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Article

Rules-Based Politics in Transition: Power Redistribution and the Changing Authority to Make International Rules

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Abstract: This article examines whether contemporary geopolitical tension marks the end of rules-based governance. It challenges the assumption that the post-1945 international order was ever characterized by consistent compliance with rules or by the absence of great-power privilege. Drawing on historical and institutional perspectives in international relations, the article develops three arguments. First, violations of international law do not by themselves demonstrate the disappearance of rules, because rules have long coexisted with military force, hierarchy, and strategic interest. Second, great powers often sustain institutions because institutionalized rules stabilize expectations, reduce the costs of maintaining order, and convert material advantages into more durable strategic influence. Third, the central transformation in contemporary world affairs concerns authority over rule-making and interpretation rather than a simple transition from rules to power. The diffusion of influence toward China, India, and the Global South makes international rules more contested and unevenly enforced, while also intensifying disagreements conducted through the language of legality and legitimacy. The article concludes that rules-based governance persists, but it is entering a more multipolar phase in which the authority to define, interpret, and apply international rules is increasingly dispersed.

Keywords: rules-based international order; great powers; international institutions; international law; multipolarity; Global South

1. Introduction

Currently, the word ‘crisis’ has become ubiquitous when depicting international order: the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Israeli-Palestinian War, such competitions between great powers, along with increasing skepticism toward international order, are leading people to suspect the existence of rule-based politics that was built subsequently after war, which has rendered frequent use of the word ‘crisis’ in describing the situation. Anxiety also goes across contemporary political reviews. James Tobin, a House of Lords Library researcher working on international affairs and foreign policy, pointed out the phenomenon of escalating pressure that originally supported politics, law, and economic rules of international relations [1]; Moustafa Bayoumi, as well as James Tobin, sharply depict devastations in Palestine as 'breaking the world' [2]. In these narratives, international politics appears to slide from a rule-based era to power politics.

Yet this judgment rests upon a historically questionable assumption: have we ever truly inhabited an international order in which states consistently abided by established rules and great-power dominance was equally constrained by international law? If rule-based politics heralds the disappearance of war, rules pervasively enforced, the era may never have existed. After World War Two, the beginning of an ‘international order’, or to say rule-based politics, also experienced the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Iraq War, and so on. As revealed by Mark Mazower in Governing the World, international rules have never existed in isolation from the imperatives of power politics; States violate rules, meanwhile re-explain definitions of ‘sovereignty’, ‘intervention’ and ‘self-defense’—

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rendering rules as 'vocabulary of permissions'. In other words, power is working in the rules, not merely exclusively existing.

Thus, to evaluate the existence of rule-based politics, one must necessarily consider whether rules maintain and affect behaviors, working as a pull force on states, organizations, international institutions, and determining the discourse they use to seek legitimacy. Hedley Bull argued the existence of rules in an anarchical state in his book The Anarchical Society; though without world government, states are able to construct international society from jointly made rules and institutions. In light of this, we may still permit the existence of rule-based politics with its underlying logic—rules are constantly shaping states' behaviors, while also serving great powers in maintaining this order—through the following three main parts of the essay. Changes are, though, to the actual role of great powers who hold, formulate, and define these rules. Rather than retreating from "rules" to "power," the contemporary world is witnessing a renewed contest over who possesses the authority to define the rules themselves.

2. The "Rules-Based Era" Was Never an Era of Perfect Compliance

If we have to declare the end of the 'rule-based era', we must answer its definition: what generates differences between the rule-based era and today? When the core trait defined as observing international orders in their entirety by states, the concept on which rule-based politics is defined, is declining instantly from its position [3]. To compare the stability of international rules in the aftermath of World War II, we may admit it's steadier than today; it has never escaped wars, strategic interests, and inequality in the practices of international order, however. The Korean War, the Vietnam War, repeated Soviet military interventions during the Cold War, NATO's intervention in Kosovo, and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq all unfolded during the very period now commonly characterized as the "rules-based international order." Hence, contemporary conflicts- the Ukraine-Russia war and the Israeli-Palestinian war both bring serious challenges to the international order. Nevertheless, do violations of the international order demonstrate the end of rule-based politics, or, to say, does perfect compliance with the international order equal rule-based politics?

Hedley Bull provides a starting point in The Anarchical Society for understanding this difference. Bull rebuts the hypothesis that international rule must persist with a supreme authority, which secures the rigorous enforcement of the law. Conversely, while sovereign states are aware of common interests and worth in each other, admit limitations of themselves, and engage in jointly connected institutions, they form a so-called international society, as Bull argued. For him, the institutions of international society encompass not only international law and diplomacy, but also the balance of power, the management of the international system by the great powers, and even war itself. In other words, in reply to the question at the end of the last paragraph, persisting conflicts and forms of violations of the international order do not necessarily symbolize the disappearance of rule-based politics: rules do not necessitate the disappearance of power politics to regulate how power functions.

The history of international institutions similarly undermines any sharp distinction between a previously rule-governed world and a newly power-driven one. Susan Pedersen's The Guardians, for example, demonstrates this tension through the League of Nations mandate system [4]. The League of Nations represents an aggressive attempt to put international governance in institutions; however, this burgeoning internationalist institution still tangles closely with European imperial power. Granted, international institutions may continue to evolve and proliferate, while entrenched political hierarchies nevertheless persist [4]. International orders built in the aftermath of 1945 did not eliminate this tension; instead, they inherited it to a large extent. Rules reflect unfair power distributions among states managing them, though to some degree useful for limiting power. As a result, people ought not to misunderstand rule-based politics as the power replaced from a neutral site order. In this way, Oona Hathaway and Scott Shapiro provided an effective way of understanding rules. They argue that, though the 1928

Kellogg–Briand Pact did not eradicate war, it fundamentally transformed the legal status of warfare and territorial conquest in The Internationalists [5]. The significance of a rule, therefore, cannot be assessed solely by the extent to which it is perfectly observed: compliance and effectiveness are not synonymous. Further, Mark Mazower offers supplements in Governing the World by pointing out his suspicions that international law could be a 'vocabulary of permissions'; states legitimated controversial behaviors through re-explaining concepts of such 'self-defense', 'sovereignty', and 'intervention' [6]. Consequently, by summarizing them, states in the long term are gaining dominant roles on pre-built frameworks of international rules, and tautologically re-explaining them.

This betrays the basic problem of judging whether 'rule-based politics' has been over: Such a judgment risks holding the turbulence of the present against a past polished smooth by memory. If today's wars, double standards, and transgressions of international rules are enough to pronounce the death of rule-based politics, then history demands that the same verdict be passed upon Vietnam, Kosovo, and Iraq [3] [5],. Shown in the cases, 'Contradictions' between rules and power are its constructive trait, which keeps it from the beginning.

3. Great Powers Sustain Rules Because Order Itself Is a Form of Power

Rule-based politics sustains itself in the long term, fueled by great powers' motif of gaining interests within the institution. People have an unsettling ease in ignoring the most significant traits—states with the power to detour rules are the ones maintaining order—while understanding rules and great powers as a contradiction. In the ensuing period of World War II, the United States acquired unprecedented advantages in its military and economy, while not fully relying on them to maintain its international position. Yet, it engaged in the creation of the United Nations, the Bretton Woods system, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and later the broader trade and security systems. We may not view rules here as merely limitations for great powers like the US; in turn, they are providing a permanent advantage-gaining way through persisting international political order [7]. As G. John Ikenberry argues in his book After Victory, by constructing institutions and willingly submitting themselves to a measure of constraint, the states that emerge ascendant from war can transmute the fleeting advantages of military victory into a more durable political order. On the one hand, rules limited the abilities on which great powers exploit other states arbitrarily; on the other hand, it lowered fear of other states by decreasing uncertainty, rendering the willingness of weaker states to join the existing order without challenging. Robert Keohane further illustrates in After Hegemony its continuity: international institutions aim to attract states by rationally choosing to accede to cooperation through providing information, diminishing uncertainty, lowering trading costs, and creating stable expectations [8]. Consequently, international rules originating from the United States do not demand that states exceed their self-interests for cooperation, but, in fact, their continuity is based on steady implementation and real feedback to states that bring benefits for members.

The institutionalization has another tempting ascendancy: it allows saving costs of sustaining extant power [8]. Rules empower coercions to long-term expectations that great powers are not seeking to harness martial threats, economic sanctions, and such behaviors for forging cooperation. Trading rules, for instance, construct expectations of behaviors of members in the institution in events, and predictions of states about how markets function, fashioning process functions as soothing states in security crises by predicting behaviors from others. Keohane's account of how institutions diminish uncertainty and sustain repeated cooperation converges here with Ikenberry's conception of "institutionalized power": the most enduring advantage of a great power may lie not in compelling others to submit, but in constructing an order in which continued participation appears more advantageous than departure. Accordingly, rule-based order transformed power, which on the surface appears as steadier influence, as well as being applied in international politics. Nonetheless, it does not mean that the rules are neutral or equal; in turn, the capability of rules holding power potentially demonstrates that they, the builders, have

segmented powers from their original construction. Mazower lays bare in Governing the World the relationship of co-existing between internationalism and political classes: developments of international institutions never meant to be the vanishing of discrepancy among states [6]. The veto power vested in the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council is perhaps the clearest illustration of great-power privilege being inscribed directly into the institutional architecture of the international order. Thereby, great powers are not constrained between 'interests' and 'rules'—rules are the tool itself functioning to preserve, organize, and extend benefits. This also explains why great powers, even when capable of transgressing particular rules, retain a powerful incentive to preserve the rules-based order as a whole: the privileges they enjoy within the system may ultimately depend upon the survival of the system itself [7] [6],.

And thus, remaining rule-based politics is not necessarily constituting a hypothesis that great powers sacrifice for common interests in international order. Resurgent recent competitions among great powers do suggest what is truly being transformed, then, is the prevailing distribution of power itself—and with it arises a more consequential question: who, in the world that is now taking shape, will possess the authority to write the rules?

4. What Is Changing Is Who Makes the Rules

The widening fissures in the contemporary international order stem from a profound reconfiguration of the distribution of power upon which its existing rules have long rested. Though the international order created in the aftermath of 1945 utilized universalist discourse for describing itself, its core institutions keep reflecting the post-war power structure: America had buttressed its dominant position in international economics, and the United Nations yet perpetuated a special position for the victorious states in World War II. Therefore, so-called 'rule-based politics' is more properly defined as a description of a certain power structure. Malcolm Chalmers investigated the trend of imagining the institution as a set of uniform rules—it hardly exists in fact as an entirely consistent, uncontested rule-based international system, which may be explained by differences among states towards opinions on sovereignty, human rights, and so on [9]. Thus, the mounting contestations over international orders should be conceived as challenges from states toward a near-monopoly over the interpretation of international rules exercised by a handful of great powers [9].

This distinction is specifically significant for explaining what 'rule-based politics' is when Western influences are relatively declining. In The Once and Future World Order by Amitav Acharya, he disagrees with the viewpoint of conflating the decline of the Western-dominant world order with the collapse of the international order [10]. To elucidate this, in history, civilizations around the world had once developed international institutions for politics and trade, which means the world without absolute influence from the Western world may not be seen as an orderless world. Similarly, during the era of decolonization, anti-colonial states fiercely contested an international system fashioned by imperial powers. Yet they did not renounce the very idea of international rules; rather, they sought to recast those rules around the principles of self-determination and economic sovereignty, while forging new forms of international cooperation. Accordingly, these international alterations should be understood as the locus of interpretive authority has begun to shift. In fact, modern political discourse reveals this shift. A telling illustration of this shift can be found in a Guardian report published on 20 February 2025, "French Foreign Minister Makes Rules-Based Order Plea to Global South over Ukraine." Western states now have to convince others to accept explanations for the Ukraine-Russian war, rather than assume that they are naturally authoritative. Meanwhile, distinctions between the Ukraine-Russian war and the Israeli-Palestinian war also present the question of how this 'double standard' works: if territorial integrity, human rights, and international law lay claim to universality, why does their enforcement vary so markedly from one conflict to another? Nonetheless, criticizing Western morals by arguing its 'double standards' does not weaken the rules themselves, though. It is, in turn, verifying a more prevailing

rule when people criticize it for its 'double standards', since that is the norm for evaluating 'double standards'.

Thus, it is with greater ease to understand 'rules-based order crisis' accurately by invoking this difference. Multipolarity is not synonymous with the absence of rules; a multipolar world may require rearrangements of rules, rather than leaving rules. As a result, these demarcations should be better construed as a transition from an institution mostly constituted by Western powers to a multipolar, competitive rules institution. What may be drawing to a close, then, is not the era of rules-based politics, but the age in which a single center of power could readily proclaim its own rules as "the rules" of the international order.

5. Conclusion

The contemporary international order is undoubtedly under immense strain, yet the struggles now unsettling it continue to unfold within the very framework of rules-based politics. Selective executions, violations of rules in wars, and international law have been a constant in the contemporary history of the international order. From the League of Nations to the international system built after 1945, rules have kept co-existing with great power competition, national interests, and asymmetrical power relations. Rule-Based politics have never required the elimination of power politics; its main trait lies in the way it functions—building frameworks for cooperation, shaping national behaviors for stabilizing expectations. The capability of the order comes from inter-relations among states as well. Great powers construct predictions on certainty, lowering costs for sustaining order, transforming immediate advantages to long-term international influence.

The more profound transformation unfolding today lies in the redistribution of global power. Western states once enjoyed a formidable advantage in shaping and interpreting international rules; the growing influence of China, India, and the Global South, however, is ushering international politics into a more multipolar and increasingly contested era. States are increasingly arguing over rules in public, the way they are executed, and who holds the role of explanation for 'legitimate authority'. Competition is facilitating multipolarization, or making it harder to enforce rules, but rules keep affecting choices, behaviors, and cooperation of states. The era of rules-based politics therefore persists, but it is entering a new phase in which power is more widely dispersed and the interpretation of rules increasingly contested. A truly post-rules-based international system would require international rules to lose their practical capacity to shape state behaviour and the exercise of power; the world today remains far from such a condition. What may be drawing to a close, then, is not the era of rules-based politics itself, but the age in which any single centre of power could relatively easily proclaim its own rules to be "the rules."

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