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War in West Asia and Failure of Global Order



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The war on Iran may come to be remembered not simply as another West Asian conflict but as a symptom of something much more serious — the gradual collapse of the post-1945 international order and, with it, the re-emergence of a colonial mindset in global politics. The United Nations (UN) was born from the ashes of World War II, a world traumatised by the devastation of total war and the horrors of genocide.

Political leaders sought to build a system that could prevent the recurrence of great-power conflict, with the UN Charter serving as the foundational document of that effort, governing how States may use force under international law. In parallel, International Humanitarian Law (IHL) exists to inject a measure of humanity into the chaos of war by prohibiting collective punishment, indiscriminate attacks, targeting civilians and using starvation as a method of warfare, through the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol 1.

Importantly, the applicability of IHL does not depend on the legality of the conflict; it applies equally to all parties once an armed conflict exists. The US-Israel war against Iran raises a question that should stand at the centre of any serious discussion: Under what legal authority is this war being fought?

Article 2(4) of the UN Charter prohibits the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State. Under Article 51, States may resort to force only in two circumstances — when acting in self-defence after an armed attack or when authorised by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

Neither applies here. There has been no UNSC authorisation, nor has there been an armed attack by Iran that triggers the right of self-defence. Instead, the strikes have been justified through the familiar but controversial doctrine of preventive war, aimed at neutralising Iran's alleged future threats. But once that logic is accepted, any State can claim that another might someday threaten its security.

The idea that war requires legal legitimacy will no longer matter.

This legal breakdown is evident on land and sea. In the Indian Ocean, the Iranian frigate IRIS Dena was torpedoed despite no attack having occurred to trigger Article 51's self-defence provisions. Perhaps it will soon be argued that the ship was a sanctioned military

target carrying drones and weapons destined for future hostile use — a dangerous stretch of legal reasoning. In the Strait of Hormuz, where neither Iran nor the US has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, control over one of the world's most vital shipping lanes is increasingly shaped by fleets and missiles rather than maritime law.

But this erosion of the legal order did not begin in 2026. When NATO bombed Yugoslavia in 1999 without UNSC approval, Western governments argued that humanitarian necessity justified bypassing the law. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003, based on unfounded claims of weapons of mass destruction, was framed as pre-emptive self-defence. Later, when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, Moscow pointed to earlier Western precedents. China, too, increasingly speaks the language of historical rights and strategic necessity rather than universal legal norms.

Washington and Tel Aviv's rhetoric surrounding the military campaign on Iran, demanding Tehran's "unconditional surrender" and regime change, evokes an older era of imperial politics. Unconditional surrender, historically, means that the defeated State must submit completely to the political terms set by the victor. It assumes that powerful States can decide when another government has become unacceptable and can, therefore, be compelled (or replaced) through military pressure.

This is especially alarming as it signals how easily the language of modern international law can give way to the older logic of empire.

For decades, the US and its allies have insisted that the world operates under a "rules-based international order." The phrase appears endlessly in speeches, communiqués, and summit declarations. It is invoked to condemn Russia, discipline smaller States, and justify sanctions regimes.

The war on Iran suggests that this aspiration is fading. By the time the world realises what has been lost, it will be living in a system where international law no longer restrains war at all. Perhaps we are already there.

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