



Evolving political dynamics and international tensions in the year 2024 pose significant challenges to the rules-based world order, writes Dr Evan Ellis. A series of events that have contributed to the deterioration of the normative structures established by the Allied powers at the end of World War II are analyzed. From territorial threats and military aggression to the proliferation of illiberal governments and the strategic influence of the PRC, key factors that are transforming the global scene are explored. The interconnectedness between changing political, economic and security dynamics reveals the complexity of contemporary challenges and highlights the urgency of critically examining the international system's ability to address these evolving problems. This article seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of current events impacting the global order and offers insights into possible future directions.

## Contemporary Challenges: Global Threats and Tensions in 2024

In early 2024, Venezuela threatened to forcibly annex the Essequibo region of Guyana, while Ecuadorian drug gangs attempted to use terrorism to destabilize that nation's government. These events added to the 2023 news of PRC espionage facilities and possible military training in Cuba, as well as the negotiations of authoritarian regimes in Venezuela, Nicaragua and Bolivia with Russia and Iran. In addition, former Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, in his position as Brazil's leftist leader, granted permission for the Iranian warship, the Makran, to dock in Rio de Janeiro. These events are part of a broader deterioration of the rules-based world order, driven by growing challenges, inefficient management by governments and China's assertiveness, which has strengthened illiberal authorities around the world.

The system of political and economic institutions, put in place by the Allied powers at the end of World War II, laid the groundwork for transformative trade, information and political interdependence in the decades that followed. Although the emerging "rules-based international order", symbolized by the agreements of the 1944 Bretton Woods conference, was neither universally applied nor widely accepted, the changes it introduced were disruptive. In particular, they had a significant impact on less developed societies. Although its influence on conflict, development and inequality has been widely debated, this order, however imperfect, provided a framework for coordination in legal, technical and trade matters. It provided the predictability and risk mitigation necessary for the construction of new global systems of logistics,

communication and financial management, which facilitated contemporary global interconnectivity and interdependence. In addition, political and security coordination mechanisms, disproportionately supported and enforced by the United States (US) and the West, reduced the frequency of clashes between nations. However, they did not eliminate internal violence, particularly in the post-Cold War period.

The rules-based international system was also central to the PRC's transformation into a modern power. It allowed it to take advantage of global connectivity in logistics, finance, data and communications, becoming the main center of industrial production in the world. In addition, this process enabled it to accumulate the wealth and technology necessary to project itself on the world stage.

Ironically, as the PRC's wealth and power have expanded, it has pursued its interests in ways that progressively undermine the very system that enabled its rise, with increasingly catastrophic global effects. While the PRC has sought to avoid explicitly anti-U.S. alliances and provocations that might undermine its commercial interests, it has adopted a self-interested stance on "unbiased" international relations that is enormously beneficial and attractive to non-liberal states. The PRC has backed its companies in global exploration of resources, markets, technology and commercial opportunities, reaping the collateral benefit that such pursuits have weakened commitments to democracy, the rule of law and close relations with the US among the PRC's trading partners.

The PRC is not consciously hijacking democracies, but rather favoring the survival of illiberal regimes by pursuing their economic and strategic interests. Other factors contributing to the spread of illiberal systems, and thus to the deterioration of the rules-based international order, are the reinforcing effects of crime, corruption, inequality, COVID-19 tensions, and the polarizing and distorting effects of social networks. These fuel public frustration with the functioning of liberal democracies, coupled with an openness to change that all too often brings with it something far worse.

The proliferation of illiberal governments is not just an academic issue. It is beginning to erode the foundations of the rules-based international order that has underpinned global prosperity and security, albeit imperfectly, for nearly a century. At the law enforcement level, the growing number of governments harboring individuals with criminal backgrounds and enabling or directly participating in illegal activities, including Venezuela and Nicaragua, in addition to simply weak or corrupt states, greatly complicates the fight against illicit activities, challenged by increased production of cocaine, fentanyl, illegal mining and human trafficking, which involves growing international displacement problems. Within increasingly global illicit networks, the fight is

further complicated by new forms of money laundering involving Chinese criminal groups and PRC-based financial institutions.

The deterioration of the rules-based international order raises additional concerns compared to the new challenges in the fight against organized criminal activity. This decline threatens to trigger a new era of interstate conflict, significantly altering the dynamics of global security and the calculations of democracies and illiberal states alike.

In this context, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 appears headed for significant gains, highlighting to the world the limited durability of divided democracies to effectively unite against a determined illiberal aggressor in the current world order. This underscores the ability of a stronger country to decimate and seize the territory and resources of a weaker nation with relative impunity.

In the Middle East, the absence of a sustained international outcry in the face of Hamas' premeditated and celebrated murder of 1,200 Israelis reveals Israel's lack of alternatives to ensure its own security. In addition, continued Houthi attacks on international shipping in the Red Sea, without a significant global response (except for US/UK air strikes), have led multiple cargo carriers to abandon the use of that route. This illustrates the decline in international consensus and mechanisms to respond forcefully to outlaw groups that threaten crucial parts of the global economy.

In the Indo-Pacific, the PRC, through its "10-dash line", has asserted sovereignty over its neighbors' territorial waters, dismissing an unfavorable ruling by an international tribunal in 2016. It has now deployed its Coast Guard and Chinese "maritime militia" to intervene by force against other nations' commercial and military vessels in those disputed waters, employing tactics such as the use of lasers to blind them, water cannons and even ramming.

In Latin America, the dictatorship led by Nicolás Maduro, president of Venezuela, has manufactured a crisis around a territorial dispute it lost in an international tribunal 125 years ago. This dispute involves approximately two-thirds of the territory of neighboring Guyana, which is significantly weaker militarily. The dispute encompasses areas rich in oil, mining and timber resources. Despite this, Venezuela has not faced substantial condemnation in the region for its aggression in this context.

The lesson for Latin American and world states is increasingly clear: the international system's mechanisms for collectively denouncing and addressing wrongdoing are crumbling. This process is accelerated by the PRC, which funds and protects regimes that advance its interests, regardless of their behavior. Moreover, a divided and timid US cannot be counted on to consistently use its power to counter aggression.

With the deterioration of the international system to collectively respond to aggression, the only factor holding back Chinese President Xi Jinping from forcibly ending Taiwanese autonomy may be his wariness of the possibility of triggering a devastating world war or economic crisis.

The results of the eroded response against aggression will be broad and multifaceted. They may include more Russian gray zone operations and military adventures against its European neighbors, "unilateral" actions by Middle Eastern, African and Asian governments against "terrorists" on their neighbors' territory, or authoritarian Latin American states such as Venezuela and Nicaragua forcibly threatening or seizing territory from their weaker neighbors. The impacts will be enormously costly and destabilizing for all parties. All will be forced to acquire more weapons, including nuclear weapons in some cases, to defend what the international order cannot be counted on to protect.

The new reality will strengthen the coalition of illiberal states willing to unilaterally impose their will, with a PRC happy to fund them and benefit from their aggressions. It is not too late for the US to act more decisively against the aggression of predatory authoritarian regimes, while striving for greater contributions from its partners, effectively communicating the cost if that order crumbles. The alternative is the deterioration of the global system toward what 17th century political philosopher Thomas Hobbes called the "state of nature" in which life is "solitary, poor, nasty, nasty, brutish and short".

## Conclusions

The complexity of contemporary geopolitical challenges has led to a marked deterioration in the rules-based world order. The proliferation of illiberal governments, the erosion of international consensus and the strategic influence of the PRC pose fundamental challenges that require a concerted and thoughtful response. This analysis underscores the importance of continued research and academic dialogue, as well as the need to strengthen political and security coordination mechanisms. International collaboration, consistent application of the rule of law, and promotion of transparency and accountability are essential to mitigate the risks associated

with the deterioration of the rules-based international order.

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