

WHO CONTROLS THE WORLD ORDER?

POWER, LAW AND INSTITUTIONS IN A NEW ERA

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Introduction

These papers are based on the lectures given at iASK on June 2-3, 2026 by Gábor Kardos (Full Professor, Department of Public International Law, ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary), Iván Bába (Professor at the National University of Public Service and the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary), and Réka Varga (Dean, Associate Professor, Faculty of Public Governance and International Studies, Department of International Law, Ludovika University of Public Service, Hungary).

The Changing World Order, the Demise of the Rules Based International Order and the International Law

Gábor Kardos

Introduction

Before proceeding, rather than adopting St. Augustine's approach—which holds that “if you do not ask, I know; if you ask, I do not know”—I will briefly summarize how I use the following terms. World Order: the distribution of economic, military, political, and cultural power among the states of the world. According to Hedley Bull, patterns of behavior play a decisive role in the order, ensuring that the fundamental values of the “international society” are maintained amid change. (Bull, 1977, 8) Rule-Based International Order: the set of values, principles, and norms followed in the management of international relations, the content of which, however, it is not precisely defined, as well as the international institutions and organizations that facilitate their enforcement. (See: Durard, 2023) International law: the binding rules of conduct established by states, which primarily take the form of international treaties or customary law.

The Changing World Order

In the era following the end of the Cold War, most people initially described as unipolar and later as post-unipolar—the international economy truly became global with the complete removal of barriers to trade and capital investment and the integration of financial markets. The United States was the architect of this world order, whose power rested on its ability to deploy military force globally, its role as the engine of the world economy, its capacity for technological innovation, and its cultural influence (Brzezinski, 1999, 35). The European Union, as a structured and geographically coherent entity, which, although it sought to preserve its distinctiveness to at least some extent—for example, by keeping alive the idea of a social Europe—showed only relative divergence from the global economic order, and large-scale immigration significantly eroded its cultural homogeneity. The European Union has failed to become a world power — which is not even possible in the absence of military strength, but the single currency and trade policy do possess incredibly significant tools. Even the Southeast Asian region (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan), with its more distinct characteristics—despite the state's much more extensive economic role and its independent cultural sphere—has become

quite integrated into the global framework. In both regions, U.S. security guarantees and military presence were key factors in stability; it was clear to everyone that these economic forces It has become firmly embedded within the global framework. In both regions, U.S. security guarantees and military presence were key factors in stability; it was accepted that these economic powerhouses were incapable of defending themselves. With the introduction of the euro, the European Union dealt a significant blow to the dollar's role as a global currency, thereby breaking the unspoken consensus that the cost of the U.S. military protective umbrella would be paid for by using this currency as a reserve currency.

As a result of massive capital investment, cross-border production and supply chains, and other aspects of globalization, the global South has caught up with and surpassed the economic performance of the global West—which includes countries such as Japan and Australia. China has become the world's workshop, the second-largest economy on Earth. (It is true, however, that in terms of GDP per capita, it has not even surpassed Hungary.) In the shadow of America's wavering economic hegemony, India, Brazil, and numerous other nations have achieved significant growth. Russia's hydrocarbon reserves, nuclear weapons, and other military assets make it a global power.

The relative economic decline of the United States first became apparent in the late 1980s (Kennedy, 1992, 483–502). If we look for a concrete sign of the international political impact of this unfavorable shift in economic position, it is worth recalling that when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, President Bush Sr. had to ask numerous countries for financial contributions to fund the first Gulf War. Today, this shift has led to the United States, under Trump's second presidency, questioning the functioning of the global free-trade system it created, as evidenced by the president's unilateral tariff hikes. Access to the vast, unified U.S. domestic market, with its staggering purchasing power, has become a primary factor of power. And despite relative economic decline, the U.S. has retained its unparalleled leadership in cutting-edge technology, as well as its military capabilities and global deployability. Relative economic decline and unquestionable military supremacy may present a temptation to use the latter.

The Contradictions and Decline of the Rule-Based International Order

In the decades following the Cold War, a debate flared up over whether there is one international community or more. According to certain American authors, a different kind of community exists among liberal democracies than among other states. Cooperation among these states is

characterized by a large number of transactions, legal convergence, a shared legal culture, the intensity of formal and informal relationships among government officials, and a knowledge-based community among judges who readily apply international law. Among these states, peaceful conflict resolution has become the norm, and legal means are preferred in their disputes. They have their own international institutions that guarantee effective international governance. (Slaughter, 1995, 503–538) This concept, which excluded a significant number of states from the international community and divided the international community into states within and outside the legal sphere, has been widely criticized. On the one hand, critics have emphasized that, despite shared values, the practices of liberal states are not so uniform. On the other hand, they pointed out that excluding non-liberal states from the international community amounts to granting permission for armed attacks against them. (Alvarez, 2001, 183–246)

The rules-based international order emerged as a hallmark of cooperation among states belonging to the community of liberal democracies. This term provided a starting point for Western criticism of the international policies of states such as Russia or China, and according to Stephen Walt, under President Biden, its use has, so to speak, become a job requirement for the U.S. foreign policy apparatus. (Walt, 2021) According to John Dugard, there were three main reasons for this. The first is that the United States is not a party to several major international treaties and thus cannot invoke their violation; for example, the two 1977 Protocols on humanitarian law and the conventions banning the use of landmines and cluster munitions. Second, the United States considers the use of international force justified on the grounds of preventive self-defense or by invoking the doctrine of inability or reluctance. Third, it refuses to acknowledge violations of international law by certain states, arguing that these are *sui generis* cases. It acts in this manner primarily when it is Israel itself, or—in certain contexts—when the state in question is Israel. (Dugard, 2023, 223)

Marti Koskeniemi points out, in connection with the United States' sense of exceptionalism, that exceptions to the norm reveal the nature of the new political order of which the United States is the guardian—the source of the normative order to which it is not itself bound. (Koskeniemi, 2001, 493) It is worth adding to the Finnish international lawyer's astute observation that China and Russia behave in a strikingly similar manner: they readily invoke international law, but there is strong suspicion that they always interpret its most important rules—such as the prohibition of the use of force, -although China has so far stopped short of taking armed attack regarding Taiwan, - or respect for human rights—to mean that they themselves are exempt from violating them, and they reject the concept of a rules-based

international order. President Putin has even stated that the rules-based international order is primarily anti-Russian, a one-sided Western project for the world order. Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated in the UN Security Council that international rules must be based on international law, but not in such a way that they become the privilege of a few states (Dugard, 2023, 229–230).

As G. John Ikenberry has undelined (Ikenberry, 2018, 8), there has been a long-term shift away from free trade, multilateralism, and cooperative security, and the global order is giving way to a diverse mix of nationalism, protectionism, spheres of influence, and regional great-power projects. This led to the decline of the rules-based international order and the emergence of a post-rules-based international order, the most significant feature of which is the behavior of the great powers, an era of predatory great powers. No matter how exceptional Russia or the United States may consider themselves to be, aggression against Ukraine or aggressive claims to Greenland or Canada represent the application of this predatory logic of power—one based on brute force—in interstate relations, and this is incompatible not only with the international legal order, nor with the concept of a rules-based international order.

Alexander Stubb, President of Finland, concludes that multilateralism has been replaced by multipolarity. Multilateralism is based on international institutions and shared rules. Its principles apply equally to all states. Multipolarity is different, it is an oligopoly of power. The multipolar world is built on multiple, often competing poles, formed by agreements among a limited number of actors, which weaken common rules and institutions. In a multipolar world, the major powers make agreements over their heads of small and medium size states, and transactional foreign policy is characterized by direct enforcement of interests. (Stubb, 2025)

Mark Carney, Prime Minister of Canada, stated on January 20, 2026, at the World Economic Forum in Davos in an era of great-power rivalry, the strong can do as they want, while the weak must suffer what they must. Thucydides' aphorism seems to be inevitable, as is the logic of international relations, which is repeatedly reaffirming itself. (Carney, 2026)

We must not forget that in the world of states, chaos lurks beneath the surface, concealed by the complexity of order, but it surfaces from time to time. Especially in the multipolar world the processes of international relations can become chaotic, even though the current state is determined by the previous one, because the complexity of the system makes prediction increasingly impossible. However, for states to coexist, order—at least relative order—and the relative predictability of state behavior are necessary. Therefore, maintaining order in international relations is in the general interest, although the great powers, which regard

themselves as the masters of the universe, feel the greatest temptation to upset it; they are the most prone to the use of force in interstate relations. The great power game is also a game, and it takes shape in decisions. As Henri Lefebvre puts it: “It is a game when we do not have sufficient information about the other players’ moves, and we transform our perspective into a decision by confronting chance and determinism.” (Lefebvre, 2014, 39) This may also involve the disregard of international law, and failure to comply with international conventions is not a technical or good-faith issue, but a political one. (Koskenniemi, 2011, 119)

The Changing Role of International Law

On January 3, 2026, the United States, through a military operation—Operation Absolute Resolve—captured Venezuelan President Maduro and his wife and subsequently charged them in New York with crimes related to drug-related terrorism. This constituted a serious violation of international law, as only the International Criminal Court may issue an arrest warrant against a sitting head of state, provided that several key conditions under international law are met. Consequently, the United States lacks jurisdiction to prosecute even if the alleged crimes had a direct impact on its territory and citizens. What is interesting is that the U.S. government did not bother to explain or justify the “military-backed law enforcement operation” in terms of international law. (Russia referred to its aggression against Ukraine as a “special military operation.”) The U.S. government was satisfied with the political explanation that it needed to curb Russian and Chinese influence and Iranian ties, that American influence in the Western Hemisphere is unquestionable, and that it was necessary to secure access to Venezuelan oil. (Sluiter, 2026) Previously, in connection with the destruction of ships carrying Venezuelan drugs, the U.S. government had also been content to label the criminals “narco-terrorists.”

On January 6, 2026, U.S. President Trump raised the prospect of a possible military occupation of Greenland, a statement he later retracted on January 21 in Davos. Once again, the United States settled for geopolitical arguments claiming that control of the sea routes in the Arctic region and ownership of the island’s mineral resources are in its vital interest. (Handel – Mazetti, Zwanenburg, 2026) Strategic interests were emphasized just as in the case of the claim to Canada.

U.S. behavior has led to assessments that “Trump has killed international law.” (Guardian, 2025) Perhaps it would be more appropriate to talk about a U.S.-Russian joint venture. We consider Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, the fact that in 2019 the United States unilaterally

withdrew from the INF Treaty on the limitation of short- and medium-range missiles, and then in 2020–21 both Russia and the United States withdrew from the Open Skies Treaty, and in 2023 the Russians did the same regarding the CFE Treaty on the limitation of conventional forces in Europe. Furthermore, given that Trump withdrew from numerous international organizations and that, over the course of eighteen months, one hundred thousand civilians were killed in twenty-three armed conflicts—the vast majority of them in clear violation of the rules of international humanitarian law, (Guardian, 2026), so doubting the existence of international law does not seem unfounded.

As for the substitutability of international law, the regulation of inter-state relations can conceivably be achieved through ad hoc, transactional decisions, political compromises, and unilateral, power-based precedents; however, these eventually lead to the emergence of international law. Ad hoc decisions and precedents, in fact, give rise to expectations that form the basis of customary law in a sociological sense. Among the numerous declarations of political consensus, some may be far more significant, and thus legally binding international treaties may emerge.

The denial of the existence of international law is nothing new. As one formulation, born amid the horrors of World War I, put it: “A legal order existing above and among states is a bleak and meaningless fantasy, born of cowardice and false sentimentality, and it is only the abuse of words and vague, airy-fairy arguments that have clothed it in the appearance of probability and reason.” (Ambrózy, 1918, 5) Martti Koskenniemi, who by no means denies the existence of international law and is perhaps the foremost living exponent of its theory, believes that serious violations of international law confirm that international law appears to be a kind of secular faith. Here, rather than stand out as a rules or an institution, international law serves as a substitute for such values as justice, goodness, solidarity, and responsibility. (Koskenniemi, 2007, 29)

When accurately assessing the role of international law, we must take two important factors into account. One is that the prohibition of use of force constitutes only a small part of international law; most of its rules—from the ship tonnage to the prohibition on corporal punishment in schools—apply to the same extent as domestic law. Of course, we could argue that non-use of force constitutes the most important part of international law and is of fundamental importance in relation to changing the world order. This is indeed the case. However, international law also takes the violations of it into account and recognizes the right of states to individual and collective self-defense. The prohibition of use of force constitutes a

powerful constraint on state sovereignty in interstate politics —just as human rights do on domestic politics—but is linked to the acquisition and retention of power. That is the reason frequently violated. Ever since the prohibition of use of force was enshrined in the UN Charter in 1945, it has been continuously violated. Over the past eighty-one years, numerous international armed conflicts have occurred, not to mention the many, many instances of threats of use of force. It is true that most armed conflicts began as internal affairs that were internationalized by the unlawful military intervention of a foreign state.

Why would the situation be qualitatively different now?

What happens when the prohibition against the use of force is violated is that the regulatory function of international law fails to take effect. However, international law has other functions as well.

Ideally, states do not initiate armed conflicts against the territorial integrity and political independence of other states, nor do they threaten to do so. In such cases, international law fulfills its function of *regulating* conduct. If, however, they come under suspicion in connection with a specific armed action, they gather those concepts and references from international law that, according to certain interpretations, appear to justify it. For example, the “unable or unwilling” doctrine, which holds that if a state is subjected to an armed attack by terrorists, and the other state where they are based or to which they have fled is unable or unwilling to take action against them the unilateral use of force is justified by the attacked state. The Obama administration cited this in connection with drone strikes against terrorist targets in Pakistani territory. However, this is a highly controversial exception to the general prohibition on the use of force. (Kajtár, 2018, 3–6) Putin after the military aggression against Ukraine also provided certain highly problematic international legal arguments to justify the Russian actions, such as the defense of the separatist republics of Ukraine. (Allison, 2024) Through such references, international law serves an *explanatory* or *justifying* function.

As we have seen, in connection with Trump’s actions regarding Venezuela and his threats concerning Greenland, the United States did not attempt to use international law to explain or justify its actions but instead invoked its national interests directly. Even the most pessimistic assessment cannot deny that the fundamental function of international law, which serves as a *standard, or yardstick for the conduct of states*, is not called into question in the event of serious violations of its norms. An international legal norm retains this character even when it is violated. The legal quality of a legal norm—and thus of an international legal norm—does not

depend on whether it is respected or enforced. Unlike the laws of nature, which lose their validity even if contradicted by a single fact, legal norms remain in force even in the face of repeated violations. (Lauterpacht, 1970, 20)

In connection with the action against Iran on February 28, 2026, the United States referred to pre-emptive strike claiming that it had thwarted an imminent attack, as Iran was close to producing a nuclear bomb. (Reuters, 2026) Without examining whether the prerequisites for a preemptive strike were met, it is worth noting that, in this case, the United States reverted to using the interpretive and justificatory function of international law.

Instead of a summary

Fluctuat ne mergitur. It is tossed by the waves but does not sink. This motto has appeared on the coat of arms of Paris since 1358. Changes in the world order, the decline of the concept of a rules-based international order, and the rise of a logic of power based on brute force do not sink international law; it merely tosses about on the stormy seas of interstate relations.

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The restructuring of the world order – in the spirit of common sense

Iván Bába

After numerous political statements, the United States National Security Strategy was published in November 2025, and the National Defense Strategy in January 2026. These two documents already contain enough information about what the real pursuits and intentions of the U.S. government are in the international arena, and what we can expect from it in the foreseeable future.

National Security Strategy of the United States of America

The main goal that can be read from the National Security Strategy is that the United States should be the world's strongest, best-functioning, and most deterrent country, and President Trump's foreign policy is guided not by tradition, not by principles, and not by the international legal order, but by two words: 'America First'.

According to the National Security Strategy, the most important region for American security policy is the American continent, as well as Asia, including China, and the Indo-Pacific.

The strengthening of the Monroe Doctrine (America for the Americans!) is one of the pillars of the strategy, and it means that neither Russia, nor China, nor anyone else has a strategic business on either side of the continent! (In the listing of the National Defense Strategy, the Panama Canal, the Gulf of Mexico, and Greenland are explicitly mentioned!)

About China, we can read the following: "President Trump single-handedly reversed more than three decades of mistaken American assumptions about China: namely, that by opening our markets to China, encouraging American business to invest in China, and outsourcing our manufacturing to China, we would facilitate China's entry into the so-called rules-based international order. This did not happen. China got rich and powerful, and used its wealth and power to its considerable advantage." This situation must be changed – the document

emphasizes. “To win the Economic Future, but prevent military confrontation” – that is, the aim can be nothing other than for the United States to remain the leading power of the global economy, enforcing its will – also relying on its greatest military deterrent power – in the Asian region as well. It balances China's gain in world trade, and with China, it 'maintains truly mutually beneficial economic relations'.

Europe appears almost exclusively as a set of problems in the strategic document. According to the interpretation of the document, the continent's global economic loss goes hand in hand with its civilizational decline. Europe's decline, in turn, is caused partly by the European Union and other transnational organizations that undermine political freedom and sovereignty, and partly by migration policy, which transforms the continent and causes conflict, the restriction of freedom of speech and the suppression of political opposition, the plummeting birth rate, as well as the loss of national identity and self-confidence.

The list that outlines the United States' priorities regarding Europe is quite remarkable:

„Reestablishing conditions of stability within Europe and strategic stability with Russia;

- Enabling Europe to stand on its own feet and operate as a group of aligned sovereign nations, including by taking primary responsibility for its own defense, without being dominated by any adversarial power;
- Cultivating resistance to Europe's current trajectory within European nations;
- Opening European markets to U.S. goods and services and ensuring fair treatment of U.S. workers and businesses;
- Building up the healthy nations of Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe through commercial ties, weapons sales, political collaboration, and cultural and educational exchanges;
- Ending the perception, and preventing the reality, of NATO as a perpetually expanding alliance; and
- Encouraging Europe to take action to combat mercantilist overcapacity, technological theft, cyber espionage, and other hostile economic practices.”

And the vision: “Over the long term, it is more than plausible that within a few decades at the latest, certain NATO members will become majority non-European. As such, it is an open question whether they will view their place in the world, or their alliance with the United States, in the same way as those who signed the NATO charter.”

These findings alone already indicate a significant shift in American strategy. However, it becomes truly evident when we also take into account what is not included in the national strategic document.

1. The document lists China, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa as problems to be solved or addressed, but Russia does not appear! (Only as a task designated for Europe.)
2. There is nowhere any reference to international law, values, norms, and rules that maintain and operate international relations.
3. There is no reference to international economic relations.
4. Apart from NATO, there is no reference to any international organization (only to the EU in a critical context).

National Defense Strategy

Its subtitle is already telling: 'Restoring peace through strength – for a new Golden Age of America.' Its tool is the army as the nation's sword and shield.

The task of the new leadership is to create a military force that ensures free military and commercial access to the Panama Canal, the Gulf of America, and Greenland in the Western Hemisphere. The task of Canada and the other American countries is "to respect and do their part to defend shared interests." Where they do not, the United States is ready to take targeted, decisive action to enforce its objectives.

According to the defense strategy, China is a partner of the United States, which should neither be strangled nor humiliated. Instead, a balance of power should be established in the region to maintain a reliable peace order.

In the case of allies and partners, increased burden-sharing must be achieved, which is not isolationism, but the implementation of the America First principle based on common sense. Apart from defending America (the homeland) and deterring China, handling and countering the remaining dangers is the task of the allies – not the United States, but in their own interest.

Russia's economic power pales in comparison to the power of the European NATO member countries (the ratio of nominal GDP is 13:1, 2024), so the primary responsibility for defending Europe with conventional weapons lies with these countries. They must take a leading role in supporting the defense of Ukraine. The war in Ukraine must end, and this is primarily and mainly Europe's responsibility.

An important element of the strategy is that the United States' allies and partners form a defensive ring around Eurasia. This not only means favorable geographical conditions, as within this ring are many of the wealthiest countries. This alliance network is much wealthier than potential adversaries combined. Consequently, if the allies and partners spend an appropriate amount on defense - in accordance with the new global standards adopted at the Hague summit - they can collectively create more than sufficient deterrent power against potential adversaries.

The Board of Peace

The Board of Peace founded by President Trump has received numerous critical remarks, and these remarks do have a professional basis. In the international world, this rather "unusual" organization has both an organizational structure and an operational system that differ significantly from those of international organizations established and operated in the international relations framework since the founding of the UN in 1945. However, if we do not interpret the creation of the organization on its own, but together with the two strategic documents presented above, we can see that it fits organically into the American strategy formulated by the two previous documents.

The preamble of the founding charter of the Board of Peace relatively simply and clearly indicates the justification and purpose of the organization's establishment.

Let us quote a few points from it:

Lasting peace requires pragmatic judgement, common-sense solutions, and the courage to depart from approaches and institutions that have too often failed. Lasting peace can only take root if people are empowered and take responsibility for their own future.

Only sustained, burden-sharing, commitment-based, result-oriented partnerships can secure peace in places where peace-building efforts have proven elusive for a long time. Too many approaches to peace-building foster perpetual dependency and institutionalize crisis rather than leading people beyond it.

There is a need for a more nimble and effective international peace-building body.

The above insights result in the creation of a coalition of states ready to act, committed to practical cooperation and effective action.

The internal structure set out in the founding charter of the Board of Peace – although it describes itself as an international organization established under international law – does not in any way meet the criteria of an international organization, either regarding the bodies of the institution or its operating procedures. However, if we examine the group of states that were invited and those that accepted the invitation, or did not reject it, we can see that membership has no ideological, value-based, or legal requirements; the only condition is the acceptance of the leadership role of President Trump in order to achieve the objectives stated in the preamble.

Contours of a New World Order

The contours of a new world order emerge from the three documents. In this, two major players and one partner are involved: the United States, China, and Russia. Indirectly, it can be read from them that President Trump wants to do business with Russia rather than go to war – with particular regard to the endless amount of mineral resources found in Russia.

Trump regards the European Union more as an opponent than an ally. In Western European countries, the liberal political force is in the mainstream, that is, in power, and this force was an ally of the previous American administration. In the United States, however, the struggle between the two sides is ongoing, which means that the European Union, the majority of Western European countries, is a support and ally of Trump's opponents.

What can Europe, currently led by liberal leadership, do in this situation? If it wants to remain a geopolitical factor as a 'fourth pole,' it would need to implement significant internal reforms. And not only would it need minor or major changes, but a fundamental shift in mindset and a political 'sleight of hand.' It would need to increase the Union's internal cohesion and the efficiency of its decision-making while ensuring that the Commission, under pressure from various economic interest groups and Brussels lobbies and against the interests and aspirations of the member states, cannot make independent political decisions and considers its main task to be the coordination of the interests of the member countries.

The transformation of the world order is happening before our eyes, according to a scenario never seen before. The President of the United States is withdrawing his country from several dozen international organizations and agreements, deeming the international order, which has been defining for about eighty years and is fundamentally based on the American liberal ideology and values, as useless or harmful in both its legal and institutional systems. Donald Trump and his team have begun building a new world order, which is based on the principle of the legitimacy of power-based pursuit of interests, guided by "common sense."

In this regard, at the beginning of the process, two fundamental questions arise. The first question is whether the other players in world politics—the major powers, the medium-sized, and the smaller ones—will acknowledge and accept this, or whether they will, individually or by forming smaller or larger alliances of interest, try to defend and preserve the basic institutions and organizing principles of the existing world order, the system built over decades in international law and the world economy, fundamentally based on liberal values. The second question might concern whether 'common sense' can be a sufficient guiding principle for establishing a new international order that functions better, more justly, and more efficiently than the current one.

International institutions – did bureaucracy eat its own goals?

Réka Varga

The UN, a multilateral organization established after World War II and now the world's largest and most inclusive body, has ultimately reached a tipping point, balancing over-bureaucratization with the need to maintain its original goals. The goals that were identified in 1945 are still highly relevant, and over the decades, the UN has established mechanisms and processes to fulfill its purpose. At the same time, the growing number of topics the UN attempted to address and the speed at which it established such mechanisms resulted in a complicated matrix, in which by now bureaucracy seems to overwhelm the purpose.

The following is a brief summary of the state of multilateral institutions, focusing on the UN, with a view to demonstrating the need for a structured approach to necessary reform.

Why international institutions matter?

The United Nations is the first permanent international organization that includes all states of the world. Its main goal, as stated in its Charter, is to maintain international peace and security through dialogue and a range of tools mentioned in the Charter.

A similar attempt in history to provide a platform for diplomatic dialogue was the Congress System, established after and in reaction to the Napoleonic Wars. The key feature of the congress system was a mechanism that encompassed ideas similar to the UN: to provide a constant platform for dialogue among states, with all concerned (European) states invited. The result of the Congress System was a 100-year period of relative peace on the continent, which ended with World War I.

The success of the congress system lay in its two main features. First, it included every power that wished to be present. This inclusiveness allowed everyone to sit at the table and have their words heard – conversely, no one felt left out. Second, the mere possibility of having a regular forum to discuss state-to-state relations put state disputes in their rightful place: diplomacy – instead of waging war.

The logic behind the UN is very similar. It is, contrary to the Congress System, a permanent body, with all states involved, providing a forum for discussion. This is the true strength of the UN. When critics ask why the UN can't deal with the big crises of our day, we must put our expectations in their proper place. The UN cannot, and will never be able to prevent or solve all major conflicts. The UN, by definition (because states are its members), is a political

institution; thus, it cannot act as the mighty, wise, and neutral police of the world. Its main strength is in its inclusiveness and in offering alternatives to states settling their disagreements through conflicts.

Another feature of the UN, as stipulated in its Charter, is its commitment to maintaining a rules-based world order and strengthening human rights. To achieve this, it furthered the adoption of human rights treaties, established committees to oversee the execution of these treaties, established other mechanisms to deal with ad hoc human rights abuses, established special procedures, institutions, special rapporteurs and special representatives to put certain topics on the map which deserve the attention of the international community. As a result, important themes received more attention. These are undoubtedly great achievements.

The expansion of the international institutional system

At the same time, over the years, the UN's system of committees, special representatives, rapporteurs, and other procedures has become a web of institutions that require a careful, structured look, also taking into consideration other regional or global institutions.

Altogether today, there are roughly 300 global international organizations, and 40,000 international NGOs, in contrast to the handful of permanent international organizations in 1815, and roughly 70–80 international organizations active in 1945.

The United Nations is the world's largest and most comprehensive international organization. Its mandate – maintenance of international peace and security – is interpreted broadly and thus covers a wide range of policies: from peace and security through development, human rights, humanitarian aid, health, the environment to refugee issues.

The UN has expanded into a large organization with diverse and sometimes overlapping institutional structures. The following basic data illustrate this.

The UN has 40,000 mandates, issued by bodies such as the General Assembly, Security Council and ECOSOC, based on the request of states. Mandates are, for example, maintaining a peacekeeping mission, monitoring a human rights situation, collecting statistics, supporting refugee protection, implementing development programs, producing annual reports, convening meetings or conferences, and administering treaty mechanisms.

These 40,000 mandates are overseen by 400 intergovernmental bodies, and result in approximately 27,000 meetings a year and 1,100 reports annually. The number of UN employees is 130–150,000 (which, in itself, is not so striking, compared to the 60–70,000 EU employees).

While there was undoubtedly good reason to undertake these mandates, more than 85% of them contain no sunset clause or automatic review mechanism.

The example of human rights mechanisms: achievements and proliferation

One set of mandates pertains to human rights, consisting of 69 treaty bodies and special procedures – 10 treaty bodies and 59 special procedures – that address various human rights aspects. This leads to repeated or *ad hoc* reporting requirements for states.

When combined with non-UN reporting duties from entities like the Council of Europe, the European Union, the OECD, and other organizations, governments - especially for European states with robust reporting systems - must submit thousands of compliance reports, notifications, statistical data, and other reports.

Many procedures have historically been essential for highlighting human rights issues, thematizing problems, and ultimately identifying, evaluating, and naming abuses. However, some procedures have become politicized or used as tools by commenting states to emphasize their own priorities or political agenda instead of focusing on the situation in the assessed country.

The Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) shows these dynamics clearly. Hungary's 2023 UPR report, spanning 20 pages, received 286 recommendations from at least 85 countries, including China, Russia, Belarus, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Cuba.

If one thinks this is specific to Hungary, Switzerland's UPR report received 317 recommendations from countries such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Cuba, and China.

Iran alone made 10 recommendations to Switzerland, including two related to women:

“Regarding trafficking of women and girls and their sexual exploitation, to formulate a comprehensive strategy, which should include measures of prevention, prosecution and punishment of offenders and increased regional and international cooperation.”

and

“Allocate sufficient resources to effectively and efficiently develop childhood centres in order to promote and protect women's ability to balance their social and family life.”

Treaties and courts – is there a judicialization of international politics, and if so, is that bad?

The number of international treaties illustrates a similarly intricate pattern. Before 1900, there were only a few thousand multilateral treaties. Currently, the UN registers around a couple of

thousand multilateral treaties, acts as the depositary for 560 multilateral treaties, and roughly 30,000 bilateral treaties. Likely, thousands of bilateral treaties are not registered with the UN. The increase in treaties correlates with active cooperation among states and reflects their efforts to manage relations peacefully. However, it also highlights the extensive bureaucratic nature involved in these agreements.

The increasing number of treaties has led to the creation of more international courts and tribunals. Before 1945, there were virtually no international courts with broad jurisdiction. Today, aside from the Permanent Court of Arbitration established in 1907, there are the UN's International Court of Justice, the World Trade Organization's dispute settlement system, regional courts, investment arbitration tribunals, and international courts like the International Criminal Court and earlier *ad hoc* criminal tribunals for Yugoslavia and Rwanda.

Scholars often observe a trend toward the judicialization of international politics. Though this might be seen as criticism, it is not necessarily negative, since courts offer effective alternative mechanisms for resolving disputes without war. The questions remain about their effectiveness, overlap, and whether they fulfill their intended roles.

A signal of dissatisfaction

The world – particularly experts in international relations and law – was on edge when President Trump announced, with much fanfare, that the US was withdrawing from 66 international organizations. Many predicted this could lead to the collapse of international law or the disintegration of international institutions.

However, some of us diligently examined these 66 organizations from which the US withdrew. We found that, despite it not being a positive signal and certainly damaging the international system, the move was partly a bluff.

Out of the 66 organizations, 85% are in the never-heard-of category. Of the 66, 36 are non-UN organizations. Of these, 3 are treaty withdrawals; the rest are mostly MOU-type agreements. The withdrawal from the Council of Europe's Venice Commission was particularly painful, while the withdrawal from the International Lead and Zinc Study Group was probably less so. The remaining 31 are UN-related organizations or mechanisms, in which the US is not even a member, because they are established either by the Secretary-General or are UN bodies, such as the ECOSOC Regional commissions or special representatives covering specific issues. In others, the US is not a participant per se, but it can nominate members who are elected by the states and then serve in their personal capacities (such as the International Law Commission, an expert body under the General Assembly). What exactly the US withdrawal means in these

cases is unclear. Withdrawal from the special representatives is particularly odd: these are established by the Secretary-General to cover a specific topic and are funded from the general UN budget.

The picture tells us that the US withdrawal didn't really shake the international institutions. But it also sent a signal that the US government was unhappy with the international establishment. And honestly, the US isn't the only one. Even when using more diplomatic language, other countries often express dissatisfaction with the rationale and impact of the extensive network of international institutions. Nevertheless, this criticism shouldn't be mistaken for the belief that most states still see a need for these institutions.

Reform, not dismantlement

The key question is this: will there be enough wisdom, oversight, and willingness to compromise to overcome excessive bureaucracy, rationalize this organizational network, and focus on their original goals to implement appropriate reforms?

However, reform does not merely mean budget cuts or shutting down institutions. A common risk is that reforms might eliminate agencies dealing with sensitive or complex issues - areas that actually require the most attention. To prevent reforms from being driven solely by political convenience, they must be approached with a careful and structural perspective. This will be one of the greatest challenges for the new UN Secretary-General. May they have the strength and wisdom to succeed.

Short bios

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