

How to Stand Tall on Shifting Grounds

by Zeynep Alemdar

Scholars and policymakers rarely agree. Yet, by the spring of 2025, there seems to be a consensus that the international system as we know it will no longer function as we have envisioned, learned about and taught it in the Western tradition. The post-Cold War period, with its confusions about unipolarity versus multipolarity, whether the United States will remain the superpower and provider of international public goods, or whether China, Russia, and some other powers will take the lead and pay for some of the latter, is over. The moral foundations of the Western international system, which guaranteed some common standards, have now completely collapsed. International norms such as the fair treatment of prisoners of war, the protection of

women and children, and the non-use of disproportionate force are now completely absent. The shared and principled understandings of desirable and acceptable forms of social behavior, that was the base of the “international society” in Hedley Bull’s terms, are not exercised anymore, and their legitimacy is not only questioned by the non-Western powers but also by the main actor that used to be the leader of the Western world, the US.

Our assumptions about how nations and leaders behave are now outdated. A new (dis)order- if we are OK with defining it in duality- is emerging, and we are all trying to anticipate and prepare for it. It is a moral duty to stand tall on these shifting grounds with some integrity, as perhaps the

last generation to live in relative safety within the liberal international normative order whose establishment spanned most of the 20th century.

Two major challenges affect our understanding of the world and challenge our assumptions about world order. The first challenge is the astonishing lack of morality in the conduct of contemporary international relations. There is no longer an international system in which certain international norms are established, at least on paper and in discourse. Neither the 1949 dated Geneva Convention’s norms such as the fair treatment of prisoners of war, nor the 2000 dated United Nations Security Resolution 1325 that concerns protection of women and children during conflict are valid anymore.



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While the rules of these and similar international agreements were never fully implemented, they were at least recognized and praised by statesmen and international organizations. In fact, the very foundation of the discipline of international relations, as theorized by realist scholars, recognizes the moral significance of political action. Knowing that there is a tension between the moral imperative and the requirements of “successful” political action, it still defines international relations as a-moral, not immoral. But even in the midst of this “amorality,” it recognizes the usefulness of international organizations, led by the most powerful states, in adopting and maintaining a common moral code to ensure long-term international equilibrium – because that is another source of power.

The second challenge in understanding and framing the issues is the pace of change. The timeline of the history of international relations after the Cold War contained milestones that used to be about a decade apart. September 11 and the Arab Spring were the reference points for major changes in the system. Then came Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. But the last two and half years have been marked by two other groundbreaking events: Trump’s reelection and Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad’s flight to Russia. Both events have already begun to shape the future of the international and regional order, with no easy predictions other

than that systems will change. In the midst of the storm of connectivity and digitalization that has taken over, we are more likely to change the timelines of events at an unprecedented pace.

These two challenges to our logical horizons have perplexing consequences for our societies, as well as for policymakers and citizens, individually and as groups, and for the interactions between them. The first is the embodiment of the lack of morality in politicians, best reflected in the persona of Trump. The scenes of Donald J. Trump as President of the United States, who, in addition to his crimes of corruption and sexual harassment, completely disregards the principles of statecraft, such as public service and respect for office. His pride in these behaviors, and lack of any confrontation from his administration alters the way societies think about how politics and international relations are conducted. His very presence and support for him in office legitimize the system’s loss of morality and paves the way for other corrupt politicians and citizens to ease their way into a similar persona. No post-World War II realist theorist, I suspect, would have imagined that this type of politician would govern the United States in the 21st century.

The second consequence of the surrounding immoral environment and the pace of change is the shock to citizens. Despite the various violent

conflicts around the world since the end of the Cold War, many citizens around the world have experienced the consequences of war only indirectly and at a slower pace. Either their economies were affected by supply chain disruptions or sanctions, or more migrants began to live in their neighborhoods. Their political needs seemed to have been met through elections, despite the low quality of democratic experience. However, confused with the loss of common normative principles, as exemplified by the personas of Trump and his imitators, and the accumulation and gradual hardening of economic conditions around the world, citizens were pushed into a space where it was now inevitable to act. During and after the super-election year of 2024, we saw eruptions of protest movements around the world, from Bangladesh to Bulgaria, from Venezuela to Gambia. Protests in Serbia and Turkey are still going on. Election fraud, economic problems ranging from inflation to poor working conditions, concerns about far-right parties, media repression, violence in Gaza, anti-gender movements and dwindling women’s rights were all protest themes. However, all the reasons for the poor economic and political conditions have already been thoroughly studied, many solutions have already been prescribed, and goals and timetables have already been set by various international organizations, including the UN, the EU, and many others during

the 2000s. The discrepancy between the international norms enshrined in many international agreements, from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the Sustainable Development Goals, and their practice resulted in complete delegitimization of the norms.

What can be done to re-legitimize the norms and restore the rules?

The end of the Western system of international norms was not abrupt. Rather, the Western liberal order, which seemed to have defeated the countervailing power of the Iron Curtain, expanded its discourse. The norms of the Western liberal order were used to legitimize U.S. interventions in Iraq in 2001 and Libya in 2011, as well as the measures taken in the aftermath of the 2008 European economic crisis. The legitimization of policies that harmed certain groups through what were perceived as international norms fed the belief that the international system works only as powerful states want it to, and that the decisions of nation-states are irrelevant. Conservatives and extremists, especially in countries with authoritarian tendencies, have found the perfect reason to criticize the legitimacy of a system of transnational liberalism that advocates

common social liberal norms. Years of negotiations and agreements that established international norms and ensured the acceptance of this system by nation-states have been erased from public memory. Moreover, in a world that was no longer bipolar, there was no strict need for countries to take sides, so leaders of each country interpreted the system according to their own internal dynamics and how they perceived the international system. The legitimacy of international norms thus faded.

In this new international order, how do we find ways to describe, communicate, negotiate, and act on common international humanitarian norms? If statesmen are not ashamed to pursue their own interests, and if there is no agreement on basic common principles, where do we turn?

As a desperately hopeful internationalist, I suggest looking at international organizations, which have been the creators and guardians of international norms. Studies of international organizations suggest that they are more effective when they can develop more institutional relationships with non-state actors. Creating sustainable mechanisms to improve interactions between non-state actors and international organizations would be an

important step toward reimagining common norms. What happened to the global protests of last year? Do Argentinean teachers and students have access to an international cooperation mechanism that improves their well-being? What happens when anti-war activists in Israel protest the war in Gaza, do they find support from an international organization?

But these sustainable mechanisms, institutional tools to connect non-state actors to old and bureaucratically burdened institutions, must be innovative. We cannot and should not create lobby groups out of civil society actors, nor should we allow the gatekeepers that also exist in civil society to establish links with international actors in order to maintain their old ways of working. The plurality and innovativeness of the new generations of protesters should be called upon.

The literature suggests that social movements become more effective when they perceive that it is possible to gain power. The events of Seattle in 1999 and Occupy Wall Street in 2011 grew because these movements were able to connect people from different movements, workers and farmers from the South and the North in the case of Seattle, and students, environmentalists, and many others in the case of Occupy, with common interests and for common rights, and see their movement grow. The World Social Forums after Seattle and many other strikes and protests that grew out of the Occupy Wall Street gatherings demonstrate the ability of protest movements to cooperate and converge. There is also evidence that the success of international organizations is enhanced when they engage in deep partnerships and work with diverse actors. When international organizations consult with civil society regularly, create flexible mechanisms of funding, and define their goals concurrently with local actors who have better information

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Voting in the UN General Assembly.

about the problems on the ground, they may become more successful institutions. Yet, international organizations, because they typically have government mandates, stay away from the solutions that these movements offer and/or lack the agency to make policy. But in these times of transformation, when local ownership of international liberal norms is urgently needed, international organizations should find new ways to work with movements.

In lieu of a conclusion

The pace of change in the world order and the fact that our assumptions about the morality of politics have been proven wrong force us to rethink the way the world works. However, we must use the accumulated knowledge of the 20th century, during which many wars were fought and lost, and a certain international order was established

through international organizations that recognized and defended basic human rights. Now that our worlds have been turned upside down, states and leaders have proven to fail the international norms, the proposal to restore some remnants of the liberal normative order involves linking disgruntled populations to international organizations. But while protest movements should find ways to de-silo themselves, escape fragmentation, and converge on common goals, international organizations should look for creative ways to meet and learn from them. While realist accounts of international relations rightly caution us against universal moral principles, we can turn to feminist international relations, which seeks to find common moral elements in human aspirations, as Ann Tickner suggested in her seminal work on feminist reformulation of Morgenthau's realist principles back in 1988.

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