

The Eroded Credibility of the West that Applies Rules Selectively

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The West’s selective application of rules has deepened the crisis of trust in the global system while eroding the legitimacy of the “rules-based international order.” The perception of double standards, strengthened by the silence of most European countries in the face of the unacceptable use of force by Israel in recent years, which has led to a humanitarian tragedy in Gaza, in contrast to the firm and resolute stance jointly displayed against Russia’s illegal actions in Ukraine that constitute violations of rules, has accelerated this erosion. While the demands of the Global South for fairer representation and equality are increasing, the rise of various actors is shaping a multipolar structure. As the sustainability of the current order is questioned, the need for a system based on more inclusive, consistent, and universal rules is increasingly felt. The West will be able to re-establish its credibility only by consistently applying the values, principles, and rules it advocates and by confronting its past mistakes. The aim of this article is, of course, not to direct criticism at the West by isolating Türkiye, but rather to be able to make, in a sense, a self-criticism of the West, of which Türkiye is also a part.

Exactly two years ago, at the Istanbul Security Conference organised by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and Başkent University, I had been asked to deliver a speech on a topic titled “Values or Rules in Ensuring Resilience in Global Stability?” I had, by noting that the framing of the topic was constructed as if there were a kind of dichotomy between values and rules, tried to explain that, in fact, they complement each other.

According to the view long adopted by the West, shared values such as democracy, human rights, individual liberties, and the rule of law would foster trust and cooperation among states. These shared values continued to serve as a fundamental basis for helping countries align their policies and responses to global challenges for a long time. Moreover, the expectation that such fundamental values would encourage respect for cultural diversity and strengthen dialogue, thus reducing the risk of conflict, had been part of this outlook.

On the other hand, over the course of history, a general belief had taken hold that treaties, conventions, and protocols would increase predictability and reduce the likelihood of disputes by setting clear rules for state behaviour. Within an institutional framework, it had become an extension of this belief that organisations such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organisation, and the International Court of Justice would implement these agreed rules, resolve disputes peacefully through good-faith negotiations, including mediation, and facilitate cooperation. In this context, the establishment of accountability mechanisms to address situations in which rules are violated through established legal processes had been envisaged. Essentially, it was intended that rules would deter potential aggression and promote a stable international environment.

The crises that the international system has faced in recent years, however, have led to deep ruptures not only in the balance of power but also in the normative ground. It is observed that the credibility of the West, which has positioned itself for a long time as the defender and implementer of the “rules-based international order” whose essence has been conveyed above, is increasingly being questioned, particularly in light of developments in recent years, together with the validity of the rules on which the system rests and the reliability of institutions such as the United Nations that guarantee the implementation of these rules.

Looking back, the 2020 Munich Security Conference, which I also attended, were organised around the theme of “Westlessness,” which succinctly described the West’s difficulty in making its presence and influence felt in the international environment. The message intended to convey was that the West’s weight in the global system was declining and that it was losing political, strategic, and normative cohesion. The point emphasised at the conference at that time was that a period had begun in which the West’s global leadership was being questioned, tensions in transatlantic relations were increasing, and the distribution of power in the international system was evolving toward a more multipolar structure. In this context, the conference issued a warning that the West needed to re-establish internal cohesion, redefine its values, and adopt a more inclusive, cooperative approach in the face of changing global balances.

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney, in his widely noted remarks at this year’s meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, essentially emphasised that the current international order is a structure that neither the West alone can shape nor can function inclusively and in balance at the global scale. According to Carney, while the West maintains its economic and institutional weight, it is experiencing erosion in legitimacy and influence; countries of the Global South, on the other hand, demand greater representation, fair participation, and a system that reflects their own priorities. In this framework, middle-sized powers have the potential to assume a balancing role amid increasing geopolitical competition and to serve as a facilitating force in resolving emerging disputes. Carney, while drawing attention to the necessity of a reformed, inclusive, and multilateral structure for a more sustainable and stable international order, emphasised that cooperation based on trust should be strengthened among different actors, particularly by bringing together as much as possible the capabilities of middle powers.

It is noteworthy that the West has traditionally established relations with the Global South primarily for strategic geopolitical interests. In this framework, for Western countries, priority issues come to the fore, such as ensuring the supply of the natural resources they need, maintaining the presence of military bases they have acquired through agreements with these countries, preserving freedom of navigation, and gaining political allies. Such a model of relations has, in the examples so far, led to alliances or conflicts depending on the overlap of interests.

The French writer of Lebanese origin, Amin Maalouf, who is well-positioned to offer a sound interpretation of this issue through his sensitivity to diverse cultural affiliations, has comprehensively examined the dysfunctions of the global system. His observations are particularly important in the context of the historical and cultural dichotomy between the West and the rest of the world that I mentioned earlier.

At the centre of Maalouf's analysis lies the concept of identity. According to him, individuals and societies often experience an identity crisis when confronted with the homogenising force of globalisation. In this framework, it is striking that he emphasises that Western powers have historically imposed their values and systems on other regions of the world, often without adequately accounting for local traditions and needs. This imposition has sparked resistance, discontent, and a search for a more multipolar world order. At an international meeting held in Como, Italy, which I attended and which brought together representatives of Global South and Western countries, participants from the South complained in strongly critical terms, giving as an extreme example that Western senior officials, in their engagement with them, could bring certain issues (such as the marriage of same-sex couples), which they thought would earn them points in their own domestic constituencies, to the forefront almost as if they were the main issues to be discussed, and that the necessary dialogue thus took place in a tone almost like a condescending and prescriptive monologue.

The structure of international organisations such as the UN often reflects Western influence, at least in the perception of other countries. For this reason, alongside some countries within Western institutions such as Türkiye, countries of the Global South demand greater representation and influence in international organisations, especially the United Nations system, and advocate reforms that reflect their own interests and priorities. As a matter of fact, the approach that has become evident in Türkiye's recent official discourse with the slogan "the world is bigger than five" is not a coincidence in terms of drawing attention to the fact that the asymmetric distribution of power in the United Nations Security Council does not correspond to today's realities.

Countries such as China, India, and Brazil are seeking to shift the traditional dynamics of relations between the West and the Global South in their favour. For example, China's Belt and Road Initiative constitutes a challenge to the West's weight on a transcontinental scale by offering an alternative to Western investment and influence.

Recently, there has also been an increasing emphasis on South-South cooperation, in which Global South countries establish closer cooperation on trade, development, and political issues. This trend also reflects the search to reduce dependence on the West.

In this framework, Russia's policies toward Ukraine have been at the centre of the West's normative discourse. The illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the large-scale invasion that began in 2022 have been assessed as clear violations of the most fundamental principles forming the cornerstone of international law, namely respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of countries and refraining from the use of force and from changing borders through the threat or use of force. In the face of Russia's violation of these principles, enshrined in the United Nations Charter and the basis of the European security architecture, the West has displayed a firm, united stance.

However, the same West has not been able to demonstrate a similar principled determination in the face of Israel's practices in Gaza for a long time. While the scale of civilian casualties and the depth of humanitarian destruction have brought about discussions of genocide as a result of systematic violations of international law and humanitarian law, the West's stance on this issue has been subjected to serious criticism of double standards. More importantly,

Israel's escalation of military tensions extending as far as Iran by also involving the United States in the process, and its use of force in a way that violates the sovereignty of Lebanon, has carried debates on the use of force and legitimacy to a new dimension. These developments show that the selective application of international law has now reached an unsustainable point.

It can be said that the discourse of the "rules-based international order" has, in essence, been emptied of its content and that this order, in its current form, has largely collapsed. However, can this collapse also create an opportunity for rethinking and perhaps an "awakening"? Such an awakening is vital, especially for Europe.

It is observed that Europe, which has long been criticised for strategic inertia and introversion, has entered a partial mobilisation in response to recent developments. In this framework, the principled and critical stance displayed by Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez and the positions taken by countries such as Norway, Ireland, and Malta have shown that a different voice is possible within the West. It may not be wrong to interpret the increasing embrace of Spain's upright stance by other European countries as a sign of Europe's search to redefine its normative claim.

However, for this search to be successful, it is necessary that past mistakes be openly acknowledged and that norms be defended and applied not selectively but universally. Otherwise, the discourse of building a new order will not be able to escape inheriting the legitimacy crisis of the old order.

I believe it is important to consider Maalouf's view that an environment in which mutual respect and understanding among different cultures can be established must be created urgently. Such an approach will also require fundamental changes in the way states interact with one another. In this context, it will be important to make international institutions more inclusive, to promote cultural interaction and the education that facilitates it, to ensure genuine engagement that goes beyond serving as mere platforms for recording known views, and to address the root causes of economic and social inequalities. Indeed, countries of the Global South insist on the necessity of a more sincere interaction in which Western leaders, instead of adopting a constantly admonishing attitude, will try to listen to and understand the perspectives of their southern counterparts.

Looking at the current trajectory, it is highly likely that the international system will evolve into a more competitive and more insecure structure. States entering an accelerating arms race will be among the most concrete indicators of this trend. This situation necessitates that disarmament and arms control efforts, which have been pushed into the back burner by the collapse of long-standing legally binding instruments, gain priority in the new period under adapted rules.

It should not be perceived as if I am directing criticism at the West by isolating Türkiye from it. In fact, what I am trying to do is to make, in a sense, a self-criticism of the West, of which Türkiye is also a part. When it comes to commitment to values and rules, it will undoubtedly play a role in the success of efforts to establish a new order in which all stakeholders in the West, including Türkiye, act with the sensitivity to remedy their shortcomings in these areas.

On the other hand, in the relations of Western countries with different geographies, and especially with the Global South, it will be beneficial for them to consult more regularly with Türkiye— which has proven the added value of its facilitating/mediating role in the resolution of disputes, as strikingly demonstrated by both the Ukraine war and the Iran war, and which has been a pioneer of the UN Alliance of Civilisations and mediation initiatives— and to benefit more from its contribution.

In conclusion, a new international order can't be an exact repetition of the past. However, it is also clear that a completely ruleless system is not sustainable. Therefore, ensuring compliance with at least certain basic rules and principles should be a priority at the centre of the search for a future order. This is in the common interest of the international community as a whole. The erosion of the West's credibility, of which Türkiye is also a part, may not be an end but a turning point. Whether this process will evolve into a true “awakening” will depend on the extent to which the West can confront its past mistakes—especially its recent history—and on how resolutely it will apply the values and principles it claims to uphold from now on, and how it will remedy its shortcomings in these areas.