

Symposium call for papers
**Rules for a lawless world? The international legal order in an age of great-power struggle
for normative primacy**

8-9 May 2025, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands

Conveners: Dr. Gjovalin Macaj and Dr. Vineet Thakur (Leiden University)

Description

The normative foundations of global order are under intense and extensive assault. Countries small and large are flouting fundamental norms, such as *ius cogens*, with unprecedented frequency and impunity—including by those with a reputation for upholding international law. Furthermore, the accelerating great-power antagonism between the US and China is widening the already yawning gap between seemingly universal aspirations and egalitarian ethos of the international legal order, and its partial, selective and biased application. Indeed, the two superpowers are engaged in constructing and projecting their own idiosyncratic “legal orders”—with China and its allies promoting what they call a ‘Charter-based legal order’ and the US and its allies promoting the so-called ‘rules-based order’. Beyond their will for global normative primacy, no clarity exists about the sources, scope, hierarchy, authority and modes of adjudication of these alternative standards and their relationship with applicable international law, further eroding legal certainty and predictability—the basic prerequisites for global peace and security.

Brazen transgression of even their own self-proclaimed alternative standards—exemplified by China’s indirect support for Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine and the direct and unconditional support of the US for Israel’s war of annihilation in Palestine, amplify radical uncertainty about the mystifying sources and functions of these alternative standards, and their combined effect on the function and future of the international legal order. The growing support that China and the US canvass for their alternative standards, exacerbates the tension between the logic of great-power rivalry and the international legal order, casting doubt on its ability to ensure even formally equal rights among states and individuals living in them or in-between.

Leading questions

We remain in the dark as regards the short-term and long-term implications of this accelerating normative divide for the ordering, protective and emancipatory functions of international law to grasp the direction in which the international legal order is heading—whether we are witnessing the breakdown of existing norms, their pervasive violation or their replacement with new ones. We do not know whether the massive exposure of bias, double standards and selectivity of the international legal order will galvanise states and other entities and movements to restore consistency with its universal aspirations or force them to search for alternatives to it. It is the scale, direction, and consequences of growing legal uncertainty that we seek to explore in this symposium. We wish to harness insights from across disciplines (e.g. international law, political science, global history, philosophy, sociology) to grasp the sources and consequences of what has changed and is likely to change, and what has not changed and is likely to persist, in the current legal international order, with a focus on its ordering, protective and emancipatory roles.

More specifically, we welcome theoretically informed papers that speak to three core dynamics:

1. Exposure of the international legal order

The first task of the symposium is to gauge the scope, scale, and kind of exposure of the manifest objectives and latent functions of the international legal order by the growing antagonism between the US and China, their allies and other constellation of states, and non-state actors (including private individuals and corporations but also resistance groups and stateless people fighting for their inalienable right to self-determination); the norms, institutions, practices that have been transgressed and their consequences, starting with *ius cogens* norms; the structural and contingent sources of exposure, from the periphery to the core, including not only to the gap between legal norms and their application to dominate or emancipate, but also between legal norms as they are and legal norms as they ought to be.

2. Response to exposure

Our second task is to assess the variation of responses by states, institutions and other entities and movements to the exposure of the biased and selective application and weaponization of international law. This ranges from direct involvement in, compliance with, complicity in, or silencing of indignation and opprobrium about the transgression of legal norms and practices, to mobilization of legal norms and institutions to resist transgression and produce some measure of justice; the structural and contingent sources and consequences of impunity for serious transgressions.

3. Balance and prospects

Finally, we want to assess the balance of forces vying for the restoration and renewal of universally applicable norms and related institutions, or their further degradation and destruction (and potential replacement with sheer transactionalism and militarism). We are particularly interested in the intrinsic and extrinsic value of the unprecedented mobilisation of international legal mechanisms to adjudicate international crimes (e.g. ICJ and ICC) as well as the unprecedented defiance and open attacks on such legal processes (e.g. by the USA, Germany). Ultimately, we are interested in exploring intended and unintended openings for new possibilities to reconfigure the international legal order in a way that responds to historical injustices and aspirations of most of the world that has been excluded from its inception to the present day.

Application and funding

To apply, please submit a working title and abstract of 700-1000 words, your contact details and a short bio of maximum 150 words by **20 February 2025** to both conveners (g.macaj@fgga.leidenuniv.nl and v.thakur@hum.leidenuniv.nl).

Thanks to support from Leiden University, needs-based funding is available to contribute towards covering travel and accommodation for young scholars.