



Can the world be a family in an age of power Politics? Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam and the future of multipolar geopolitics

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Abstract

The contemporary international system is marked by intensifying great-power rivalry, strategic fragmentation, and the reassertion of hard power politics, even as global challenges such as climate change, pandemics, forced migration, and technological disruption demand cooperative responses. In this context, the question of whether the world can be imagined as a moral community rather than merely a competitive arena of states acquires renewed significance. This paper interrogates the relevance of the Indian civilizational concept of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, the idea that “the world is one family”, for rethinking geopolitics in an emerging multipolar order.

Drawing upon Indian Knowledge Systems, particularly the ethical and relational worldview articulated in the Maha Upanishad, the study situates Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam as a normative framework that challenges the dominance of realist assumptions in International Relations. Unlike liberal universalism or Western cosmopolitanism, this concept emphasizes relational ethics, mutual responsibility, and coexistence amidst diversity, offering an alternative moral imagination of global order. The paper engages with Global International Relations (Global IR) and post-Western theoretical debates to argue that non-Western Knowledge traditions can contribute meaningfully to the reconstitution of international theory and practice.

The analysis compares Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam with the ideas of power politics, the balance of power, and strategic competition that are part of today’s multipolarity in Global International Relations. This comparison is important for Global International Relations. The paper looks at how India uses the idea of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam in talks with countries and in international meetings. This idea is about treating the world like one family. India brings up this idea when discussing issues of helping people in need and working with other countries in the same region. It contributes to ongoing debates on normative geopolitics by demonstrating how Indian Knowledge Systems can inform a more plural, inclusive, and ethically grounded understanding of world politics. Ultimately, the study suggests that in an age of multipolarity and persistent conflict, reimagining the world as a moral community is not merely aspirational but increasingly necessary for the sustainability of global order. Through a conceptual and interpretive methodology, the paper examines how India has invoked this civilizational ethic in diplomatic discourse and multilateral engagements, particularly in the context of global governance, humanitarian assistance, and South-South cooperation. It contributes to ongoing debates on normative geopolitics by demonstrating how Indian Knowledge Systems can inform a more plural, inclusive, and ethically grounded understanding of world politics. Ultimately, the study suggests that in an age of multipolarity and persistent conflict, reimagining the world as a moral community is not merely aspirational but increasingly necessary for the sustainability of global order.

Keywords: Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, Global international relations, Indian knowledge systems, Multipolar world order, Normative geopolitics, Post-western IR theory

Introduction

The twenty-first century has arrived bearing the weight of an increasingly unstable global order. The coherence of the post-Cold War unipolarity has visibly eroded, with asymmetries of power giving way to a far more fluid and uncertain multipolar constellation. In this milieu of fragmentation, resurgent nationalisms, anxious middle powers, widening geopolitical fault lines, and a deliberate weaponization of interdependence, international politics often appears locked within the hardened grammar of power. Yet, equally, the global crises of climate, pandemics, technological disruptions, humanitarian emergencies, and growing inequalities reveal a world more intertwined than ever before. This paradox, heightened interdependence coexisting with amplified rivalry, forces a

critical reflection on whether a moral horizon capable of guiding global governance survives amid such turbulence.

Amid these tectonic shifts, India’s civilizational maxim, *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, the idea that the entire world is one family, emerges as a striking moral counterpoint to the prevailing idioms of power politics. Far from being a sentimental slogan or romantic abstraction, the concept, articulated in the Maha Upanishad, foregrounds an ontological understanding of humanity as inherently interconnected. It gestures toward a form of subjectivity that transcends territoriality, recognizing the ethical claims we owe not only to our compatriots but to the broader human community and even the natural world. When India placed Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam at the heart of its G20 presidency in 2023, it did

more than merely invoke spiritual heritage; it articulated a normative vocabulary capable of rethinking global governance at a moment when multilateralism risks becoming both structurally weakened and ideationally hollow.

The central concern guiding this paper is whether Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, hereafter Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, can meaningfully influence or reshape the conduct of states in an age defined by strategic mistrust and geopolitical competition. The question is neither naïve nor rhetorical. It probes the limits and possibilities of ethical norms in a structurally anarchic international system. It examines whether Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam can serve as a lens for cooperative multipolarity rather than a moralistic veneer over realpolitik. And it interrogates whether a concept rooted in ancient philosophical traditions can articulate a contemporary political ethic for a world marked by transboundary crises and systemic vulnerability. The argument advanced here is that while Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam cannot abolish power politics, dismissing it as irrelevant to geopolitical behaviour overlooks the profound ways in which norms, ideas, moral claims, and philosophical vocabularies shape international life. VK possesses the potential to humanize multipolarity, infuse global governance with ethical consciousness, and redirect competition toward responsible coexistence rather than destructive rivalry.

Objectives

The purpose of this research is not to rehearse simplistic binaries between moral idealism and political realism but to unfold a nuanced, theoretically informed, and historically grounded understanding of how Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam can contribute to an ethic of relationality in global politics. The objectives guiding this exploration are organically woven into the overall narrative of the paper rather than presented as prescriptive checklists. This study seeks to excavate the philosophical underpinnings of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam in order to assess its contemporary resonance; to examine how the structural features of emerging multipolarity simultaneously constrain and invite new ethical frameworks; to consider the extent to which Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam can influence diplomatic behavior, institutional reform, and the global governance agenda; and to reflect on the ways VK contributes to India's evolving role as a civilizational and normative actor within the international system. These objectives collectively shape the trajectory of analysis, enabling the paper to explore Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam not as an abstract maxim but as a potential ethical grammar for a fragmented world order.

Reimagining global order: from strategic rivalry to civilizational ethics

The reconfiguration of the global order in the twenty-first century invites a deeper interrogation of the normative foundations of international politics and the feasibility of cooperative coexistence in a world increasingly shaped by friction, fragmentation, and revived great-power competition. As the structural conditions of unipolarity fade, and as rising

powers assert their own models of governance, development, and strategic autonomy, the global system appears to be drifting towards a more complex and contested multipolarity. In such a climate, the question of whether the “world can be a family” seems almost paradoxical, if not counterintuitive, because international relations continue to function predominantly through the realist vocabulary of power, deterrence, capability accumulation, and strategic hedging. Yet, it is precisely within this tension that Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (VK) gains intellectual and normative relevance. Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (VK) does not naïvely reject the empirical reality of power politics; instead, it proposes an alternative ethical grammar for interpreting power and responsibility in a plural world. Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (VK) reframes multipolarity not as a competitive arena of clashing spheres of influence, but as a civilizational opportunity to construct a more stable equilibrium based on mutual respect, reciprocal restraint, and the recognition that durable order emerges not from dominance but from the conscious cultivation of moral interdependence. By anchoring geopolitical behaviour in ethical responsibility rather than pure strategic advantage, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (VK) expands the meaning of security and influence from hard power metrics to the capacity of states to cooperate, listen, empathize, and co-create norms that humanize power. In doing so, it recasts the very idea of multipolarity not as a system destined for volatility, but as a fertile environment for ethical global governance where many centres of power can coexist without reproducing the conflicts of earlier eras.

Human security and ethical diplomacy as the foundations of global familyhood

To justify the notion that the world can function as a family, one must transcend conventional state-centric understandings of security and interrogate the deeper vulnerabilities that define human life in an interconnected world. Traditional geopolitics has historically privileged territorial integrity, military capability, and strategic alliances, often neglecting the everyday forms of insecurity experienced by individuals across borders, whether through poverty, disease, displacement, ecological degradation, or conflict-induced trauma. Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam challenges this narrow framing by positing human security as the starting point of collective well-being and global stability. In its ethical imagination, threats cannot be contained within territorial boundaries, and the suffering of any community reverberates outward, weakening the moral and material foundations of global order. This philosophical shift carries profound policy implications: it urges states to redefine diplomatic conduct around empathy, dialogue, and principled responsibility. Ethical diplomacy, in the Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (VK) worldview, does not disregard national interest, but it broadens the meaning of interest to encompass the health, dignity, and security of humanity at large. When states internalize such a worldview, they become more willing to engage in transparent communication, conflict de-escalation, humanitarian

cooperation, and preventive diplomacy behaviours crucial in an age where miscalculations can occur at unprecedented speed. In a multipolar world marked by competing narratives, contested borders, and hybrid threats, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam -based diplomacy functions as a stabilizing epistemology that tempers egoistic impulses with sensitivity to the shared vulnerabilities of the human condition. By embedding the logic of care into the mechanisms of statecraft, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam demonstrates that global familyhood is not merely a moral aspiration but a rational strategy for enhancing both national and international security.

Sustainable growth, shared responsibility, and the ethics of global interdependence

One of the most compelling justifications for the idea of global familyhood in an age of power politics lies in the undeniable reality of global interdependence economic, ecological, technological, and social. Unlike earlier historical periods of multipolarity, today's world is defined by deep transnational linkages where disruptions in one region can trigger cascading consequences across continents. Yet paradoxically, this interconnectedness has not eliminated competition; instead, it has intensified rivalries over trade routes, supply chains, critical minerals, green technologies, energy systems, and digital infrastructures. Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam addresses this paradox by offering an ethical-economic framework that redefines growth not as a race for national supremacy, but as a collective venture whose success depends on shared responsibility, equitable development, and ecological stewardship. Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (VK) insists that development divorced from sustainability leads to planetary insecurity and ultimately undermines the very foundations upon which nations build their power. Climate change, pandemics, resource depletion, and technological vulnerabilities illustrate that the well-being of states is inseparable from the health of the global commons. Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (VK) thus advocates for a shift away from extractive, competitive models of development toward cooperative, inclusive, and environmentally attuned frameworks. In practical terms, this means fostering transnational climate partnerships, equitable access to green technologies, fair distribution of resources, and ethical management of oceans, forests, and outer space. By embedding sustainability within the architecture of multipolarity, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (VK) reframes global governance as a shared stewardship project rather than an arena of zero-sum extraction. It provides a philosophical foundation for imagining the world as a family whose members, though diverse, share a common responsibility toward both present and future generations.

Multipolarity, plural identities, and the possibility of a global family

The philosophical and geopolitical feasibility of global familyhood ultimately depends on the ability of states to embrace plurality and manage power transitions with maturity,

responsibility, and moral imagination. Multipolar systems historically evoke images of instability, shifting alliances, and rivalry-driven competitions for dominance. However, contemporary multipolarity is embedded within an unprecedented context characterized by global connectivity, cultural exchange, normative diffusion, and transnational interdependence. Here, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam offers an intellectual framework capable of integrating plural identities into a shared global ethos. Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (VK) accepts difference not as a threat, but as an inherent feature of humanity that enriches the global collective. Civilizational states emerge as unique custodians of cultural, historical, and ethical traditions, each contributing distinct perspectives on governance, justice, spirituality, and social organization. Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (VK) does not demand uniformity; instead, it offers a normative compass that guides states toward acting with restraint, reciprocity, and awareness of the long-term implications of their geopolitical choices. Under a VK-informed model, multipolarity becomes a networked order where influence is exercised responsibly and where normative commitments such as peaceful coexistence, inclusive dialogue, and ethical restraint temper the structural pressures of competition. This framework does not claim to eliminate conflict entirely but proposes that conflicts can be managed through principles grounded in shared humanity rather than adversarial logic. Thus, the idea of a global family becomes not a sentimental metaphor, but a sophisticated lens through which geopolitics can be practiced with ethical depth, cultural sensitivity, and long-term foresight. In this sense, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam emerges as both a philosophical ideal and a pragmatic strategy for stabilizing multipolarity in the twenty-first century.

Materials and Methods / Methodology

This study uses a qualitative interpretivist methodology, grounded in philosophical reasoning, normative political theory, and international relations scholarship. Rather than treating Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam as an empirical variable or testing it through quantifiable indicators, the paper approaches Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam as a conceptual and discursive framework whose significance lies in its meaning-making capacity. The methodology draws on hermeneutic techniques to interpret Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam within its civilizational context while engaging contemporary theoretical lenses such as realism, liberalism, constructivism, and Global South international relations. This interdisciplinary approach is essential, for Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam's normative depth cannot be understood through positivist epistemologies alone; it requires an interpretive sensibility attentive to the entanglement between ideas and political behaviour.

Primary sources include philosophical commentaries, policy speeches, G20 communiqués, and contemporary diplomatic narratives. Secondary sources encompass scholarly articles and books in international relations, global governance, and political theory. The analysis mobilizes a triangulation of interpretive reading, conceptual mapping, and normative

theorization. The approach is consciously reflective, acknowledging that Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam cannot be reduced to policy prescriptions but must be appreciated as a mode of ethical orientation. The limitations of the methodology stem from its conceptual nature; the findings are interpretive, theoretically reasoned, and meant to illuminate possibilities rather than forecast geopolitical outcomes.

Findings / Results

The study finds that Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam offers a deeply relational perspective that aligns with the material realities of global interdependence. Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam reframes global challenges not as arenas for competitive advantage but as shared vulnerabilities demanding collective stewardship. This conceptual reorientation has significant implications for a multipolar world. First, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam provides a universalist ethical lexicon that can anchor cooperative structures across diverse political systems. Its emphasis on shared responsibility echoes in climate debates, health governance, technology ethics, and sustainable development. Second, emerging multipolarity, unlike rigid bipolarity, creates space for the proliferation of norms. Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam can serve as a stabilizing idea amid geopolitical flux, promoting cooperation without erasing strategic autonomy. Third, though structural realism cautions that states ultimately pursue security and power, the study finds that ethical norms influence behaviour in subtle yet consequential ways. The nuclear taboo, humanitarian laws, and sovereignty norms testify that ideas shape conduct even in an anarchic system. In this regard, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam’s philosophical sensibility acts as a soft constraint on excesses of power. Furthermore, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam enhances India’s global identity not through coercive instruments but through moral imagination. It enables India to act as a bridge between North and South, aligning with the aspirations of the developing world while advocating equity and justice. Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam’s philosophical resonance strengthens India’s soft power, contributing to its credibility in international development partnerships, climate initiatives, and

institutional reform. The study also finds that Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam provides important discursive resources for human-centric international relations, shifting attention from narrow national interest to broader global welfare. Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam's relational ethos has direct implications for how the world conceptualizes peace, security, and sustainability.

Discussion

The discussion explores the deeper conceptual tensions and synergies between Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam and multipolar geopolitics. At its core, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam articulates an understanding of the world that transcends atomistic individualism and state-centric egoism. It imagines humanity as bound by ties of mutual obligation, compassion, and shared destiny. Such a worldview is not purely metaphysical; it resonates profoundly with the material conditions of contemporary global politics. Pandemics, climate disruption, digital vulnerabilities, and supply chain interdependence illustrate that no state, however powerful, can unilaterally secure its well-being. Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam offers an ethical vocabulary that acknowledges this relational ontology, framing interdependence not as a strategic liability but as a collective condition requiring responsible stewardship. This relational ethic stands in contrast to realist frameworks that interpret international relations through the lens of survival, self-interest, and power accumulation. Yet Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam does not deny the existence of power politics. Instead, it seeks to moralize power, urging states to situate their interests within an awareness of shared humanity. VK becomes meaningful not because it negates strategic behaviour, but because it demands that strategy be tempered by self-restraint, empathy, and a recognition of interwoven destinies. In this way, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam contributes to the shaping of what may be called cooperative multipolarity, a configuration where competition coexists with collaboration, and where geopolitical rivalry does not foreclose the possibility of convergence on global public goods. Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam’s normative principles to contemporary geopolitical imperatives:

Principle (Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam)	Geopolitical relevance in a multipolar world
Interdependence	Supports cooperation in climate, health, and trade crises
Shared responsibility	Encourages equitable burden-sharing in global governance
Dignity and reciprocity	Humanizes diplomatic negotiations and conflict resolution
Non-harm (Ahimsa)	Reinforces peaceful coexistence and restraint in the use of force
Inclusivity	Bridges Global South concerns and promotes institutional reform

What emerges from this synthesis is the realization that Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam can be interpreted as a framework enabling states to navigate the complexities of multipolarity without succumbing to destructive zero-sum logic. Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam does not require states to relinquish sovereignty or strategic autonomy; rather, it reframes autonomy within an ethic of global responsibility. This has implications for global governance, where multilateral institutions often suffer from deficits of legitimacy, representation, and trust. Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam provides a philosophical scaffolding for a more

inclusive multilateralism that accommodates diverse civilizational perspectives while foregrounding the sharedness of the human condition. Beyond institutions, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam also bears significance for India’s foreign policy identity. By articulating Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam in global forums, India positions itself as a civilizational actor capable of offering moral leadership without hegemonic intent. Unlike models of great-power dominance, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam-based diplomacy rests on persuasion rather than coercion, partnership rather than

extraction, and moral appeal rather than strategic compulsion. As India rises in global stature, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam equips it with a narrative that integrates its ancient intellectual traditions with its contemporary aspirations.

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, positioned at the philosophical center of India's global vision, radiates outward into two deeply interconnected domains that shape the future of global governance: human security and sustainable growth. The ethic embedded in Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam begins with an acknowledgement of the essential oneness of humanity, which in turn compels states to consider security not merely through military preparedness or strategic advantage, but through the protection of human life, dignity, and well-being. Human security in this sense becomes a holistic framework, integrating health, livelihoods, climate resilience, and socio-economic inclusion. Through this lens, peace is not simply the absence of conflict but the presence of dialogue, trust-building, and ethical diplomacy. Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam thus urges states to cultivate political cultures that prioritize conversation over coercion, cooperation over confrontation, and the moral responsibility to prevent suffering wherever it occurs.

Parallel to this is the second pillar, emanating from the Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam worldview, of sustainable growth, which insists that economic progress must be aligned with ecological balance, intergenerational justice, and equitable development. In an era where multipolarity has intensified competition for resources, markets, and technological leadership, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam reframes growth as a shared enterprise rather than a zero-sum contest. It emphasizes the importance of reciprocity and shared responsibility in global decision-making, particularly in addressing climate change, energy transitions, technological governance, and the reform of multilateral institutions. Sustainable growth, when informed by Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, becomes inseparable from inclusivity, fairness, and the ethical management of global commons.

Taken together, these two pillars illuminate how Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam provides a philosophical architecture that connects human security, peace, dialogue, ethical diplomacy, sustainability, and responsible multipolarity into a coherent whole. It transforms interdependence from a point of vulnerability into a source of strength and positions ethical consciousness at the heart of geopolitical conduct. In doing so, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (VK) offers not merely a moral aspiration but a practical compass by which a fragmented world may navigate its shared challenges with greater humility, foresight, and collective purpose.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this paper demonstrates that Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam holds profound relevance for a world navigating the stresses and uncertainties of multipolar geopolitics. Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (VK) cannot dissolve the structural realities of power politics, nor can it substitute for strategic judgment, military preparedness, or national interest. Yet it would be a mistake to measure Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (VK) solely by its capacity to overturn the logic of power. Its

significance lies instead in its ability to provide an ethical horizon, one that humanizes global politics, orients states toward shared responsibilities, and offers a normative anchor for global governance in times of fragmentation. Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (VK) injects into international relations a relational ethic attuned to the vulnerabilities and interdependence of the twenty-first century, compelling states to navigate rivalry with restraint and cooperation with sincerity. The world may never fully function as a "family" in a literal political sense, but Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (VK) invites states to operate with an awareness that their destinies are intertwined. It encourages the cultivation of empathy, reciprocity, and solidarity across borders. As global crises deepen and geopolitical rivalries sharpen, the ethical imagination offered by Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (VK) may prove indispensable. It provides not a utopian alternative to power politics, but an ethical grammar capable of moderating its excesses and redirecting its energies toward collective well-being. In this sense, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (VK) contributes meaningfully to shaping the future of multipolar geopolitics not as a replacement for power, but as a compass guiding power toward responsibility, dignity, and shared humanity.

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