

From Rules to Power: Is the Rules-Based Order Quietly Collapsing?

Jannatul Toba Jhumu¹



Source: News.az

The rules-based international order (RBO) is now deeply contested. The system of post-1945 laws, institutions and norms meant to govern state relations is likely on the verge of change. In theory, the system was supposed to ensure that even the most powerful countries played by shared rules and worked through multilateral institutions, instead of just using their strength to get what they wanted². U.S. leaders like Antony Blinken describe it as “a system of laws, agreements, principles

¹ Jannatul Toba Jhumu is a Research Assistant at Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS). She completed her BSS and MSS in Development Studies from Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP).

² House of Lords Library, *Challenges to a Rules-Based International Order*, 9 January 2025, House of Lords Library Briefing Paper, UK Parliament, accessed February 18, 2026, <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/challenges-to-a-rules-based-international-order/>.

and institutions” built after World War II to prevent conflict and uphold rights. At its core, this open order was supposed to rest not on sheer power but on shared commitments and predictable multilateral processes. In reality, though, the RBO was never free from power imbalances. It was essentially a U.S.-backed system built and sustained through Western influence³. From the very beginning, the Western bloc largely set the terms of the system, while many non-Western powers, such as the Soviet bloc, China, and India, either remained outside it or pushed back against it for decades. In many ways, the liberal order functioned as a privileged club of the West, leaving much of the Global South on the margins⁴.

Yet despite these criticisms and structural biases, the RBO continued to shape global politics for decades. The states still engaged with the global institutions for trade, dispute settlement, peacekeeping, and development financing. While there was criticism of Western dominance, the countries still relied on multilateral forums as the system offered predictability, legal channels, and access to global markets. In practice, the world operated within this framework with enough shared expectations to keep cooperation functioning. This durability led many to believe that the order remained the backbone of global governance.

In recent years, however, the reality has altered. The mechanism of diplomacy has also changed. The world now experiences coercive bargaining, military posturing, and direct confrontation between great powers instead of traditional mechanisms of negotiation and institutional conflict resolution. This deterioration of diplomatic practice affects the trust and predictability essential for sustaining any rules-based system. At the same time, diplomatic manners themselves are being disrupted. The way the U.S. humiliated Ukrainian leadership regarding aid conditions in the White House⁵ shows that even within alliances, power asymmetry shapes outcomes. The smaller states are compelled to adjust to the strategic preferences of stronger partners. These unequal

³ Aude Darnal, Amitav Acharya, and Tim Murithi, “A [New] World Order: What, Why, and How?,” *Stimson Center*, July 12, 2023, The Henry L. Stimson Center, accessed February 18, 2026, <https://www.stimson.org/2023/a-new-world-order-what-why-and-how/>.

⁴ Amitav Acharya, “After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order,” *Ethics & International Affairs* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2017), accessed February 18, 2026, <https://www.ethicsandinternationalaffairs.org/journal/after-liberal-hegemony-the-advent-of-a-multiplex-world-order/>.

⁵ Graden Keller, “Letter to the Editor: The Oval Office Fiasco Was a Calculated Setup to Humiliate Ukraine and Undermine Democracy,” *Kyiv Independent*, March 1, 2025, accessed February 18, 2026, <https://kyivindependent.com/letter-to-the-editor-the-oval-office-fiasco-was-a-calculated-setup-to-humiliate-ukraine-and-undermine-democracy/>.

relationships contradict the RBO's claim of treating all sovereign states as formally equal. This crisis has been further intensified by the withdrawal of the United States from several major international bodies and UN agencies⁶. It raises doubts about the credibility of the RBO's principal architect. This shows that Washington is no longer willing to focus on multilateralism⁷. It weakens both the normative legitimacy and the practical functioning of the RBO.



Source: Fair Observer

The erosion of diplomatic norms, selective use of multilateralism, and visible power asymmetries within alliances feed into a broader debate about what the “rules-based order” actually means in practice. The RBO's crisis is not simply about recent geopolitical shifts, but about the inherent contradictions embedded in the system from the start. For instance, China accuses Western powers of invoking the notion of a rules-based order primarily to delegitimize rivals and maintain their

⁶ Lyndal Rowlands, “Which Are the 66 Global Organisations the US Is Leaving Under Trump?,” *Al Jazeera*, January 8, 2026, accessed February 18, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/1/8/which-are-the-66-global-organisations-the-us-is-leaving-under-trump>.

⁷ Aicha Elbasri, “The UN and the Multilateral System in Crisis amid US Retreat and China's Rise,” *Doha Institute for Graduate Studies*, December 31, 2025, accessed February 18, 2026, <https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/PoliticalStudies/Pages/un-and-the-multilateral-system-in-crisis-amid-us-decline-and-rise-of-china.aspx>.

own strategic primacy⁸, while critics from the Global South note it has never been a truly universal or neutral system⁹. As RUSI's Malcolm Chalmers observes, the idea that there was one neat order of rule-followers and rule-breakers was always an oversimplification¹⁰. In reality, international politics has long combined rules with power-based bargains. Nonetheless, after 1945 the United States and its allies did build expansive institutions under the banner of an open order. Those institutions, and the notion of collectively managing global problems, do matter: they created unprecedented stability and even economic growth for many. But because the order relied disproportionately on the leadership of Western power, strategic shifts and domestic politics have inevitably reverberated across the system. The world is now confronting the consequences of this imbalance and skeptic over whether the RBO can be sustained anymore.

Signs of Strain and Erosion

The signs of strain on the rules-based international order are increasingly difficult to ignore. The powerful states are defying foundational principles of international law. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and China's dismissal of the 2016 South China Sea tribunal ruling show that key actors now treat sovereignty norms and binding legal decisions as matters of political convenience¹¹.

Economic governance is also showing signs of strain. The paralysis of the World Trade Organization's dispute-settlement system, along with rising protectionism in the United States and Europe, points to a retreat from the ideal of open, rules-based trade. Interdependence, once seen as a stabilizing force, is increasingly being used as leverage through sanctions, export controls, and industrial policies. The global economy is in the midst of reshaping, where competing blocs

⁸ Paul Gewirtz, "China, the United States, and the Future of a Rules-Based International Order," *Brookings*, July 22, 2024, accessed February 18, 2026, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/china-the-united-states-and-the-future-of-a-rules-based-international-order/>.

⁹ Aude Darnal, Amitav Acharya, and Tim Murithi, "A [New] World Order: What, Why, and How?," *Stimson Center*, July 12, 2023, The Henry L. Stimson Center, accessed February 18, 2026, <https://www.stimson.org/2023/a-new-world-order-what-why-and-how/>.

¹⁰ Malcolm Chalmers, *Which Rules? Why There Is No Single 'Rules-Based International System'*, RUSI Occasional Paper, April 2019, Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, accessed February 18, 2026, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/occasional-papers/which-rules-why-there-no-single-rules-based-international-system>.

¹¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Remarks on Philippine President Marcos's Speech Concerning the South China Sea Issue at the Shangri-La Dialogue," June 3, 2024, accessed February 18, 2026, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/fyrbt/202407/t20240730_11463278.html.

such as BRICS+, a U.S.-anchored group, a China-centered sphere, and flexible plurilateral coalitions are taking place rather than a single unified marketplace¹². This fragmentation is also visible in global problem-solving. Attempts to reach agreement on a pandemic treaty, strengthen global health preparedness, develop rules for AI governance, or advance equitable climate action continue to stall. Humanitarian norms long considered a moral foundation of the RBO are likewise coming under growing strain. The world has witnessed the selective application of international law regarding the Gaza conflict which has fueled debate. Israel aggression and large-scale civilian harm have not altered the political stance of key Western powers. It reinforces the perceptions that the rules are flexible for allies and rigid for adversaries.



Source: The World Economic Forum

Diplomacy itself is evolving in ways that both reflect and accelerate this erosion. Traditional negotiation is being replaced by coercive bargaining, megaphone diplomacy, and overt pressure tactics. Even among allies, power imbalances are becoming more apparent. Rising nationalism from “America First” to Brexit, and China’s push for self-reliance is further undermining the political foundations of multilateral cooperation. As Mark Carney noted at Davos 2026, many

¹² Aparna Bharadwaj et al., “Trade in Transition: How to Prepare for a Patchwork World Order,” *Boston Consulting Group* (January 8, 2026), accessed February 18, 2026, <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2026/how-prepare-patchwork-world-order>.

leaders no longer feel bound by the mutual benefit narrative when rules are enforced unevenly¹³. Taken together, these trends suggest a system under serious strain. Global institutions are struggling to reach consensus, diplomatic channels are increasingly clogged, and major powers often ignore the norms they once promoted. The 2023 G20 Summit's failure to issue a unified communiqué highlighted this paralysis. Without a renewed commitment to cooperation, the world risks slipping into a prolonged period of fragmentation and dysfunction.

Regional Blocs, New Alignments, and Global South Responses

The disruptions in the global institutions have created a vacuum in the international arena. With uncertainty around, the states are desperate to safeguard their interests through regional, plurilateral, and informal arrangements. The states are leaning towards overlapping blocs and minilateral formats to advance common priorities. Economic, trade, security, and political alignments are no longer shaped by universal institutions only. These are increasingly taking place outside traditional multilateral institutions¹⁴. The countries now navigate multiple rulebooks depending on where they operate, and governments increasingly pursue bilateral and regional deals as alternatives to multilateral negotiations.

On the strategic front, security partnerships are also becoming more consolidated. The Quad now holds regular meetings and presents itself as a defender of an open Indo-Pacific. Meanwhile, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is gaining prominence. Its 2023 summit in China, attended by leaders from India, Russia, Iran, and others, signaled a non-Western-led platform advancing an alternative vision of international order¹⁵. China's Global Governance Initiative, announced at the summit, calls for a world order "that prioritizes the Global South" and stands "against hegemonism and power politics." The BRICS bloc is expanding membership and establishing development banks, signaling efforts by emerging economies to shape norms and financing outside Western-

¹³ Mark Carney, "Davos 2026: Special Address by Mark Carney, Prime Minister of Canada," *World Economic Forum*, January 20, 2026, accessed February 18, 2026, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/>.

¹⁴ Aparna Bharadwaj et al., "Trade in Transition: How to Prepare for a Patchwork World Order," *Boston Consulting Group* (January 8, 2026), accessed February 18, 2026, <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2026/how-prepare-patchwork-world-order>.

¹⁵ Bob Savic, "Global Majority Drives Multipolar Shift," *GIS Reports* (September 1, 2025), accessed February 18, 2026, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/global-majority-multipolar-world/>.

led institutions. Regional actors like the European Union and ASEAN similarly act as consolidated players, negotiating collectively in global forums. The result is a multipolar and patchwork world¹⁶.

Global South countries are also focusing on multi-alignment strategies. There rises a trend of hedging across multiple partnerships instead of relying on one powerful bloc. The traditional, binding alliances are giving way to flexible, issue-by-issue coalitions. The countries are forming new blocs and participating in existing multiple regional blocs such as BRICS, the Non-Aligned Movement, IBSA, and G77. At the same time, they are also engaging with Western-led forums like the G20 or the EU. They are focusing on maximizing strategic leverage while protecting sovereignty and managing national interests.

The Global South's approach is shaped by longstanding skepticism and the perception of the RBO being a Western-dominated system. Many developing countries view the current disorder as an opportunity to articulate alternatives. The war in Ukraine, for example, exposed many states to severe food and energy shocks while revealing how unevenly sanctions and international norms are applied. The "Western-created" order is widely perceived as unjust and disadvantageous¹⁷. Policy debates across the Global South are increasingly gravitating toward ideas such as reviving the Non-Aligned Movement, convening a new Bandung Conference, or even calling for a UN Charter Review Conference to establish updated governance norms. The Global South is also investing in alternative institutions and financial mechanisms. The BRICS New Development Bank, China's Belt and Road Initiative, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and various regional development banks. These initiatives are simultaneously defensive and offer a model of development that prioritize state-led growth and multipolar cooperation.

¹⁶ OECD and Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), *Global Perspectives on Triangular Co-operation 2025* (Paris: OECD Publishing, October 24, 2025), accessed February 18, 2026, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/global-perspectives-on-triangular-co-operation-second-edition_f713f2ce-en.html (doi:10.1787/f713f2ce-en).

¹⁷ Aude Darnal, Amitav Acharya, and Tim Murithi, "A [New] World Order: What, Why, and How?," *Stimson Center*, July 12, 2023, The Henry L. Stimson Center, accessed February 18, 2026, <https://www.stimson.org/2023/a-new-world-order-what-why-and-how/>.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the rules-based order is changing, and it is changing profoundly. The system is drifting away from its original post-1945 values. The old architecture has been undeniably weakened by great-power rivalry, selective adherence to rules, regional fragmentation, and diplomatic erosion. Yet it would be overstated to claim that the order is fully dead or on the edge of absolute collapse. Many of its core components continue to function and still structure large parts of global interaction. Even rising powers that criticize the liberal order continue to use these institutions to protect national interest. The world is not entering a vacuum but a more multiplex configuration, where overlapping regional, functional, and issue-specific arrangements co-exist with weakened global ones¹⁸. At the same time, the pressures on the old order are deeper than geopolitical shifts alone. The growing influence of transnational oligarchic and kleptocratic networks visible in both democratic and authoritarian systems blurs the boundary between public governance and private enrichment. This trend suggests that global rules are unevenly applied and easily circumvented by the powerful. In this environment, the RBO is neither intact nor extinct. Instead, it is undergoing a contested transition. In short, the rules-based order is in deep crisis. Its future will hinge on the decisions made over the next decades by multiple global actors instead of just the major powers. What is certain is that the era of a single, hegemonic liberal order is over, and the contours of the next system will be forged in a world where power, legitimacy, and rules are no longer aligned but in active contestation.

¹⁸ Amitav Acharya, "After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order," *Ethics & International Affairs* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2017): pp. [page range], accessed February 18, 2026, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/ethics-and-international-affairs/article/after-liberal-hegemony-the-advent-of-a-multiplex-world-order/DBD581C139022B1745154175D28EC639>.