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Written by Ahmet Serdar Günaydın

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AHMET SERDAR GÜNAYDIN, MAR 9 2026

Debate is intensifying over whether the international order is evolving or collapsing. The politics of the Trump administration have fuelled this discussion. But has politics itself really changed, or only the language surrounding it? As practices once kept behind the scenes move into the open, the rhetorical games that once sustained the system are losing their force. Many argue that the so-called rules-based international order is collapsing in the face of renewed power politics. However, a simple triumph of power politics is not necessarily the case. U.S. efforts to enforce unipolarity on the basis of a neocolonial logic may ultimately accelerate the emergence of multipolar arrangements at regional and transregional levels – unless multilateral institutions, originally built in the aftermath of the World Wars and shaped by power asymmetries, are revised and reinforced to meet the necessities of today's global balance. In a multipolar trajectory, more practice-oriented forms of politics based on quasi win-win arrangements among states may emerge, though still conditioned by existing power balances. This, of course, represents the more optimistic scenario.

The limits and shortcomings of unilateral interventions driven by pure self-interest can be foreseen, and the U.S. may be aware of this. The U.S. has recently withdrawn from several international agencies and scaled back funding for institutions contributing to international development, including its own soft power instrument, USAID, the world's largest foreign aid agency. Despite these cutbacks, Congress tempered President Trump's decisions on foreign assistance by maintaining funding for key programs, including U.S. dues to the UN.

A related precedent emerges from the Republican Reagan administration, which withdrew the U.S. from the UN agency UNESCO due to alleged anti-American bias, although it later resumed payment of its dues. The U.S. again moved to withdraw in 2017 and 2025 under the two Trump administrations, citing alleged anti-Israel bias. UN resolutions supporting Palestinian rights have played a significant role in shaping such decisions both then and today, as has the pending International Court of Justice (ICJ) case concerning Israel's genocide in Gaza. Such reactions reflect the tensions that arise when a singular power loses, or perceives a loss of, control within international institutions.

While the Trump administration's decisions have prompted analysts to write more about the collapse or future of an international system based on laws and rules, such concerns have existed for a long time. In particular, the structure of the Security Council and the veto power of the five permanent members have been increasingly questioned, leading to recurring calls for reform. In fact, unipolarity exercised through both soft and hard power within the UN and other international structures has appeared more viable for a global power like the U.S. Acting outside or against these structures, by contrast, is difficult to sustain and prone to generating higher international tensions that may force transformation. Such transformations may take the form of revised international institutions, a possibility long debated, or a shift toward more divided and rigid configurations along regional and transregional power centres, or something else. The emergence of parallel arrangements alongside established institutions would likely place actors in a state of uncertainty, fostering ad hoc practices, reducing stability, and increasing vulnerability to domestic regime changes.

Nonetheless, the international order with a liberal façade had already been under strain, and the institutions

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underpinning it (particularly those with roles in political, economic, and military decision-making) may have outlived their original function. The issue, therefore, may not be the failure of the system as such, but rather that it no longer serves those in power adequately – particularly with regard to addressing global injustice arising from power asymmetries between oppressors and the oppressed, the selective promotion of human rights, and the longstanding neglect of the rights of peoples in the so-called Global South.

Rising forms of oppression and increasing popular resistance, partly reflected in state behaviour within international relations and multilateral platforms, have made these contradictions more visible. The global implications of recent developments, including Russia's war on Ukraine, Israel's war on Palestine and its genocide in Gaza, have brought systemic blockages to a more critical level, rendering states and institutions incapable of intervening for peace. I use the term blockage because this is not fundamentally a struggle between two opposing camps or ideologies; rather, it reflects a fragmentation into scattered centres of power rather than a coherent balance of power. Western nations, which had long positioned themselves as representatives of the liberal order, have faltered in taking firm stances and decisive action. Their selective application of liberal principles has undermined their credibility in the face of the voices of the oppressed. The resulting loss of moral authority and didacticism has naturally raised questions of legitimacy. Moreover, the rift between the U.S. and European states has left many European actors uncertain and politically disoriented.

Paradoxically, the Nobel Peace Prize, long associated with figures aligned with the Western camp, was this year awarded to a Venezuelan politician who had expressed support for Israel committing genocidal war on Gaza. She subsequently presented her prize medal to Donald Trump, a figure whom the Norwegian Nobel Committee would be unlikely to consider for the award. This seemingly absurd chain of events aptly epitomises the tragicomic trajectory of contemporary politics and the approach to peace. At the same time, the Trump administration's disregard for liberal order-based politics, extending even to public considerations of annexing Greenland, has placed European states in a difficult position, leading them to confront their moral duplicity in light of shifting U.S. policy positions.

Amid an uncertain transformation, what remains clear is the growing dominance of politics centred on economic resources in world affairs. Current developments reinforce a form of neocapitalism marked by neocolonial features, one that seeks to address or manage ongoing wars and conflicts in accordance with the unilateral interests of hegemonic powers. For the time being, state actors have largely responded by adapting to this trajectory, whether willingly or reluctantly.

President Trump, who views Gaza as a potential 'Riviera,' co-chaired a Gaza peace summit in Sharm El-Sheikh, supposedly aimed at securing a ceasefire, marked by iconic, media-driven scenes with state leaders and representatives from around the world. The summit concluded with the 'Trump Declaration for Enduring Peace and Prosperity,' signed by the U.S., Egypt, Qatar, and Türkiye. A month later, this venture was converted into UN Security Council Resolution 2803, which carried a colonial tone and annexed Trump's own text announcing a 'New Gaza' based on an economic development plan to 'rebuild and energise' the city. The resolution was adopted by 13 votes to none, with China and Russia abstaining. It established a Board of Peace headed by Trump, viewed as an alternative mechanism to the UN and the Security Council.

Moreover, money and pragmatism as driving forces in politics are also reflected in relations with rentier Gulf states. Reactions to Israel's attack on Qatar last year differed sharply from responses to Israel's far deadlier attacks on other states. A similar indifference can be observed toward the oil-rich UAE's complicity in the war in Sudan. On one side, we see harsh mercantilist weapons, such as tariffs deployed as tools of coercion, or the invocation of a renewed Monroe Doctrine as a means of colonising others' resources. Alongside this, we see neoliberal 'peace' initiatives based on economic development and incentives that overshadow the real problems and human sufferings. But can we speak of a legitimate order or development that sidelines people and morality? Is legitimacy and stability built on money possible and sustainable? States that have criticised the unfair structure of the UN Security Council now appear to have endorsed, at least for the moment, a one-man-led intervention mechanism.

While these developments are unfolding at the state and governmental levels, a potential public backlash may be emerging. Popular despair should not be taken for granted as a fixed or unchanging condition. Recent mayoral

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elections in New York have reflected a new direction in voter behaviour away from the neocapital political establishment. Similar patterns can be observed internationally, at different scales and across political spectra. This may be a moment in which democracy itself re-emerges as a corrective force. The emerging disclosures related to the Epstein files, whose repercussions have extended well beyond the U.S., may heighten public anger and contribute to shifts in governance linked to malign establishments. What is clear is that we are no longer in a steady historical moment. While the international order may struggle to move in the right direction, transformation may ultimately emerge from public intervention.

About the author:

Ahmet Serdar Günaydın is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Security and Global Affairs, Leiden University. His research interests include conflict and peace studies, geopolitical rivalries, and Middle East politics.