories more asserted than systematically demonstrated.

The book's most important contribution is to move the Global South from the margins of international order to its center. For Stubb, the future will not be decided by Washington, Beijing or Moscow alone, but by the interaction within this triangle of power. The Global South is no longer merely an object to be assisted, courted or mobilized; it appears as a political actor with agency, leverage and choices (Stubb, 2026). This argument echoes Amitav Acharya's call for Global IR. Acharya (2014) criticizes conventional International Relations for its Western-centrism and for neglecting non-Western experiences, regional orders and plural histories. Stubb does not offer a fully developed Global IR theory, but he responds to a similar problem at the level of policy analysis: the future international order can no longer be designed, interpreted or enforced by the West alone. One of the book's most distinctive conceptual moves is Stubb's contrast

between "Yalta" and "Helsinki." In his account, Yalta symbolizes great-power bargaining, spheres of influence and the exclusion of smaller states from decisions about order; Helsinki represents rules, institutions and more equal participation (Stubb, 2026). Stubb is therefore not simply rejecting multipolarity. Rather, he warns that unconstrained multipolarity can slide into great-power deals, spheres of influence and the marginalization of small and medium-sized states. This judgment aligns with Ruggie's (1992) classic definition of multilateralism as more than the coordination of several states: it is a form of cooperation based on generalized principles and institutionalized rules. From Finland's small-state perspective, multilateralism is not an abstract moral ideal, but a mechanism of survival against domination by larger powers.

A further contribution lies in Stubb's concepts of "values-based realism" and "dignified foreign policy" (Stubb, 2026). He does not argue that the West should abandon democracy, human rights, the rule of law or political freedom. Nor does he call for a retreat into pure power politics. Instead, he seeks a middle path between values and realism: the West should remain committed to basic rules and liberal principles, while recognizing the historical experiences, cultural differences and developmental demands of wider global society. "Values-based realism" can therefore be read as a revised form of liberal internationalism. It accepts the return of power politics, but still seeks to prevent competition from turning into conflict through rules, institutions and restraint.

However, the book's greatest strength is also the source of its main limitation. The "Global West–Global East–Global South" framework is clear, powerful and highly effective as a language of policy communication, but it is less convincing as a strict analytical category. In Stubb's framework, the Global West is defined largely by liberal democracy, market economy, institutional inheritance and the rules-based order; the Global East by authoritarianism, revisionism and challenges to Western dominance; and the Global South by developmental demands, under-representation and strategic autonomy (Stubb, 2026). These are not equivalent units of analysis. The Global West resembles an institutional community, the Global East a coalition of challengers, and the Global South a shared structural position and political mood. Flockhart's (2016) concept of a "multi-order world" is useful here: the contemporary world is not simply moving from unipolarity to multipolarity, but toward overlapping orders, institutional spaces and political logics. Stubb's triangle captures an important direction of change, but it risks compressing a multi-order world into three over-neat categories.

The treatment of the Global East is particularly open to question. Stubb is right to observe that China and Russia are both dissatisfied with the Western-led order and both favor a more multipolar world that gives greater weight to sovereignty and non-interference (Stubb 2026). However, placing them together under the label of the Global East may obscure the different ways in which they challenge international order (Stubb, 2026; Cooley and Nexon, 2020). Russia relies primarily on military aggression, coercion and territorial revisionism. China, by contrast, appears in Stubb's account more as a global competitor concerned with economic influence, international reputation and institutional position than as a direct military disruptor (Stubb, 2026). The former is closer to destructive revisionism; the latter to institutional, economic and narrative competition. In this sense, the Global East is not a stable community of values, but a temporary strategic formation whose members challenge Western dominance through different aims and tools (Cooley and Nexon, 2020).

CC BY

The Global South is the book's most illuminating concept, but also the one most in need of disaggregation. Stubb correctly notes that many Global South states are using shifts in global power to demand greater autonomy and institutional representation (Stubb, 2026). Nevertheless, the Global South is not a single actor. Stubb himself acknowledges that it includes democracies and autocracies, rich and poor states, and countries with divergent security concerns and external alignments (Stubb, 2026). The Global South is therefore better understood not as a bloc, but as a shared structural condition: under-representation, developmental claims, resentment of double standards and a desire to expand strategic choice in an era of great-power competition.

This points to the book's central paradox. Its greatest merit is that it takes the Global South seriously; its main limitation is that it still tends to understand the Global South through the question of how the West can win it back. Stubb's problematique remains that of a Western policy practitioner: how to restore the appeal of liberal multilateralism, how to persuade the Global South to choose Helsinki rather than Yalta, and how to rebuild Western leadership without abandoning liberal values. At the policy level, however, the book is more persuasive in diagnosing the need for a more representative and legitimate international order than in specifying how that representation should be institutionalized. Its advocacy of values-based realism, multilateral rules and greater responsiveness to the Global South establishes a clear normative direction, but the practical institutional implications remain less fully developed, particularly with regard to concrete reforms of representation and decision-making in the United Nations and international financial institutions. This matters because many Global South states are unlikely to return to a revised liberal internationalist framework; they increasingly seek to maximize strategic choice through issue-specific partnerships, hedging and flexible alignments (Stubb, 2026; Kuik, 2016).

Overall, the value of The Triangle of Power lies less in offering a flawless theoretical model than in providing a lucid and readable diagnosis of a world in transition. It argues persuasively that the post-Cold War order is over and that the future will not be decided by the West alone (Stubb, 2026). The triangle is therefore most convincing as a heuristic for geopolitical change rather than as a literal map of an emerging international order. Even so, Stubb's call for "values-based realism" and "dignified foreign policy" deserves serious attention. It reminds the West that the future of international order will be decided not only by power, but also by legitimacy; not only by the ability to persuade others, but also by the willingness to listen to them. The book will be particularly useful for advanced undergraduate and postgraduate courses on international relations, foreign policy and changing world order, while its accessible prose and practitioner perspective should also make it valuable to diplomats, policymakers and readers interested in contemporary geopolitics.

CC BY

CRediT AUTHOR STATEMENT

Li Yang: Conceptualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing.
Long Ting: Conceptualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing.

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the book review.

CC BY

COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Acknowledgments:
Not applicable.

Funding:
Not applicable.

AI Declaration:
During the preparation and revision of this book review, the authors used ChatGPT solely for language editing and formatting support. The tool was not used for substantive analysis, interpretation, or evaluation of the reviewed book. All AI-assisted outputs were carefully reviewed and revised by the authors, who retain full responsibility for the content, analysis, and interpretation presented in the book review.

Disclosure statement:
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author/s.

CC BY

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Neutrality Statement on Jurisdictional Claims and Institutional Affiliations:

The publisher and the journal remain neutral regarding jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Language Quality and Author Responsibility Policy:

The publisher and the journal use AI-assistive tools to enhance the language quality of accepted book reviews. These tools help refine grammar, clarity, and readability while preserving the integrity of the original text. However, authors retain full responsibility for the accuracy and content of their work.

Disclaimer on External Links:

The publisher and the journal cannot be held responsible for the content of external websites or any broken or missing links within the book review. Authors are solely responsible for ensuring the accuracy and functionality of all hyperlinks at the time of submission.

CC BY

REFERENCES

1. Acharya, Amitav. 2014. "Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies." *International Studies Quarterly* 58 (4): 647–659. https://doi.org/10.1111/isqu.12171.
2. Cooley, Alexander, and Daniel H. Nexon. 2020. *Exit from Hegemony: The Unraveling of the American Global Order*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190916473.001.0001.
3. Flockhart, Trine. 2016. "The Coming Multi-Order World." *Contemporary Security Policy* 37 (1): 3–30. https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2016.1150053.
4. Kuik, Cheng-Chwee. 2016. "How Do Weaker States Hedge? Unpacking ASEAN States' Alignment Behavior towards China." *Journal of Contemporary China* 25 (100): 500–514. https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2015.1132714.
5. Ruggie, John Gerard. 1992. "Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution." *International Organization* 46 (3): 561–598. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300027831.
6. Stubb, Alexander. 2026. *The Triangle of Power: Rebalancing the New World Order*. London: Biteback Publishing.