



By: **Ferry Biedermann**

# Is the West's declining soft power undermining the international system?



The rules-based international order that saw a growth spurt after the Second World War is currently being tested to the breaking point, or so it seems. What might really be under pressure is the West's ability to project soft power.

Whether it's in trade and economic relationships, aid, diplomacy, military alliances, or the use of force, a confluence of political, nationalistic and financial forces appears to be gunning for the end of restraint, burden-sharing and the cooperative model in international affairs.

The signs right now are not encouraging. The Trump **tariff wars** are heating up again, with his use of extortionate tactics to browbeat weaker partners into submission.

At the same time, the world is still reeling from the American participation in the Israeli **attack** on Iran that it didn't even bother to justify under international law.

Particularly in liberal circles in the West, the apparent breakdown in the post-WWII aspirational march towards a more ordered and law-abiding world is regarded with consternation.

A narrative of new Western guilt is emerging: We built the system, and now we're tearing it down. The consequences for the less powerful or wealthy will be devastating.

But does this overstate the role the international system is playing, the world's reliance on it and its supposed decline all at once?

## Not much new under the sun

Outside the West, if that designation still has meaning, the response is very different. Many, such as Russia and Saudi Arabia, actively welcome what they see as a correction to an overly meddlesome international order.

Others, among them China and Turkey, see the retreat of the West from the international

system and the vacuum that this is creating as an opportunity for, among other things, widening their sphere of influence and profiting financially.

But for most countries, I expect that there's not much new under the sun. What is interpreted in the West as a rupture and a turnaround is to many others just the latest twist in the saga of the powerful and rich doing what they've always done: look out for themselves.

What has mainly changed is the Western perception of this self-interest. Post-WWII this was mostly thought to be the promotion of free trade and the forging of (semi-)dependent alliances. Now it focuses on isolationism, imperial power projection and transactional coercion.

**Even the European Union has been increasingly inward-looking and transactional in its international posture**

This is not just so in the obvious case of the current American administration, with its disdain for allies, economic partners, international norms and its threats of annexation or **incorporation** of Greenland, the Panama Canal and Canada.

The UK was one of the first major countries to embrace this logic and see through its implementation, come what may, with the 2016 Brexit decision. It was a deeply inward-looking move, despite the global trade pretensions of the Brexiteers.

Even the European Union, the supposed model of transnational cooperation, has, under anti-immigrant and far-right pressures, been increasingly inward-looking and transactional in its international posture.

This can be seen, among other, in its **agreements** with Turkey and a slew of North African states to stem the flow of migrants. And also in its member states' whittling away at their international development budgets.

## A neo-colonial straitjacket

It's hard to argue with the principle of international law and the guaranteeing of all sorts of rights, be they national, economic, ecological or otherwise.

In practice, the framework that has emerged from the post-WWII arrangements - and that has roots in many previous local, regional and international frameworks, ranging from, among others, Hammurabi to Magna Carta, the Peace of Westphalia, Geneva Conventions and the League of Nations - has always had its detractors on several sides of the political divide.

Particularly to poorer, weaker nations and groups, the system reeks of hypocrisy. It's a neo-colonial straitjacket to force former possessions into a constant cycle of debt and dependence.

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When seeking redress, the great powers always win out. To add insult to injury, when an International Criminal Court was established, it initially **went** mostly after non-Western strongmen.

On the other hand, some in the West have come to see international laws and institutions as offering protection to terrorists and criminal or corrupt regimes. These are, for example, accused of using human rights and claims to sovereignty as shields from behind which they operate with impunity or extract unreasonable support.

Both sides largely ignore the benefits that a rules-based international order brings them and fail to formulate a feasible and equitable alternative.

## Rules and institutions hardly matter

Ironically, they don't really need to. This supposed international authority has always been at best mostly aspirational and at worst a chimera. As the current moment is proving, rules and institutions hardly matter if countries are not willing to empower them.

Since the Second World War, at least, that willingness has largely rested on Western countries' joint public support for such an international order and their ability both to enforce it and convince others to follow suit through the use of soft power.

The enforcement part has become increasingly unpopular, especially post-Iraq invasion and the failures in, among others, Afghanistan and Libya. It has also bumped up against a reality in which powerful adversaries cannot be restrained, meaning Russia in Ukraine, or, as is the case with Israel in Gaza, there's no willingness or ability to rein in allies.

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None of this is particularly new - during the Cold War, many conflicts could not be resolved through international action. And both the West and its Cold War adversaries flouted international rules when and where they saw fit, if they could.

Still, while the Soviet Union and its allies appealed to anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist sentiment to broaden their appeal, the West positioned itself as a beacon of good governance, of a rules-based, non-arbitrary system with freedoms and material successes that were to be emulated and adopted.

## Declining Western

## attractiveness

Now, these Western lures look a lot less enticing. Materially, China and other authoritarian, non-democratic countries show they can rival the West. But this is only relative, with the US, Europe and their global allies still remaining exceptionally wealthy.

Where the West is really falling short these days is in offering an attractive and stable domestic rules-based system that appeals to all. Anti-immigrant sentiment and increasingly draconian restrictions might have a questionable deterrent effect, they also cast doubt on claims to have a fair and rights-based system.



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Being a continuing magnet for migrants might be seen as putting the lie to the idea of declining Western attractiveness. In fact, it probably says more about the desperation that drives many to leave.

And where the US is specifically concerned, it's not just its increasingly transactional foreign posture that is unattractive. Its assault on domestic freedoms and the transfer of wealth and power to the ultra-rich is also **undermining** its status as the city on a hill.

It's quite patronising to think that countries around the world are 'disappointed' by what is seen as Western hypocrisy or American self-dealing. Most of those familiar with the international system are probably quite clear-

eyed about it and not above bending it to their own purposes when they see fit.

But there was always the implied promise that emulating the West, despite all its problems, would ultimately deliver a better future in freedoms and material wellbeing. The real disappointment might be that this is increasingly either beyond reach or just doesn't look that appealing anymore.