

Seeking the Common Good: A Panacea to Growing Global Adversarial Geopolitics?

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Abstract

The contemporary international system is increasingly characterized by adversarial geopolitics, strategic rivalry, and ideological polarization. Yet the concept of the *common good*—the pursuit of shared interests that transcend national boundaries—remains a powerful framework for mitigating conflict and fostering cooperation. This paper examines whether the common good can serve as a panacea to escalating geopolitical tensions. Drawing on historical precedents, contemporary case studies, and theoretical insights from international relations, it argues that while the common good is not a perfect cure, it is an indispensable strategic orientation for global stability. The paper concludes by outlining policy pathways for embedding the common good into global governance.

Keywords: *Common good, Geopolitical rivalry, Multilateral cooperation, Global governance, International interdependence*

Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed a resurgence of geopolitical rivalry reminiscent of earlier eras of great-power competition (Rubab et al., 2024; Ryan, 2022; Mazarr, 2022). The U.S.–China strategic contest (He and Feng, 2023), Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (Kapitonenko, 2024), Middle Eastern instability (Saeed, 2025) and rising nationalist politics (Haynes et al., 2023; Steinberg, 2022) have collectively strained the international order. These tensions challenge the cooperative frameworks established after World War II and raise questions about the future of global governance. Rivalry among powerful states is often discussed in terms of strategy, national interest, or

military balance. Yet beneath these abstractions lies a far more consequential reality: adversarial geopolitics profoundly shapes the everyday wellbeing of humanity (Martin and Basistha, 2024; Tyner, 2023). Its effects fall heaviest on those least able to shield themselves—the weak and vulnerable, including children, the elderly, refugees, low-income communities, and populations living in fragile states (Kristensen, 2023; Fernandes and Ferreira, 2025; Taheri, 2025).

Against this backdrop, the idea of the **common good**—a principle rooted in classical philosophy, religious traditions, and modern political theory—offers a compelling alternative to zero-sum geopolitics. The common good emphasizes shared human interests such as peace, prosperity, environmental sustainability, and human dignity (see, Mazzucato, 2024). This paper explores whether this principle can meaningfully counteract adversarial geopolitics.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing the Common Good in International Relations

The common good in global politics refers to conditions that enable all nations and peoples to flourish (Solum, 2023). As further suggested by Solum (2023), it is not merely the sum of individual national interests but a set of collective outcomes that enhance global wellbeing. This includes collective security, economic interdependence and equitable development, environmental, stewardship, human rights and humanitarian protection and stable multilateral institutions as summarised and presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Dimensions of the Common Good in Global Governance

Dimension	Description	Illustrative Example
Security	Shared mechanisms to prevent conflict	UN peacekeeping operations
Economic Stability	Fair trade, development financing	Marshall Plan; AfCFTA
Environmental Protection	Joint climate action	Paris Climate Agreement

Humanitarian Welfare	Protection of vulnerable populations	Global refugee frameworks
Institutional Cooperation	Multilateral diplomacy	WTO dispute settlement

*Each dimension reflects the idea that global challenges require collective solutions.

The collective security element within the context of the common good is grounded on the core idea that countries are safer when they protect one another rather than acting alone. This is evident in existing mechanisms such as security alliances (e.g., NATO, ECOWAS), peacekeeping operations and early-warning systems for conflict. The reason why it serves the common good is because collective security reduces the incentives for arms races and unilateral aggression. When states commit to mutual defence, the cost of conflict rises and cooperation becomes more rational.

The economic interdependence and equitable development angle of the common good concept is also built on the core idea that economies that are linked through trade, investment, and shared production chains are less likely to engage in conflict. Exemplar mechanisms that reflect this idea includes regional trade blocs, development financing, fair trade rules and technology transfer. Interdependence serves the common good because it creates mutual benefits and shared vulnerabilities. Equitable development also ensures that poorer states are not structurally disadvantaged, reducing grievances that often fuel instability.

Environmental stewardship is salient component of the common good concept, and it hinges on the core maxim that the global environment is a shared resource; its degradation harms all states and people regardless of borders. Some of the mechanisms that reflects this core idea are climate agreements (e.g., Paris Agreement), biodiversity treaties and transboundary water management. This is envisaged to serve the common good because environmental crises—climate change, deforestation, water scarcity—are conflict multipliers. Hence, stewardship protects long-term human security and reduces competition over scarce resources. Given that the common good emphasizes shared prosperity and sustainable development, its principles are fundamentally advanced through inclusive economic models and resilient business practices, particularly entrepreneurship, which fosters innovation,

reduces inequality, and builds cooperative economic interdependence across nations (Haque, 2025). Equitable development also ensures that poorer states are not structurally disadvantaged, reducing grievances that often fuel instability.

The idea that protecting fundamental rights and human dignity strengthens global stability represents the human rights and humanitarian protection segment of the common good concept. This is exemplified with mechanisms such as international human rights law, refugee protection regimes, humanitarian intervention norms and international criminal court jurisdiction. Its proposition is that it serves the common good because societies that respect rights tend to be more stable, less prone to internal conflict, and more reliable international partners. Again, humanitarian norms also reduce the human cost of crises.

Stable multilateral institutions represent the common good idea that institutions provide predictable rules, reduce uncertainty, and facilitate cooperation. This facet of the concept is evident through existing mechanisms such as United Nations, World Trade Organisation, African Union, ASEAN, OECD and International financial institutions. Indeed, multilateral bodies seek to enable countries coordinate actions, resolve disputes peacefully, and manage global challenges that no single nation can solve alone, and therefore serves the common good.

It is important to highlight that all these elements of the common good interact as each component reinforces the others. As an illustration economic interdependence supports peace, which strengthens human rights protections; environmental cooperation requires strong multilateral institutions and humanitarian norms reduce the likelihood of conflict, enabling collective security. The common good in international relations is therefore systemic — it emerges from the interplay of institutions, norms, and shared interests.

History is replete with precedents when the common good, reduced conflict, where leaders, communities, or institutions prioritized shared welfare and successfully lowered tensions. The Concert of Europe (1815–1914) for instance, followed the Napoleonic Wars, when European powers established a diplomatic system to maintain balance and prevent large-scale conflict. Although imperfect, it preserved relative peace for nearly a century and reinforced the notion that shared interest in stability

outweighed ideological differences. Another example is the Marshall Plan (1948), guided the United States to invest over \$13 billion in rebuilding Western Europe. Scholars argue this was both strategic and altruistic (Hogan, 1987) because of the evident outcome that includes economic recovery, democratic consolidation, and long-term alliances.

The formation of the United Nations in 1945 was viewed as a practical example of pursuing the common good. It is essential to comment that the collective good position of the union has been loudly questioned by members from the global south recently. In effect, the UN institutionalized the pursuit of the common good through collective security, humanitarian aid, and international law. It has served as a global forum for conflict resolution and cooperation. In addition, the ASEAN's Regional Cooperation Model has been credited as the transformational vehicle for a region once marked by ideological conflict into one of the world's most stable blocs. Such an outcome epitomises peace through economic integration and diplomatic norms. Similar examples in Africa include: Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah's early post-independence policies emphasized national unity over ethnic division, reducing the risk of civil conflict in the 1950s–60s; South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), when Mandela's government prioritized forgiveness, truth-telling, and inclusive nation-building, preventing large-scale revenge violence after apartheid; Rwanda's Gacaca Community Courts After the 1994 genocide, when Rwanda used community-based justice to rebuild trust and reintegrate offenders, reducing cycles of revenge, and Botswana's Inclusive Governance Model. Strong traditional institutions and equitable resource distribution (especially diamond revenue) helped prevent ethnic conflict, among others.

Similarly, some notable Asia and Latin American examples include: India's Post-Independence Secular Constitution that embedded minority protections and federal power-sharing, India avoided large-scale fragmentation after 1947; Indonesia's Pancasila national ideology that sort to promote unity across ethnic and religious groups helped stabilize a diverse archipelago after independence; Japan's Post-War Social Compact Land reform, labour protections, and shared economic growth that reduced class conflict and political extremism in the 1950s–60s; and South Korea's

developmental state consensus broad agreement on national development goals that reduced internal conflict during rapid industrialization.

The Latin American examples cover: Costa Rica's Abolition of the Military (1948) and redirecting military spending to education and health created social cohesion and long-term political stability; Colombia's 2016 Peace Agreement that negotiated settlement with the FARC - focused on rural reform and victims' rights, reduced armed conflict in many regions; Chile's Democratic Transition (1990s) based on broad political pacts and truth commissions that helped avoid renewed authoritarian conflict after Pinochet and Uruguay's Social Welfare Consensus strong labour protections and inclusive welfare policies that reduced class conflict throughout the 20th century.

In summary, these cases are generally deemed to have been successful to a large extent because of common good attributes like inclusive institutions that engendered power-sharing, minority protections, and participatory governance; economic fairness that included land reform, equitable resource distribution, and social welfare; community-based justice mechanisms that prioritize healing over punishment; shared national identity via ideologies or narratives that transcend ethnic or class divisions; and leadership committed to peace by framing stability as a collective good.

Contemporary Geopolitics: Rising Adversarial Dynamics

Without prejudice to many other global adversarial geopolitics, the great-power (U.S.–China) competition, Russia–NATO Tensions, Middle Eastern fragmentation and technological arms races collectively have dominated international media discussions in the recent past and on-going. The U.S.–China rivalry spans trade, technology, military power, and ideology. Scholars describe this as a “Thucydides Trap” scenario (Allison, 2017). The Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 reignited Cold War–style confrontation and reshaped European security. While the proxy conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Libya illustrate how regional rivalries undermine collective security leaving Middle East regions fragmented, Competition in AI, cyberwarfare, and space militarization threatens global stability. It is common knowledge that such adversarial geopolitics are driven by unbridled nationalism, resource scarcity, technological rivalry and ideological polarization (see Table 2 for further descriptions of these drivers and examples respectively).

Table 2. Drivers of Adversarial Geopolitics

Driver	Description	Example
Nationalism	Domestic politics fueling external aggression	Brexit; U.S.–China decoupling
Resource Scarcity	Competition for energy, minerals, water	South China Sea disputes
Technological Rivalry	Race for digital dominance	AI and semiconductor competition
Ideological Polarization	Democracy vs. authoritarianism	Russia–West tensions

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist research design to examine how the concept of the *common good* can function as a corrective to adversarial geopolitics in the contemporary international system. The methodology integrates theoretical analysis, document review, and comparative case interpretation, drawing on established scholarship in political philosophy, international relations, and global governance. The paper employs a theory-driven analytical approach that synthesizes normative political theory with empirical insights from international relations. This design enables the study to explore how the common good—traditionally a philosophical construct—can be operationalized within global politics. The study relies exclusively on secondary data, drawing from peer-reviewed journals, academic books, policy reports, and multilateral institutional documents. Sources of data and information include scholarly books on global governance, ethics, and international relations theory, peer-reviewed journal articles from international Organisations, ethics and international affairs and review of international studies, policy reports from the United Nations, African Union, ASEAN, and OECD and historical case analyses documenting cooperative security, environmental agreements, and humanitarian norms. These sources provide conceptual clarity, empirical grounding, and historical precedents relevant to the study. The analysis involved three stages covering conceptual analysis that clarifies the meaning of the common good in global politics, followed by a normative-theoretical synthesis that integrates insights from cosmopolitanism, liberal

institutionalism, and communitarian ethics to articulate how the common good can counter adversarial geopolitics and a comparative interpretive assessment that examined historical and contemporary examples of cooperative security, environmental stewardship, and multilateral governance to illustrate the practical relevance of the common good. The study used purposeful sampling to select illustrative cases where collective welfare approaches reduced geopolitical tension. These cases are not meant to be exhaustive but serve as analytical exemplars. The cases were selected based on their relevance to the five pillars of the common good: collective security, economic interdependence, environmental stewardship, human rights, and multilateral stability.

Findings and Discussion

Can the Common Good Serve as a Panacea?

The idea of the common good offers a compelling corrective to the escalating adversarial dynamics that define contemporary geopolitics. In a world marked by strategic rivalry, zero-sum competition, and fragmented multilateralism, the common good reframes global politics around shared human flourishing rather than national dominance. It asserts that the stability, prosperity, and security of any one state are inseparable from the wellbeing of the international community as a whole. By foregrounding collective security, equitable economic cooperation, environmental stewardship, human rights protection, and robust multilateral institutions, the common good provides a normative and practical foundation for reducing conflict and fostering cooperative global order.

At its core, the common good challenges the logic of adversarial geopolitics by replacing rivalry with interdependence. It recognizes that transnational threats—climate change, pandemics, cyber-instability, resource scarcity, and mass displacement—cannot be contained by borders or resolved through unilateral action. When countries pursue policies that enhance shared resilience rather than narrow advantage, they reduce the structural conditions that fuel insecurity and geopolitical mistrust. In this sense, the common good functions as a stabilizing principle, encouraging states to see cooperation not as a concession but as a strategic necessity.

Moreover, the common good strengthens the legitimacy of the international system. By promoting fairness, inclusivity, and respect for human dignity, it reduces grievances that often manifest as conflict, extremism, or geopolitical backlash. It also revitalizes multilateral institutions by grounding them in shared purpose rather than power politics. When global governance is oriented toward collective wellbeing, institutions become more credible, more effective, and more capable of mediating disputes peacefully.

Finally, the common good offers a moral horizon that transcends ideological divides. It does not erase national interests but situates them within a broader ethical framework that values cooperation, justice, and sustainability. In doing so, it transforms geopolitics from a battleground of competing sovereignties into a platform for shared problem-solving.

The common good serves as a panacea for adversarial geopolitics by realigning global priorities around mutual flourishing, reducing the incentives for conflict, and fostering a more stable, just, and cooperative international order. It is not merely an ideal but a pragmatic pathway toward a world where security and prosperity are understood as collective achievements rather than competitive victories. Some practical examples include exploring interdependence as a peace mechanism, situations where shared global threats encourage cooperation, multilateral institutions serving as stabilizers and investment in moral leadership and norm setting. Interdependence as a peace mechanism amply manifests in the domains where economic interdependence reduces incentives for conflict (Keohane & Nye, 1977). A cardinal example that is observed in recent history is that despite tensions, U.S.–China trade remains above \$600 billion annually. Climate change, pandemics, and cyber threats transcend borders and the international community's reaction has shown that shared global threats encourage cooperation. Additionally, multilateral institutions serve as stabilizers by providing platforms for negotiation rather than confrontation. An example is the World Trade Organisation (WTO) that offers dispute mechanisms to prevent trade conflicts from escalating. Finally, the moral leadership and norm setting is directly reflected in countries such as Norway, Sweden, and Canada that invest heavily in peacebuilding and humanitarian diplomacy. Such tactful mechanism accentuates norm diffusion that encourages cooperative behaviour.

Common Good in Action: Case Studies

The paper adopted three (3) case studies around global health cooperation during Covid -19 pandemic, climate change agreements and Africa's Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) to illustrate the common good in action.

With regards to the global health cooperation during COVID-19 pandemic, the rapid sharing of genomic data set the tone for a common good foundation to tackle the pandemic. The first major demonstration of the common good during the pandemic occurred when Chinese scientists released the SARS-CoV-2 genomic sequence publicly in January 2020. This act enabled laboratories worldwide to begin developing diagnostic tests and vaccine prototypes within days. Countries such as the UK, South Africa, and Brazil later continued this cooperative spirit by rapidly sharing genomic data on emerging variants through platforms like GISAID. This transparency allowed global health authorities to track mutations, adjust public-health responses, and accelerate vaccine adaptation. The common-good impact was become apparent as early data sharing reduced uncertainty, enabled faster scientific responses, and strengthened global situational awareness.

COVAX vaccine development and distribution that was co-led by WHO, Gavi, and CEPI, was designed as a global public-goods mechanism to ensure equitable vaccine access. It pooled resources from wealthy and developing countries to purchase vaccines collectively and distribute them based on need rather than wealth. By 2022, COVAX had delivered hundreds of millions of doses to low-income countries that would otherwise have been excluded from early vaccine markets. The common-good impact was demonstrably evident, in that, the collective procurement reduced inequality and stabilized global health outcomes. Another notable example relates to the high pace of international scientific collaboration during the covid-19 pandemic. COVID-19 triggered one of the most intense periods of scientific cooperation in modern history. Researchers shared preprints, clinical trial data, and epidemiological models at unprecedented speed. Cross-border collaborations—such as the Oxford–AstraZeneca partnership, mRNA research networks, and global clinical trials—accelerated vaccine development from a decade-long process to under a year. As an impactful common good in practice evidence, knowledge became a shared resource,

enabling breakthroughs that no single country could have achieved alone. On the contrary, the common good impact of these interventions was limited by vaccine nationalism and misinformation. Despite these successes outlined earlier, the common good was undermined by vaccine hoarding, export bans, and disinformation campaigns. Wealthy states secured early supplies far beyond their populations' needs, while misinformation eroded trust in vaccines globally. The objective lesson from this scenario is that the common good can guide global action, but political self-interest and information disorder remain major obstacles.

Climate change agreements epitomise cases of common good in action. The Paris Agreement in 2015 marked a turning point in climate diplomacy by committing nearly every country to limit global warming through nationally determined contributions (NDCs). Unlike earlier treaties, Paris emphasized flexibility, transparency, and shared responsibility. It created a framework where states cooperate through technology transfer, climate finance, and adaptation support. The common-good impact in this example is underpinned by recognizing climate stability as a universal public good requiring collective stewardship. The Kigali Amendment (2016) further built on the Montreal Protocol and committed countries to phasing down hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs), potent greenhouse gases used in refrigeration. This agreement is projected to prevent up to 0.5°C of warming by 2100. It succeeded because it aligned environmental protection with economic incentives, offering financial and technological support to developing countries. The common-good impact is evident from the demonstration that cooperative regulation of shared atmospheric resources can yield measurable global benefits. A third notable climate agreement chosen was the Global Methane pledge in 2021. For this agreement, over 100 countries agreed to reduce methane emissions by 30% by 2030. Methane is a short-lived but highly potent greenhouse gas and reducing it offers rapid climate benefits. The pledge encouraged data sharing, best-practice dissemination, and joint monitoring. The common-good impact is explicated in how targeted, science-based cooperation can address urgent global risks. A key insight from the cases highlighted is that climate diplomacy is a feasible model of common-good cooperation. In sum, climate agreements illustrate that when countries recognize shared vulnerability, they can build durable frameworks for collective action. Climate diplomacy remains one of the strongest examples of the common good shaping global governance.

Looking forward, Africa's Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) that is integrating 54 economies into a single market has the potential to achieve a common-good impact on all stakeholders. Launched in 2021, AfCFTA is the world's largest free-trade area by number of participating countries. It aims to remove tariffs on 90% of goods, harmonize regulations, and create a unified African market of 1.3 billion people. By reducing trade barriers, AfCFTA seeks to stimulate intra-African trade, diversify economies, and strengthen regional value chains. The potential for common-good impact can be envisioned from AfCFTA's work to make economic integration becomes a shared project that benefits all member states, not just the largest economies. This has the added potential to reduce conflict through interdependence. As earlier demonstrated, economic interdependence is a well-established peace mechanism. By linking national economies through trade, investment, and shared infrastructure, AfCFTA increases the cost of conflict and incentivizes cooperation. It also strengthens regional institutions such as the African Union and enhances collective bargaining power in global trade negotiations. A more integrated Africa is better positioned to prevent conflict, manage disputes peacefully, and promote inclusive development – presenting a congenial environment for common good impact to be realised.

Notwithstanding its promise and potential, the common good faces structural challenges that limit its adoption, applicability and impact. The structural challenges include power asymmetry that is at play when great powers often prioritize national interest; domestic politics where leaders may exploit nationalism for political gain; institutional weaknesses such as the prevailing situation where the UN Security Council veto power limits action and economic inequality that often led to the situation where uneven development fuels resentment and instability.

Policy Pathways for Embedding the Common Good in Global Governance

Embedding the common good into international politics requires more than moral aspiration; it demands institutional, economic, and environmental pathways that reshape how states understand their interests and responsibilities. Four major policy directions—strengthening multilateral institutions, promoting cooperative security frameworks, advancing global economic justice, and deepening climate and

environmental solidarity—offer practical routes for transforming global governance from a system of rivalry into one grounded in shared flourishing.

Strengthening Multilateral Institutions

Multilateral institutions remain the backbone of collective action. Bodies such as the United Nations, African Union, European Union, and ASEAN provide the rules, norms, and platforms through which states coordinate responses to transnational challenges. Strengthening these institutions means enhancing their legitimacy and decision-making capacity, ensuring equitable representation for developing regions, and improving enforcement mechanisms for global norms. However, the legitimacy and efficacy of these global frameworks are ultimately tested at the local level. The theoretical and practical role of local government—as the sphere of governance closest to the citizen—is fundamental in translating multilateral agreements into tangible outcomes, fostering civic participation, and building the social trust necessary for sustained cooperation (Haque, 2012). When multilateral bodies are empowered to mediate disputes, coordinate humanitarian responses, and regulate global commons, they transform the international system from a competitive arena into a cooperative community. Robust institutions make the common good not an abstract ideal but a governing principle.

Promoting Cooperative Security Frameworks

Traditional security models rooted in zero-sum competition and military dominance often undermine global stability. Cooperative security frameworks—such as confidence-building measures, regional peacekeeping, arms-control agreements, and preventive diplomacy—shift the focus from deterrence to shared security interests. Initiatives like ECOWAS peace operations, OSCE monitoring missions, and ASEAN conflict-prevention mechanisms demonstrate that security is most durable when states view threats collectively rather than individually. By embedding cooperation into security policy, states reduce mistrust, prevent escalation, and create conditions where peace becomes a mutual investment rather than a fragile truce.

Advancing Global Economic Justice

Economic inequality—between and within states—remains one of the most powerful drivers of instability. Advancing global economic justice involves fairer trade rules, debt restructuring, technology transfer, and inclusive development financing. Policies that promote equitable global growth reduce structural grievances that fuel conflict and geopolitical resentment. Initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and global tax-justice campaigns illustrate how economic cooperation can serve the common good by expanding opportunity, reducing dependency, and strengthening social cohesion. When economic systems are designed to benefit all rather than a privileged few, global stability becomes more attainable.

Climate and Environmental Solidarity

Climate change is the ultimate test of the common good. No state can shield itself from rising temperatures, extreme weather, or biodiversity collapse. Climate and environmental solidarity—through agreements like the Paris Agreement, the Kigali Amendment, and the Global Methane Pledge—reflects a growing recognition that environmental stewardship is a shared planetary responsibility. Policies that support climate finance, renewable-energy transitions, and protection of global ecosystems create long-term security benefits that transcend borders. Environmental solidarity embeds the common good by aligning national survival with global cooperation.

Together, these four pathways form a coherent strategy for embedding the common good into global governance. Strengthened multilateral institutions provide the architecture; cooperative security frameworks supply stability; economic justice ensures fairness; and environmental solidarity safeguards the planet. When pursued collectively, these policies transform international relations from a landscape of adversarial geopolitics into a system oriented toward shared human flourishing.

Conclusion

The common good is not a perfect cure for adversarial geopolitics, but it is a powerful antidote. History demonstrates that cooperation—however difficult—has repeatedly prevented catastrophe and fostered prosperity. In an era of global interdependence, the pursuit of the common good is not idealistic; it is essential for survival. The

challenge is not conceptual but political: whether nations can recognize that shared threats require shared solutions. The common good offers a strategic compass for navigating an increasingly fragmented world.

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