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Strategic Voids in International Cooperation: A Geopolitical Tool in the Context of Environmental Justice

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*"A has power over B to the extent that A
can get B to do something that B
would not otherwise do".*

- Robert Dahl (1957), *The Concept of Power*

*"Action in chess is not only determined by
what moves, but by what is left unmoved".*

- Attributed to Garry Kasparov, Chess Grandmaster

Abstract

This essay explores the concept of strategic voids in international cooperation and environmental justice, analyzing how these voids serve as tools for hegemonic actors to exert subtle control over global politics, perpetuating systemic inequalities. Strategic voids are deliberate, state-centric gaps left unaddressed in international governance, which hegemonic actors exploit to consolidate their influence. Drawing on power theories by Robert Dahl, Steven Lukes, and Joseph Nye, as well as philosophical concepts from Hegel, Feuerbach, and Nietzsche, the essay examines how these voids reinforce existing power dynamics, contributing to environmental injustice, while allowing hegemonic forces to maintain dominance. In response, the essay proposes specific approaches. One is the development of multi-level governance frameworks that promote participation and inclusive decision-making at both local and global scales, decentralizing power and ensuring greater inclusion of vulnerable communities. It also advocates for redefined global responsibility through incentive-based reward mechanisms, encouraging states, corporations, and organizations to adopt more sustainable practices. This shift moves from punitive centered measures to proactive incentives that align with long-term environmental goals, promoting a cooperative approach to addressing climate issues. Additionally, the essay calls for the exploration of regional climate agreements tailored to the unique challenges of neighboring states, fostering collaboration and addressing cross-

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border environmental issues. These proposals aim to analyze strategic voids as potential spaces for dialogue and effective international cooperation, with a view to addressing the root causes of environmental injustice. The paper emphasizes the need for critical and epistemological vigilance over the structures and key actors in international relations, as well as the importance of inclusive participation in global decision-making. It concludes by calling for a transformation of governance models toward more just and sustainable frameworks that prioritize both environmental protection and social equity. Such shifts could contribute to moving towards an international system that more effectively addresses issues of justice, while acknowledging the challenges involved.

Keywords: strategic voids, international cooperation, environmental justice, soft power, global governance

Resumen

Este ensayo explora el concepto de los vacíos estratégicos en el contexto de la cooperación internacional y la justicia ambiental, analizando cómo estos vacíos, con perfil estatocéntrico, actúan como herramientas para que los actores hegemónicos ejerzan un control sutil sobre la política global, perpetuando las desigualdades sistémicas. A partir de las teorías del poder de Robert Dahl, Steven Lukes y Joseph Nye, y con la incorporación de perspectivas filosóficas de Hegel, Feuerbach y Nietzsche, se examina cómo los vacíos estratégicos refuerzan las dinámicas de poder existentes y contribuyen a la injusticia ambiental, al tiempo que permiten que las fuerzas hegemónicas mantengan su dominio en detrimento de las comunidades marginadas y el medio ambiente. En respuesta a esta problemática, el ensayo propone algunos abordajes, como la creación de marcos de gobernanza multinivel que favorezcan la participación y la toma de decisiones inclusivas a diferentes escalas, desde lo local hasta lo global, promoviendo la descentralización del poder y mayor inclusión para las comunidades vulnerables. Además, plantea la redefinición de la responsabilidad global mediante mecanismos de recompensas basados en incentivos, para alentar a los estados, corporaciones y organizaciones a adoptar prácticas más sostenibles, así como la promoción de acuerdos climáticos regionales que ofrezcan soluciones específicas y fomenten la colaboración entre estados vecinos. Estas propuestas buscan analizar los vacíos estratégicos como espacios potenciales para el diálogo y la cooperación internacional efectiva, al tomar en cuenta las causas subyacentes de la injusticia ambiental. El trabajo subraya la necesidad de una vigilancia crítica y epistemológica sobre las estructuras y actores clave en el marco de las relaciones internacionales y destaca la importancia de una participación inclusiva en los procesos de toma de decisiones globales, concluyendo con un llamado a transformar los modelos de gobernanza hacia marcos más justos y sostenibles que prioricen tanto la protección ambiental como la equidad social.

Palabras clave: vacíos estratégicos, cooperación internacional, justicia ambiental, poder blando, gobernanza global

Initial Inquiry: Is it possible to conceptualize the strategic void in international cooperation?

Voids are likely the norm in a global context where international institutions face unprecedented challenges, particularly concerning environmental issues. The vision of globalization as a dominant paradigm has fractured, or at the very least, has been reinterpreted

by new ways of understanding international relations. That's why analyzing international cooperation through the lens of the 'void' offers a profound shift in understanding the so-called 'unoccupied' spaces in global politics, prompting a reconsideration of power dynamics beyond visible territorial occupation. In this essay, we will explore the concept of "void politics" and its consequences for international cooperation.

Hegel's dialectical method, for example, offers a robust philosophical framework for understanding the evolution of international relations. In this context, nation-states progress from overt cooperation based on clear, visible interests (the thesis) to more covert and fragmented alliances, which exploit strategic voids as spaces for indirect influence (the antithesis). Such a transition highlights a fundamental shift in global politics, where power is not only exercised solely through visible means like territorial occupation or military might, but through the more subtle and strategic management of voids nurtured by international actors. This perspective challenges traditional notions of power, suggesting that true influence resides not in the explicit control of physical space, but in the capacity to navigate and manage the unseen gaps in international structures—void politics—. According to Hegel, the dialectical process leads to a synthesis, where the global order redefines itself, evolving into a model in which voids and contradictions become the critical battleground for maneuvering and power projection (Hegel, 2021).

Building on this framework, Feuerbach's exploration of human relations provides additional insight into the role of voids within international cooperation. Feuerbach (2021) suggests that human beings project their worldviews and desires onto the external world, shaping their perceptions and interactions with others. In the context of international relations, voids, therefore, are not merely empty or passive spaces but rather dynamic sites that hold the potential for projection and influence—voids are spaces of power and power struggles—. The strategic manipulation of voids allows international actors to extend their influence indirectly, projecting their power through non-obvious means. This perspective aligns with the idea that power dynamics in international cooperation are not solely defined by overt actions or visible control but by the ability to shape perceptions and indirect relations. Void spaces provide opportunities for actors to exercise power on the margins, redefining the global order through subtle manipulations of international norms, informal structures, and unspoken agreements. The very absence of explicit control in these voids offers room for innovation, flexibility, and the exercise of power in less conventional, but equally significant, ways.

The concept of "will", for example, plays a crucial role in both Feuerbach and Nietzsche's philosophies, though with distinct nuances. For Feuerbach, "will" refers to the human capacity for "rational desire" and freedom of action, emphasizing the importance of human agency in shaping the world. He views the will as an expression of

the individual's freedom and the potential for human improvement through reason and compassion. In contrast, Nietzsche's notion of the "will to power" is a more radical and complex concept, referring to the fundamental driving force behind human behavior and existence. Nietzsche proposes that all living beings are motivated by an inherent desire to assert control, overcome limitations, and expand their influence, often transcending conventional moral values in the process.

In the context of international politics, these concepts suggest that states and other actors, like individuals, are driven by underlying motives of power, dominance, and survival. International actors engage in international arenas not only to pursue economic or political interests, but also to assert their own power and identity, or at the very least, to weaken the influence of their rivals and adversaries. Strategic decisions made by states can often be understood through the lens of these "wills": the will to influence, or outright defy, international norms in a pursuit of dominance in global conflicts. Conflicts between nations, therefore, may be seen as expressions of competing wills, where each state seeks to impose its own vision of order or anarchy. The ongoing struggles for geopolitical power, economic control, or ideological supremacy in the global arena can be viewed as modern expressions of these philosophical concepts.

Nietzsche's (2016) concept of the "will to power" further enriches our understanding of strategic voids in international cooperation: power is not only expansion or control, but the capacity to shape the conditions in which social and political systems operate. In the context of international relations, then, actors do not merely seek visible dominance; they exercise the will to power by defining the rules of the game itself through the occupation and shaping of strategic voids. But what determines who can interact in these voids and how they do so? Several interlocking factors matter: the level or proximity to centers of power (institutional access to decision-making arenas); political-economic alliances and coalitions that confer access, resources and legitimacy; hard power—military capabilities that underpin bargaining leverage—; the ability to seize opportunities and exploit conjunctural openings (organizational agility, timely information and resources); and control over technical knowledge, expertise and legal standing that enable actors to frame problems and propose binding solutions. Equally important are softer, relational dimensions like networks of influence, normative legitimacy, and geographic or economic proximity, that determine whether an actor can transform potential access into meaningful influence. Through these capacities, actors convert structural advantages into rule-making in spaces left unregulated—what might be called void colonization—so that the will to power operates less as direct conquest and more as the "quieter art" of redefining how global cooperation is structured and by whom.

The role of voids in international cooperation also invites a reevaluation of how we

understand cooperation itself. Traditional models of cooperation assume that power must be explicitly exercised through formal agreements, territorial claims, or direct intervention. However, by focusing on the strategic management of voids, we are led to a particular conception of cooperation as a more fluid, decentralized process where influence is exerted through tacit means, such as information, cultural diplomacy, and informal alliances: void cooperation. These voids represent not a lack of power, but rather a space where alternative forms of governance can emerge, based on shared understandings that are not immediately evident. In this context, international cooperation is not simply about negotiating or occupying spaces, but about navigating these voids and reshaping the global order in a way that reflects the evolving dynamics of power.

Understanding voids as strategic spaces of power invites a broader reconsideration of the ways in which global governance operates in the 21st century. Traditional state-centric models of international relations often overlook the subtle and indirect forms of power that shape outcomes on the global stage. By focusing on voids, we are able to account for the often invisible or purposely ignored mechanisms of influence that occur in the background of global cooperation. These include diplomatic backchannels, the manipulation of international norms, and the shaping of informal power structures. Recognizing voids as key areas of strategic importance allows us to diversify the nature of international cooperation itself. Instead of seeing it as a zero-sum game of direct control, we can view it as a complex web of interdependent relationships, where influence is exercised not just through the explicit occupation of space, but through the strategic management of willfully unoccupied spaces.

Moreover, the concept of voids also underscores the importance of indirect power as a means of governance. Voids represent spaces where traditional methods of coercion or authority, such as military force or economic dominance, are hypothetically less effective. Instead, power in these areas is exerted through the ability to shape norms, perceptions, and ideologies that influence the behavior of states and non-state actors. This form of governance does not only rely on visible markers of power, but rather on the creation and manipulation of relatively invisible structures that define the global order. A Hegelian dialectic of voids is at play: the void acts as the *thesis*—an untamed arena for conflict and control—which clashes with its *antithesis*, its role as a space for dialogue and diplomatic opportunity, ultimately evolving into a *synthesis*.

In addition, this focus on strategic voids highlights the increasing importance of non-state actors in global governance. Multinational corporations, international organizations, and civil society groups all have the ability to influence global politics, not by directly occupying spaces, but by operating within the voids. These actors often shape international norms, policies, and practices from “behind the scenes”, in ways that are less comprehensible

but nonetheless powerful. By leveraging the strategic voids in international relations, these non-state actors can shift the direction of global governance without the need for direct intervention or territorial control. This development further illustrates the dynamic and evolving nature of international cooperation, where power is no longer solely concentrated in the hands of state actors, but is increasingly diffused across a variety of players who operate within the voids of the global system.

Void vs. Vacuum: Understanding “strategic absences” in international power dynamics

In this essay, we have chosen to use the term “void” rather than “vacuum” to describe the strategic absences within international cooperation due to the more static and abstract connotations that the former offers. The concept of a “void” allows for a more flexible and conceptual interpretation, making it particularly suitable for exploring power dynamics, inequalities, and gaps within the global architecture. In this context, a void should not be read only as an empty power-space that must be filled in conventional terms; rather, it denotes an intentional or junctural absence of governance or influence that dominant actors may deliberately leave unaddressed because the absence itself can be instrumentally valuable at the moment. When powerful actors tolerate or manufacture such absences, they can exploit them to entrench authority, set agendas, and shape norms without formal contestation. Thinking of voids as strategic—rather than merely accidental—shifts the analytic focus from occupation to manipulation: it foregrounds how absences are produced, maintained, and leveraged as mechanisms of indirect rule and subtle reordering of international authority.

While the term “vacuum” may be appropriate in certain contexts, particularly when referring to a lack or absence that provokes immediate action, as seen in physics where it refers to a space devoid of matter, it does not fully capture the complexity of international relations. A vacuum, in the physical sense, generates a suction effect, pulling actors or forces toward it. This metaphor could be used to describe how certain actors may rapidly fill voids of power when they perceive an opportunity. However, the dynamics of strategic voids in international cooperation are not always characterized by immediate or active response. In many cases, voids are more passive and unacknowledged, making them scenarios where the status quo remains unchallenged—void resistance—, and hegemonic actors are able to maintain or even strengthen their control without opposition. The relative passivity of voids reflects the subtlety with which power dynamics are reinforced, making them less visible but no less consequential—void impasse—.

In contrast, the concept of a void emphasizes the absence itself and the potential for this absence to either remain unaddressed or be manipulated by powerful actors, even if it's filled with apparent political emptiness. It offers a framework where power is not

immediately “sucked” into the vacuum, but rather allowed to persist and settle in ways that preserve existing hierarchies. This lack of dynamism in the void creates an environment where hegemonic powers can solidify their dominance without the pressure of active confrontation or resistance. Thus, the use of “void” aligns with the conceptualization of power as something that is entrenched through neglect or the passive omission of responsibility, rather than through overt or immediate action.

Additionally, while “vacuum” conveys an immediate and dynamic process, the use of “void” allows for a broader, more abstract investigation into how power operates in global governance. A vacuum’s pull implies a force at work, one that drives change and encourages movement, whereas a void suggests an absence of such forces, creating a space that is more static and resistant to change. This fine difference is crucial for understanding how hegemonic actors can create, promote and exploit voids to maintain their dominance. Hegemonic forces may let voids persist through omission—either by explicit non-intervention or by indirect inaction—thereby maintaining influence without continuous direct engagement. This “void-based proxy” mode of dominance can be as effective as overt intervention, since it secures leverage while incurring minimal political and economic costs.

By choosing “void,” the essay reframes these absences as analytically tractable and normatively contestable arenas. It calls for mapping and addressing voids through cooperative mechanisms—multilateral fora, joint capacity-building, and dispute-resolution—to broaden participation and prevent rapid occupation by external or hegemonic forces (what I term Thucydides’ hegemonic void). In short, preventive institutionalism can make capture politically costly and convert potential instability into opportunities for more effective global governance.

By focusing on “voids,” we move away from the tendency to view international relations as a simple vacuum where actors are constantly competing for influence—idealism vs realism *et cetera*—. Instead, we open up the possibility of understanding the more complex, enduring forms of power that exist within international cooperation. These voids, while often overlooked, are sites of significant strategic importance. In this way, the void becomes not just an “relative power absence” but a potential space for the reimagining of international relations.

Strategies and voids: A chess metaphor

International cooperation, in its various forms and realms, has historically been a field of dispute and collaboration among global actors who seek not only to resolve shared problems but also to maximize their own interests in an interdependent international system. However, in recent years, the discussion about power in international cooperation has moved beyond

traditional approaches that only consider coercive power or explicit force relations among actors. In this context, strategic voids emerge as a key concept to understand how some actors, particularly hegemonic ones, are able to shape the global agenda without resorting to open confrontations or high transaction costs. These voids not only represent the lack of agreements or action but can become strategic spaces that allow actors to dominate quietly, exercising what is known as “soft power” (Prado & Velázquez, 2014).

Through Joseph Nye’s (1990) theory of soft power, we know that power is not only exercised through force or coercion but also manifests through the ability to influence others more subtly, through attraction and persuasion. In this sense, strategic voids in international cooperation allow certain actors, such as the most powerful countries or major international institutions, to use their influence indirectly. By controlling these voids, they can shape the dynamics of international cooperation in their favor, directing the behavior of others without the need for direct confrontation. This type of “intangible power” can be compared to a technique in chess, where, just as a player controls the spaces on the board by placing pieces and pawns, a global actor can manage strategic voids to direct the flow of international cooperation without explicit intervention.

In the realm of environmental justice, strategic voids acquire an even more significant dimension. Global environmental policies on climate change, biodiversity, or water management reveal how voids can directly affect vulnerable communities, exacerbating asymmetries and perpetuating historical inequalities. Yet, if we assume that no actor is truly without power in international relations, then even those often labeled as “powerless” can exert influence. They do so by mobilizing moral authority, leveraging transnational advocacy networks, forging coalitions with sympathetic states or international organizations, and strategically framing issues to gain visibility in global forums. In scenarios where hegemonic actors exploit voids to shape agendas and allocate environmental costs and benefits, marginalized actors can still contest, redirect, or reshape outcomes by exploiting cracks in governance structures and aligning with broader movements. Understanding how these actors navigate, contest, and even reconfigure voids is essential to promote more equitable forms of international cooperation oriented toward environmental justice (UNFCCC, 2015).

International cooperation is increasingly characterized by a complex interplay of visible and invisible forms of power. While traditional views often focus on tangible aspects such as military strength or economic dominance, the more nuanced role of strategic voids reveals the subtler dynamics at play. These voids, created—with intention or direct omission—by gaps in agreements, unregulated spaces, or ambiguous norms, serve as arenas where hegemonic actors can exert control indirectly. By exploiting these voids, powerful countries or institutions can maintain influence over global policy without

direct interference, shaping the international order through informal means. This form of governance challenges the conventional notion that power is solely exercised through visible authority, offering a more multifaceted view of international relations where control is often achieved through “strategic non-action” (void action).

Moreover, the influence of strategic voids extends beyond political power to include the management of global resources, particularly in areas where cooperation is most needed, such as environmental protection and climate change mitigation. Hegemonic actors that control these voids not only shape policy but also direct the flow of resources and financial assistance, often reinforcing the global inequalities that they claim to address—void double discourse—. In environmental justice, this manipulation of voids becomes even more critical, as it enables dominant states and institutions to dictate terms that disproportionately affect vulnerable populations.

This exploratory essay does not aim to produce a definitive theoretical innovation, but rather seeks to examine how strategic voids—defined as spaces of inaction or lack of regulation in the international context—are leveraged by hegemonic powers and rising actors to strengthen their positions on the global stage. Through an analysis that connects power theories, such as those proposed by Robert Dahl, Steven Lukes, and Joseph Nye, with the concept of environmental justice, it is argued that these voids are not merely a lack of action but a mechanism of silent control developed by hegemonic actors purposely or by absence of political action. This approach allows dominant actors to continue exerting global influence without the need for direct confrontation (and a lower cost), perpetuating an international system where the most powerful maintain their hegemony while the voices of the less dominant remain marginalized.

Voids in international cooperation: A strategic opportunity

Voids in international cooperation are critical spaces where global governance may fall short, either intentionally or due to systemic limitations, to provide adequate and effective solutions to global challenges. These voids emerge in various forms, such as the absence of binding commitments, the lack of regulatory frameworks, temporal anarchy or lack of order in international relations, or the inability of multilateral institutions to address urgent issues in a timely manner. The causes behind these voids are multifaceted, ranging from geopolitical tensions and differing national interests to institutional weaknesses and structural inequalities within international organizations. As a result, these gaps in cooperation undermine the ability of global governance mechanisms to respond to issues such as climate change, environmental justice, and economic inequality, leaving marginalized communities and vulnerable nations without the support or resources they need to address their concerns.

These voids—spaces of non-commitment, weak commitment or false commitment—are not only a reflection of existing power imbalances but also function as tools that reinforce these inequalities. Stronger actors, often the wealthiest and most influential countries or corporations, are able to shape the rules and frameworks of the international system in ways that serve their own interests. By influencing the creation or management of these voids, these dominant actors can maintain a disproportionate level of control over global decision-making processes. Meanwhile, weaker actors, including developing countries and marginalized communities, struggle to assert their voices and influence international agendas, often finding themselves excluded from meaningful participation in critical policy discussions. This systemic imbalance prevents the international community from addressing shared challenges in a fair and equitable manner, perpetuating cycles of inequality and environmental degradation. In this way, strategic voids not only reflect the existing power asymmetries but also deepen the divisions within the global system, creating a vicious cycle—the void trap—that is difficult to break without significant structural reforms in global governance.

Strategic voids in international cooperation can manifest in both tangible and abstract forms, each contributing to the dysfunction of global governance in different ways. Tangible voids refer to physical absences of cooperation or action on specific issues where states or international organizations fail to coordinate their efforts. For example, the lack of binding international agreements on climate change or the absence of global initiatives to address environmental degradation in certain regions create concrete gaps that hinder progress. These physical voids often emerge due to conflicting national interests, political reluctance, lobbying of economic interests or the inability of multilateral institutions to enforce cooperation. They result in concrete consequences, such as insufficient funding for risk adaptation in vulnerable nations or a lack of coordinated efforts to mitigate global crises, leaving many of the most pressing global challenges unaddressed.

On the other hand, abstract voids refer to less visible, yet equally significant, gaps in international relations. These voids are characterized by the absence of norms, institutional structures, or diplomatic frameworks that could facilitate more effective cooperation. For example, a lack of agreed-upon principles in the realm of environmental justice or the absence of specialized international institutions dedicated to specific cross-border environmental concerns can create an environment of uncertainty and inaction. Additionally, abstract voids may stem from a failure in conceptualizing or theorizing critical issues within academia or diplomatic circles, leaving gaps in the understanding and framing of key topics. This lack of intellectual or institutional development can impede progress in creating actionable policies or in shaping the international discourse necessary for addressing complex challenges. These abstract voids, while not as immediately noticeable as physical absences, contribute to the

larger structural limitations of international cooperation and can prevent the emergence of solutions that require innovative thinking or new approaches.

A prime example of voids in international cooperation is the Paris Agreement (2015), which, despite setting ambitious goals to mitigate climate change, leaves it up to states to define their nationally determined contributions (NDCs). This has allowed the most powerful countries to avoid stricter commitments while projecting an image of environmental leadership (Hale, 2020). This normative void has been strategically used by actors such as the United States and China to maintain their economic competitiveness without compromising their national interests or at a low geopolitical cost.

In the field of environmental justice, these voids are especially problematic because they reproduce patterns of exclusion and inequality. Martínez-Alier (2014) notes that the most vulnerable communities, particularly in the Global South, disproportionately bear the impacts of environmental degradation due to the absence of effective international—and often national—governance mechanisms that address their needs. The exploitation of strategic voids in international cooperation thus becomes a key lens for understanding how global power relations are structured and maintained.

When there is a lack of consensus or weak enforcement mechanisms, powerful actors can take advantage of these gaps to maintain their interests while avoiding commitments that would limit their freedom of action. This not only weakens the overall effectiveness of international agreements but also hinders the capacity of multilateral institutions to enforce meaningful global cooperation. The absence of clear binding regulations in critical areas, such as climate change or environmental protection, becomes a tool for dominant actors to assert control without taking on the financial or political costs associated with stronger regulatory frameworks. This selective and cyclical approach to cooperation reinforces existing inequalities and contributes to the fragmentation of global governance.

On top of the environmental challenges these voids generate, the social and political implications of power asymmetries are equally evident. As Martínez-Alier (2014) emphasizes, vulnerable populations in the Global South disproportionately bear the consequences of weak or absent governance structures, which fail to provide adequate protection against environmental harm. By failing to address these voids, global governance perpetuates a cycle of exclusion, where the most affected regions continue to suffer the consequences of environmental degradation without being able to influence the decisions that shape their futures—void perpetuation—.

Soft power and strategic control of voids

The concept of soft power has been central in international relations theory, especially since Joseph Nye (1990) and Keohane & Nye (2000) introduced the term to describe the ability

of a global actor to influence others without resorting to direct force or coercion. Unlike hard power, which depends on militarization and economic capacity, soft power relies on persuasion, attraction, and the ability of an actor to set their agenda through cultural, ideological, and diplomatic influence. In this context, strategic voids present themselves as an ideal space for the practice of soft power—void soft power—. These voids are not merely gaps in action but can be used to establish control over the international playing field.

Power exercised through the manipulation of these strategic voids can allow hegemonic actors (typically economic or techno-military powers) to dominate the international agenda without needing to engage in direct confrontations or explicit interventions. Thus, voids can become instruments of power that align with Nye's concept of soft power, as dominant actors control the negotiation space, priority issues, and global narrative. By controlling these voids, an actor can dictate the terms of international cooperation, influence the adoption of international norms, and direct global attention to issues that favor their interests without their intervention being evident: it is similar to how masters of the Russian school of chess controlled the center of the board with pieces placed at a distance but exerting direct pressure on that space without touching it (chess void metaphor).

In practice, this type of control is not exercised through the imposition of explicit rules or the use of military force but through the creation of expectations (opportunities) and geopolitical risks (threats), the control of narratives, and the shaping of global policies. For example, when certain actors influence the global environmental justice agenda without direct intervention, they are using strategic voids to construct a global order that aligns with their interests. This can occur, for example, in areas where international agreements are not fully defined or in regions where environmental policies are weak or nonexistent.

In this sense, the control of strategic voids can be seen as a form of “biopower void space” (using *foucauldien* logic) where global actors, not being directly challenged, can advance by methodically controlling their costs and exercising a kind of damage control—progressive void control—. For example, in the context of climate change, the lack of a binding global agreement on greenhouse gas emissions in certain sectors or regions can be considered a strategic void. Major economies, by avoiding firm commitments in specific sectors, can maintain control over the climate action agenda, forcing other actors to follow their terms without an open confrontation. The inability to make clear decisions or the lack of an effective normative framework in key areas is, therefore, an opportunity that can be exploited by hegemonic actors (UNFCCC, 2015).

The progressive control of strategic voids can also be compared to a chess technique where the player, instead of directly occupying each square, seeks to create a network of pieces and pawns that indirectly influence the board. By not occupying certain spaces or allowing the opponent to occupy them, the player can strategically force a response or open

new possibilities to influence the development of the game. In the context of international relations, dominant global actors employ a similar strategy by not intervening directly in certain voids, but at the same time, positioning their interests in such a way that when these voids are filled, the outcomes align with their interests—the void paradox—.

This phenomenon can also be understood through the power theories of authors such as Steven Lukes (2005) (2008) and Robert Dahl (1989) (1998), who propose that power is not always exercised visibly or directly. According to Lukes, power can be exercised structurally by influencing actors' decisions and perceptions without them realizing how they are being influenced. Similarly, Robert Dahl argues that power is implemented not only when one actor gets another to do something they would not otherwise do but also when an actor prevents certain problems from being addressed or decisions from being made.

The influence of strategic voids on global environmental policies is closely linked to the concept of “passive hegemony”, drawing from Gramsci's theory of “passive revolution” in his analysis of power dynamics. Hegemonic actors do not only seek to dominate actively through the imposition of policies but also achieve control by building and maintaining consensus where strategic voids become crucial elements. By not filling these voids or allowing other actors to fill them, hegemonies maintain indirect control over key decisions that, in the long term, consolidate their global leadership position. This control of voids allows hegemonic actors to manipulate international power structures without the need for direct interventions or visible influence.

The logic of passive hegemony in void theory

Gramsci's (1999) classic concept of “passive revolution” refers to a process through which a dominant social order is transformed without a radical rupture or overt conflict. Instead, the transformation occurs through a series of incremental adjustments that preserve the established power structure while accommodating new elements. This process is not driven by a revolutionary class overthrowing the old order but is instead characterized by shifts that help consolidate the existing power, often through the absorption of elements of opposition or subaltern groups. Gramsci highlights that this kind of revolution is often disguised as reform, as it preserves the superficial appearance of stability while enabling a deeper, less visible transformation. It is undeniable that the theory of voids in international cooperation is rooted in several theories with marxist and post-marxist influences.

Relating this concept to international relations and cooperation, the notion of passive hegemony can be understood as a parallel phenomenon in global power dynamics. Rather than dramatic shifts in the balance of power or open conflict between states, passive hegemony manifests through subtle shifts in authority, where dominant powers manage to maintain their control by filling power vacuums in strategic ways. This can occur through

diplomatic, economic, or cultural means that integrate previously marginal voices or regions into a framework that still serves the interests of the hegemonic powers. In this context, the “passive nature” of hegemonic control prevents a clear-cut challenge to authority, allowing the system to evolve while sustaining the *status quo*—the fallacy of the void—.

Both passive revolution and passive hegemony operate in the realm of the unseen, often out of the “public eye” and away from the theatre of open conflict. While Gramsci’s analysis centers on the internal dynamics of class struggle within a society, the concept can be extended to global relations, particularly when examining how dominant states and powers maintain their influence. The vacuum of power in certain regions or areas of global governance is often managed not through direct confrontation but through calculated maneuvers that allow hegemonic powers to retain control without significant resistance. This strategy enables dominant actors to adapt and evolve while preserving their position at the top of the global hierarchy. It also raises a critical question for the future: what occurs within these voids when a power transition unfolds and a new hegemon assumes the position of privilege?

In the context of power voids, the dialectic of costs borne by countries can be linked to habermasian intersubjectivity, which involves the construction of understanding and consensus through dialogue and interaction among actors. In the international arena, a hegemonic power may opt not to exercise its power explicitly or coercively, but by assuming the costs of its indirect presence, it fosters a network of intersubjective relationships where a consensus is achieved that, although seemingly the result of mutual cooperation, is actually influenced by the underlying interests of the dominant power. In this way, hegemonic powers manage to maintain their influence in international processes without resorting to visible or coercive methods, but through a subtle control of the interaction space and the configuration of action frameworks, allowing global decisions to appear as the product of intersubjective cooperation while preserving hegemony: the greater the costs, the greater the indirect influence.

Thus, the strategic control of voids, through soft power, is not only about the lack of action but also about the ability to influence the rules of the game—or the absence of rules, the inability to construct rules, or the inability to standardize rules—indirectly. Dominant international actors, through the management and agency of these voids, not only affect international policy in terms of environmental justice but also ensure their dominance over the global system without their power necessarily being evident or explicit.

The concept of “power voids”, when understood through the lens of intersubjectivity, also raises important questions about the transparency and legitimacy of international cooperation. While these voids may appear as opportunities for cooperation and mutual benefit, they often conceal deeper asymmetries of power—voids are expressions of hegelian

contradictions—, as weaker states are not always able to fully engage in the decision-making process. In many cases, the lack of formal structures or agreements leaves room for dominant powers to dictate the terms of cooperation without the need for explicit negotiation or confrontation. As a result, the apparent cooperation that arises from these voids can often be misleading, as it masks the true dynamics of power and influence at play. This raises the question of whether such cooperation is genuinely cooperative or if it is simply a veneer for the continuation of hegemonic dominance.

International cooperation and environmental justice: A critical perspective

Environmental justice has been a key category in studying the relationships between environmental issues and social equity. This concept not only addresses the disproportionate impacts that environmental problems have on vulnerable communities but also examines how social, political, and economic actors distribute the costs and benefits derived from environmental policies. In the context of international cooperation, environmental justice is closely related to institutional voids and crises resulting from climate change. The lack of decisive action against climate change and the strategic voids in international norms are key points where environmental justice is profoundly affected, as the most powerful countries, by avoiding firm commitments, leave the most vulnerable nations at a disadvantage (Pellow, 2016; Schlosberg, 2007).

The concept of environmental justice in the international arena cannot be understood without considering the institutional and geopolitical voids that coexist in international agreements and treaties. These voids occur when global environmental norms are insufficient, inconsistent, or even absent in certain sectors, creating spaces where the most powerful international actors can operate without restrictions or under lax restrictions. These voids, besides reflecting a failure in global governance from an institutionalism theory point of view, also manifest inequality in international relations, as countries with greater influence and resources can exploit these spaces for their benefit, while less developed countries, especially those already facing the consequences of climate change, do not have the same negotiating power—void realism—.

In this sense, institutional and geopolitical voids become a tool of power for nations that, by not filling these “gaps,” indirectly control the rules of the international game. This power dynamic becomes even more critical when considering conflicts resulting from climate change. The climate crisis generates a series of geopolitical, economic, and social tensions, particularly between countries in the Global South and the Global North, which have historically been the largest emitters of greenhouse gases.

Climate change exacerbates poverty, forced displacement, and resource scarcity, leading to increasing food insecurity and territorial conflicts, especially in vulnerable

regions such as sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. Regions suffering these impacts not only have to deal with the physical consequences of natural disasters but also with the lack of adequate international policies to address their needs. The lack of action or slow implementation of effective international policies reinforces environmental injustice. Thus, strategic voids and gaps in international agreements create a space where international cooperation is insufficient and unequal, perpetuating imbalances in the distribution of resources needed to mitigate the effects of climate change. It is worth noting that institutional voids probably produce power voids and vice versa, considering a dialectic that is far from the simplicity and limitations of a chessboard.

In the context of international cooperation, environmental justice is compromised when aid mechanisms and investments in adaptation and mitigation projects are not equitably distributed. Voids in climate financing—void financialism—, the absence of binding commitments, and the unequal distribution of responsibilities for reducing greenhouse gas emissions sustain a global power structure that benefits developed nations while marginalizing minority groups.

At the level of international policies and mechanisms, climate change is perceived as a common threat, but solutions, burdens, and consequences are not equitably distributed. According to global justice theory, countries that have contributed the most to the climate crisis should assume greater responsibility in financing global efforts to mitigate climate change effects. However, voids in international commitments hinder the implementation of this principle.

This is clearly seen in the international community's inability to address reparable climate damage, a void that has persisted through decades of negotiations and international cooperation. The lack of a functional global compensation mechanism for countries vulnerable to climate disasters, who are not responsible for the majority of emissions, reflects a strategic and voluntary global responsibility void. This absence of concrete action results in a "distortion" of environmental justice, where the most powerful actors opt to calculate their costs and evade their responsibility but continue to benefit from an international system that allows a vast majority of countries to suffer the consequences of climate change that they did not cause.

Climate Justice Theory and International Relations

Climate justice theory also introduces a pivotal concept of historical accountability, which asserts that the nations most responsible for the majority of greenhouse gas emissions over the past centuries should bear the primary burden for financing climate adaptation and mitigation efforts in the countries most affected—void accountability—. This perspective highlights a moral obligation for the wealthier nations, which have historically contributed

the most to global emissions, to provide financial support to the global South, which is disproportionately impacted despite having contributed the least. However, the reality is far from equitable, as powerful nations often shy away from making binding financial commitments, preferring voluntary pledges or symbolic gestures rather than formal, enforceable agreements (Pellow, 2016; Schlosberg, 2007).

The absence of robust institutional frameworks further complicates this issue, leaving critical gaps in global governance designed to hold the most polluting countries accountable. The lack of a comprehensive, enforceable system for compensation or climate financing means that vulnerable countries continue to suffer without the necessary resources or support to adapt to climate impacts. These gaps—both structural and political—allow the most powerful countries to avoid substantive commitments while contributing to a climate regime that favors inaction, deepening the inequities between the global North and South.

In addition, the presence of these geopolitical voids in international climate governance exposes a deeper, systemic power imbalance. The dominant global powers, particularly those from the industrialized world, can exploit these voids by leaving essential elements of climate agreements unaddressed—void intentionality—. These nations, by refraining from making binding commitments to climate action, effectively maintain their advantage within the international system, while countries in the Global South continue to struggle with inadequate support and resources.

This elusive yet potent form of influence, wielded by hegemonic powers through the strategic management of voids, is a prime example of how power operates in international relations without overt coercion. By neglecting or failing to address critical issues—such as financial compensation for climate damage or mechanisms to ensure fair adaptation efforts—these dominant actors manage to retain control over the global climate discourse by framing environmental justice in ways that minimize their obligations, deferring costly commitments, and redirecting resources toward strengthening their own adaptive capacity. This approach, often referred to as “soft power”, enables them to present themselves as champions of climate action, even as they sidestep substantive changes to their own national policies or financial commitments.

Exploratory approach: The strategic void in the framework of international cooperation

In the analysis of strategic voids within international cooperation, it is necessary not only to recognize the inequality and implicit power mechanisms but also to consider how these voids can be transformed into opportunities for more equitable and disruptive cooperation. The proposals presented here aim not only to fill these voids but also to re-examine the international cooperation system itself disruptively, using existing voids to

generate systemic change in the global power structure. These are just ideas that can be further developed in future work.

1. Analyzing multilevel governance spaces within the framework of environmental justice

Voids in international cooperation are not confined to high-level multilateral negotiations between governments; they also manifest in the disconnect between local and regional (even transnational) policies and global dynamics. These gaps often emerge when international governance frameworks fail to incorporate the voices and needs of those most affected by global challenges, such as climate change. While they can certainly be read through the lens of North–South asymmetries—where developed nations dominate decision-making and communities in the Global South have limited opportunities to influence outcomes—they are not reducible to this divide. These voids also reflect internal power struggles within nations, where marginalized groups are frequently excluded from decision-making processes, and where domestic elites align with international agendas in ways that reinforce their own interests. In this sense, environmental governance becomes a mirror: the structural inequalities visible in global North–South relations are reproduced internally, with local hierarchies echoing global asymmetries. Addressing these disparities therefore requires multilevel governance systems that bridge local and global perspectives while also confronting the internal power structures that perpetuate exclusion.

2. Reflect on global responsibility through reward mechanisms

An alternative and potentially transformative proposal involves redefining global responsibility by fostering more equitable climate cooperation through reward-based mechanisms. Traditionally, international efforts have centered on damage compensation or financing adaptation measures in vulnerable nations. While these approaches remain important, they often overlook the significant contributions made by resource-limited countries to global climate mitigation efforts. Addressing strategic voids in cooperation could involve establishing systems that recognize and reward these contributions. This would shift the narrative from one of mere financial obligation by developed nations to a broader framework that values and incentivizes proactive climate action by all actors, regardless of their economic standing. This idea aligns with elements of realist theories of power in international relations, as articulated by Hans Morgenthau, but it also resonates with Joseph Nye's (1990) concept of soft power. By incorporating reward systems, global governance could encourage collaborative climate efforts while maintaining the influence of dominant powers. For instance, soft power mechanisms could highlight and amplify the successes of smaller nations in climate mitigation, incentivizing others to adopt similar practices. Such policies would not only enhance global cooperation but also shift the focus from punitive measures to constructive and forward-looking solutions.

3. Promoting the implementation of cross-border and transregional cooperation

An essential proposal for addressing strategic voids and advancing environmental justice is the promotion of cross-border and transregional climate agreements. While global frameworks like the Paris Agreement play a pivotal role in shaping international climate governance, they often fail to account for the specific challenges and needs of particular regions. This disconnect leaves room for strategic voids—regional or transregional void—, where dominant global actors establish standards and policies that may not reflect the realities or capacities of vulnerable regions. Regional agreements, in contrast, provide an opportunity to tailor cooperation efforts to the unique environmental, social, and economic conditions of specific areas, fostering more effective and relevant solutions.

By focusing on regional agreements, nations in the Global South could gain a stronger voice in determining the terms of their environmental strategies, addressing local priorities in a way that global agreements often overlook. These agreements could encourage cooperation among neighboring states facing shared challenges, such as desertification, deforestation, or rising sea levels, allowing for more targeted responses to environmental threats.

4. Developing alternative transparent monitoring and evaluation tools

Developing more robust and transparent monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the implementation of international policies on climate change and environmental justice is a crucial strategy to reduce the gaps in accountability that currently exist. Weak oversight within international agreements often allows powerful actors to avoid or delay compliance with their commitments. To address this, systems need to be designed that provide accessible and reliable information for stakeholders, including vulnerable communities, about the actions of countries and corporations. One potential approach is the creation of an independent international body responsible for monitoring and verifying compliance with climate-related agreements. While such a body could operate under the framework of the United Nations, its structure would need to balance autonomy and accountability to remain credible. Incorporating practical tools, such as satellite data for emissions monitoring and digital tracking of climate finance flows, could enhance transparency and provide stakeholders with timely, verifiable information about the implementation of commitments.

Concluding insights on strategic voids in international cooperation

International cooperation, especially in the realm of environmental justice, represents a complex, intersectional, and multifaceted space where strategic voids emerge as a key factor in shaping global power. These voids are not simply the absence of action but constitute deliberate spaces of inaction or lack of regulation that, when properly understood and

manipulated, allow hegemonic actors to exercise control and position themselves in the international system quietly.

In this essay, it has been argued that these strategic voids not only reflect systemic and structural deficiencies in the architecture of global governance but are also instrumentalized by hegemonic states and other dominant actors as tools of control and balance. By not acting openly, yet at the same time shaping the behavior of other actors through incentives, indirect pressures, or the simple management of narrative, these actors consolidate their dominance in critical areas such as environmental cooperation and the extraction of critical minerals. This phenomenon is clearly manifested in the management of climate commitments, where institutional and normative voids allow the most powerful states to indirectly define the agenda and rules of the game without fully subjecting themselves to the same.

The analogy with chess reinforces this perspective: while the visible movements of pieces and pawns symbolize concrete actions, such as multilateral agreements or climate financing initiatives, the control of strategic voids represents a more subtle and sophisticated level of dominance. Major actors not only seek to occupy spaces but also to control voids through strategic foresight, ensuring that their opponents cannot use them against them. This technique is not only effective but also less confrontational, allowing dominant actors to maintain their hegemonic position without exposing their power to direct criticism and conducting effective damage control over the costs inherent in ceding active leadership on the international stage.

International cooperation, in this context, must be reassessed as a space not only for collective action but also for critical and epistemological vigilance over the creation, management, and exploitation of strategic voids. This represents a departure from conventional cooperation, moving beyond a reactive paradigm that merely addresses voids with financing, toward a proactive model that interrogates the very genesis and beneficiaries of those voids.

Environmental justice offers a particularly valuable lens for addressing this challenge by emphasizing the equitable redistribution of environmental costs and benefits, as well as inclusive participation in decision-making processes. From this perspective, it is crucial that strategic voids be viewed not only as system failures or market externalities but as opportunities to implement more just and sustainable governance models. This will require a reorientation towards more horizontal cooperation frameworks, where the voices of developing countries and the most affected communities play a central role.

International cooperation, especially in the domain of environmental justice, is increasingly seen as a crucial mechanism for tackling global inequalities. However, as this analysis suggests, the process of cooperation is often shaped by complex power dynamics

and strategic voids that exacerbate rather than mitigate these inequities. These voids, representing areas where action is deliberately postponed or left unregulated for strategic purposes, have profound implications for global governance. Hegemonic actors, through their ability to control and exploit these gaps, manipulate the international system in ways that disproportionately benefit them while marginalizing the interests of less powerful states. The control of these strategic voids is not simply an incidental aspect of international politics but a deliberate and effective means of sustaining global power structures.

As environmental justice becomes an increasingly central issue in global governance, the consequences of these strategic voids are amplified. The unequal distribution of environmental burdens, particularly in the context of climate change, serves as a stark example of how hegemonic powers use voids to perpetuate a system of environmental injustice. This has resulted in a system where developing countries and marginalized communities continue to bear the brunt of the crisis without having a significant voice in decision-making processes.

The prevalence of strategic voids underscores the urgent need for a fundamental rethinking of global governance structures. It is not enough to simply address the gaps by filling them with policies or financial aid; a deeper examination of the political and economic systems that create these voids is essential. By understanding the underlying forces at play, we can begin to develop strategies that not only address the symptoms of these voids but also challenge the power dynamics that sustain them. This requires a shift towards more inclusive, transparent, and accountable models of cooperation, where the voices of the most affected communities are not only heard but central to the decision-making process. Such a transformation would involve rethinking the principles of sovereignty, equity, and justice in global governance, ensuring that all nations, especially those most vulnerable to environmental harm, have the opportunity to shape international policies that affect their future.

This involves integrating insights from diverse fields, including political economy, environmental science, and social justice, to better understand the multifaceted nature of strategic voids and their impact on global power relations. Theories such as Wallerstein's (2004) world-systems analysis and environmental justice—combined or integrated—offer valuable frameworks for analyzing the global dynamics of inequality and power. These frameworks can guide the development of new policies and initiatives aimed at reducing the exploitation of strategic voids while promoting a more just and sustainable international order.

Ergo, this analysis underscores the need for greater academic and political reflexivity towards the dynamics of strategic voids in international cooperation. While concepts such as “soft power” and “complex interdependence” provide an initial framework

for understanding these dynamics, it is necessary to integrate emerging theories, such as environmental critical justice and climate justice to develop more integrated and transformative approaches. Only through critical analysis and sustained collective action will it be possible to transform strategic voids from instruments of domination into platforms for building a more equitable and just international system. Failing to understand “void politics” will result in a lack of analysis and action on significant global processes, creating an opening for the neglect of seemingly distant issues such as climate change, terrorism, and the emerging role of artificial intelligence in diplomacy.❧

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