



MULTILATERALISM IN CRISIS: INTERNATIONAL LAW IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

Kanika*

ABSTRACT

The contemporary international order is experiencing a profound transformation as the traditional system of multilateral cooperation faces increasing challenges from geopolitical rivalry, unilateral actions, and institutional deadlock. This research essay examines the erosion of multilateralism and critically explores whether international law can remain effective in an emerging multipolar world characterized by competing global powers. The post-cold war order, largely shaped by institutions such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization, was founded on the principle that global governance should operate through collective decision-making and rule-based frameworks rather than power politics. However, recent developments indicate growing strain on this system. The Russia-Ukraine war exposed the paralysis of the UN Security Council due to veto politics, while the ongoing Israel-Gaza conflict has highlighted deep divisions within the international community. More recently, escalating tensions and military confrontations involving the United States, Iran, and Israel have further raised concerns about the erosion of the prohibition on the use of force under Article 2(4) of the UN Charter. These developments reflect a broader shift toward unilateralism and strategic alliances that challenge the effectiveness of global institutions. This essay argues that although multilateralism is under significant strain, international law is unlikely to disappear. Instead, it is evolving through institutional reforms, regional cooperation, and emerging governance models that may redefine the operation of international law in an increasingly multipolar world.

KEYWORDS: Multilateralism, Multipolarity, Geopolitics, Global governance, Unilateralism

1. INTRODUCTION

Multilateralism is no longer an abstract idea, but an integral part of the current governance process. The institution-like structure of power put in place after the Second World War remains, but its authority has eroded. As noted in recent work, multilateral institutions are not usually spectacular failures, but they are rendered insignificant as states take alternative routes with selective defiance or strategic

* LLM, University Institute of Legal Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh.

instrumentalism. The more important question is whether international law can be effective if multilateral institutions have limited authority and representation is questionable, particularly when great powers increasingly prefer coercive or exclusionary to universal processes.

The unipolar world order created by the US post-Cold War was the ideal environment for the emergence of rule-based governance. This system has evolved into a multipolar system whereby Russia's renewed aggressiveness is matched by the emergence of new powers such as China, India and Brazil. This has led to greater geopolitical competition and the loss of peace and harmony needed for effective multilateralism.

Empirical indicators confirmed this transformation. Trade has become more fragmented, the number of global conflicts have risen, and multilateral organisations have faced difficulties in responding to events ranging from war to the climate emergency. These developments raise a fundamental question: Can international law retain its relevance in a world where power politics increasingly dominate global affairs?

This piece contends that although multilateralism is facing a crisis, international law is not likely to disappear. Rather, it is transforming into a more fragmented but resilient system that still shapes state behaviour, legitimates activities and provides a mode of governance.

2. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF MULTILATERALISM IN INTERNATIONAL LAW

Multilateralism is defined as the structured cooperation among three or more states within institutional arrangements governed by shared norms and rules. It is an international law foundational principle which facilitates treaty formation, dispute resolution and global governance.

Multilateralism is principally based on the United Nations' Charter. *Article 1* places the maintenance of international peace and security as one of the purposes, and *Article 2(3)* and *2(4)* mandate peaceful dispute settlement and prohibit the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state. Further, the peaceful resolution and enforcement of international law is institutionalised in Chapters VI and VII.

Multilateral treaties like the Paris Agreement, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the

Sea are examples of international law built through cooperative arrangements, in addition to the UN Charter. These instruments create obligations and enable the gradual development of international law.

Multilateralism has a number of beneficial functions. It establishes a rule-based system that enhances stability and reduces uncertainties in world affairs. It creates collective security mechanisms through which states can deal with threats through collective efforts. It assists in resolving problems in areas such as climate change, public health and monetary affairs. It also helps to develop international standards, thus increasing the consistency and legitimacy of the law. Despite all of this, multilateralism is now seeing an increasing strain.

3. RISE OF MULTIPOLARITY AND GLOBAL FRAGMENTATION

The shift from a unipolar to a multipolar world order is a transformation in the structure of international relations. The world has become more complex and contested due to the relative decline of the western powers and the emergence of the rise of developing countries.

The growing prominence of BRICS is the indication of this change. They collectively represent a significant share of the global population and economic activity, and thus challenge the dominance of the traditional western institutions. At the same time, regional associations such as the European Union and Association of South East Asian Nations have become increasingly important to global governance.

Aside from regionalism, mini-lateralism, which refers to smaller, issue driven groupings, have gained favour. These often allow for quicker decision making but at the cost of universality and inclusivity. Thus, there is a fragmented global governance, with multiple (and sometimes competing) institutional arrangements.

Economic patterns show even more how fragmented it is. The rate of world trade growth has declined, uncertainty in policy has increased, and protectionist measures have become more commonplace. This affects efforts to maintain a stable legal framework and the multilateral organisations' effectiveness.

4. THE STRUCTURAL REASONS FOR THE COLLAPSE OF MULTILATERALISM

The first reason for the crisis is the legitimacy gap of official multilateral organisations. The United Nations Security Council is an excellent example: while

the principle of sovereign equality is enshrined in the system, the five permanent members' veto power introduces a hierarchical structure in which a minority of countries can dominate decision making. The current distribution of power allows a minority to stay more powerful than the majority.

The failure to adapt does not necessarily lead to death, but it certainly leads to decay. The same can be said for economic control. Although the developing world has grown and there is a continuing need for reform in quotas and governance of the Bretton Woods institutions, they are still not well-adapted to current circumstances. So, the legitimacy problem is one of representation, too. Institutions originally established to rule appear to many in the Global South as selective inclusion.

Geopolitical fragmentation is the second cause. The World Bank's June 2025 Global Economic Prospects report painted a picture of slowing growth, an unrivalled level of trade-policy uncertainty, and fragmentation. It forecasted that growth in 2025 would only grow to 2.3%, the slowest growth since 2008 except during global recessions. In addition, it forecasted global trade growth to slow from 3.4% in 2024 to 1.8% in 2025. This report also claimed that the effective tariff rate in the US was at its highest in nearly 100 years. In other words, fragmentation has spread from being military or political to becoming economic as well. Multilateralism becomes more of a challenge as trade measures, sanctions, retaliation and industrial policy measures continue to proliferate, and multilateral institutions are pushed to deal with issues for which they were not designed.

The rise of minilateralism and informalism is the third factor. The new research and the documents uploaded support the notion that government is shifting towards smaller, flexible and even issue specific groups. This trend isn't necessarily bad. Restricted and informal alliances may enable cooperation where none can be found, and may be faster than universal forums. But it comes at the expense of systematic integrity. This is termed by some as "networked fragmentation" and by others as "multilateralism à la carte" where states join committees and tribunals as needed and avoid those that bind them. While this can foster short-term engagement, it undermines the universality, predictability, and equality of access, especially for the small. In such a setting, international law continues to operate, but more as a flexible framework for cooperation than as a system of binding commitments.

Norman inconsistency ultimately intensified the crisis. The same factors that increase the validity of territorial integrity and the sanctity of sovereignty in one phase may decrease or recast them in another. This prerogative is risky because

international law is based not only on formal validity but also on a minimum degree of impartiality. While the material integrity of the law may remain in place, it loses its validity when humanitarian law, self-determination, responsibility or non-aggression appear to be applied unequally. So, the current crisis of the world is a crisis of international law.

5. CASE STUDIES IN THE STRESS TEST OF INTERNATIONAL LAW

A. UNITED NATIONS PARALYSIS AND THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

The Russia-Ukraine war dramatically reveals the obstacles of collective security in a veto system. Despite recording atrocities, condemning them, and delivering humanitarian aid, the United Nations has failed to stop the war. In February 2026, the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission reported a sharp increase in the toll taken on civilians in 2025 compared to the previous years, with more than 15,000 people killed and over 41,000 wounded since February 2022. There are also reports of torture, sexual violence, executions and increasing destruction of vital infrastructure. These trends reaffirms the problem: when a permanent member of the Security Council is involved, enforcement of international law is severely limited.

At the same time, the conflict demonstrates that international law remains resilient. The prohibition on aggression has not fallen into irrelevance due to its unenforceability. Rather it continues to play a role in international responses in sanctions, calls for reparations, calls for criminal accountability and multiple condemnations in international forums. While law may not have prevented the war, it still defines what is right or wrong. Law might not be a weapon of prevention, but it is a weapon of guidance.

B. ICJ, UNITED NATIONS, AND THE ISRAEL-GAZA CRISIS

If Ukraine revealed the limits of collective security, Gaza highlights the breakdown of humanitarian multilateralism. In June 2025, a Security Council resolution for an immediate and permanent ceasefire, with almost unanimous support, was vetoed by the United States. This is symptomatic of a broader issue: even with a broad consensus, a single country can paralyse collective action, leaving humanitarian crises unresolved.

This shortfall is also reflected in the ongoing humanitarian situation in 2016. Reports show ongoing civilian deaths, limited humanitarian access, and thousands needing medical evacuation, as well as escalating violence and forced displacement in the West Bank. These facts demonstrate not only a humanitarian

crisis but a breakdown in legal norms, such as protection of civilians and proportionality, where enforcement is lacking.

But international law is not completely absent. In its 2024 Advisory Opinion, the International Court of Justice ruled that Israel's presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory is illegal and confirmed fundamental principles such as self-determination and the illegality of the seizure of territory by force. It also highlighted the duty of all states not to recognise or support unlawful situations. This shows that although law enforcement is impeded, international law still clarifies standards and maintains the legal framework for future enforcement.

C. ISRAEL-IRAN-UNITED STATES HOSTILITIES AND ARTICLE 2(4) OF THE CHARTER

The recent Israel-Iran conflict in June 2025 and subsequent United States airstrikes on Iranian nuclear sites, demonstrate the challenges that increasing geopolitical tensions pose to the UN Charter's provisions on the use of force. According to reports, Israel launched a surprise air assault on Iran, including attacks on military and nuclear facilities, and the deaths of top officials, to which Iran responded with missiles and drones. Further investigations also highlighted potential breaches of international humanitarian law, revealing civilian casualties, the targeting of aid workers, and issues of proportionality and distinction. The conflict was also escalated by US involvement.

This incident is important not only for its facts, but its legal implications. It further complicates matters of self-defence and escalation, as governments increasingly assert the need for force. In this environment the norm prohibiting the use of force risks being weakened, although it is still in place. But the debate itself still uses the language of law proportionality, civilian protection, and precaution, as a consequence of international law being invoked to assess and contest actions.

D. WTO, TRADE FRAGMENTATION, AND ECONOMIC LAW

Multilateralism also finds itself in crisis in global trade. The WTO's Appellate Body has not been operational since December 2019, and in December 2024, many appeals were unresolved because of the inability to fill vacant positions. Despite negotiations to reform the system, it remains unrepaired. As a result, countries have resorted to ad hoc arrangements, unilateral tariffs and retaliation, reflecting a shift away from a rulebased system to a more strategic and contested economic landscape.

These are reflected in broader economic developments. Reports from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund confirm that growth is slowing, barriers are increasing and reform is being delayed. Taken together, this indicates that while economic multilateralism remains, it is increasingly under stress. International economic law remains, but it is becoming more diverse, malleable and politically driven.

6. WHY INTERNATIONAL LAW IS SURVIVING DESPITE MULTILATERAL DECAY

The reports and studies tell us that there is a weaker, more selective, more informally and regionally ordered multilateralism than in the past. But this is not legal death. There are at least four reasons why international law continues. First, it still offers a lingua franca. What's more, states that flout norms still feel compelled to justify their actions in legal terms. This is crucial because a law that is contested is not the same as an abandoned law.

Second, international law is becoming increasingly decentralized. It is not dependent on one institution. Courts, investigative commissions, human rights groups, treaty bodies, regional organizations and ad hoc coalitions all help to form and share legal accountability.

Third, legal norms persist because they continue to be essential to middle and smaller states. For smaller states, law is not a luxury of liberal order; it is the main bulwark against a world lowered to spheres of influence. That's why even critics of the current system typically don't reject multilateralism as such. The BRICS perspective highlights this shift clearly. It doesn't reject multilateralism, but suggests that it needs to be transformed into a more balanced multilateralism. It is not about abandoning legality, but about post-Western legality, one characterized by greater representation and less structural bias.

Fourth, law survives because the alternatives are expensive. According to a SIPRI research released in April 2025, global military spending increased by 9.4% in 2024 to reach \$2.718 trillion, marking the sharpest yearly increase since the Cold War. Israel increased its spending by 65% to \$46.5 billion; Russia spent \$149 billion; Ukraine \$64.7 billion; and 55% of global military spending was done by NATO. These data reveal the consequences of a less regulated international system: greater militarization, reallocation of resources and conflict. In such an environment, flawed legal systems have a role as cost minimization mechanisms, enabling institutions and minimal escalation restraints.

7. INFLUENCE AND RESILIENCE OF INTERNATIONAL LAW

The decline of multilateralism has a profound impact on international law, especially enforcement and coherence. With weaker institutional mechanisms, there is decreased compliance with obligations, and inconsistent application of norms by the powerful, leading to inequality. Meanwhile, fragmentation has resulted in overlapping legal frameworks, resulting in confusion and inconsistencies. However, these challenges do not signal the collapse of international law; rather, they reflect its evolution in response to changing global dynamics.

Despite these pressures, international law continues to demonstrate resilience. Its enduring strength lies in its normative authority, as states still seek to justify their actions in legal terms, underscoring its role as a source of legitimacy. Additionally, the system is becoming increasingly fragmented with a variety of actors such as international courts, regional groups and civil society playing a role in the creation and enforcement of legal norms. Crucially, international law remains crucial for weaker states, and a means to protect their interests in an asymmetrical international system. The increasing costs of conflict and disorder also strengthen the case for the persistent importance of legal norms to regulate interdependence and disorder.

8. REIMAGINING MULTILATERALISM IN A MULTIPOLAR LEGAL ORDER

The solution cannot be nostalgia for the post-Cold War liberal order. Instead, adaptive multilateralism is required. Indian scholars strongly support this transition, highlighting India's role in promoting inclusive, development-oriented, and plural multilateral frameworks through institutions such as G20 and BRICS. This means that there will be universal institutions coexisting with regional and issue-based institutions, while emphasising that such agreements are not separate from universal legal principles. The aim should not be to eradicate informality, but rather to stop it from taking the place of accountability or acting as an exclusive privilege for great countries.

Three reforms are especially urgent. The first is representational reform, especially within the UN Security Council and global banking. A legal decree asserting universality cannot indefinitely maintain the power structure of 1945. The second is functional restoration, particularly of WTO dispute settlement and more effective humanitarian access mechanisms in armed conflict. The third is compliance pluralization: using courts, reporting systems, sanction regimes,

regional diplomacy, civil-society monitoring and non-recognition obligations together instead of waiting for a single institution to restore legality.

9. CONCLUSION

Multilateralism is really in crisis, and it is structural and serious. The Russia-Ukraine war, the Israel-Gaza conflict, the June 2025 Israel-Iran-United States confrontation, the dysfunctional WTO Appellate Body and the under-representation of emerging powers all point to a decline of the previous trust in coordinated, universal and rulebased governance. The world is moving towards a more fragmented and competitive world where bi-lateral and mini-lateral agreements, blocs, alliances and partnerships play an increasing role. But this does not mean the end of international law. The assumptions of law as derived from one hegemonic source, or relying on a perfectly functional institutional structure, are dying.

International law will remain because the world still needs legitimacy, weaker players still need legal protection, international courts and other international institutions still generate norms, and the consequences of a free-for-all power-political world are now evident in military spending, humanitarian tragedy, economic division and violent conflict. So far, then, it is not whether international law can survive in a multi-polar world that is at issue but how. That it will be more diverse, contested and decentralised, less hegemonic and triumphant but still morally necessary, is the best answer. The key to the future of multilateralism is not to reject fragmentation but rather to renew law within it.

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