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End of the Liberal Order? Multiplexity and International Disaster Law

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Dramatic changes in US foreign and domestic policies have triggered panic and forecasts of the end of the liberal international order or rules-based order. However, a more likely scenario is a multiplex world order, a system in which elements of existing orders persist with greater inclusivity and cross-regional collaboration. Disasters and the growth of international disaster law present a notable area for multilateral cooperation.



A multiplex world order at work: ASEAN's AHA Centre disbursing aid for internally displaced persons at Marawi City. Image from *Wikimedia Commons*.

The re-election of President Donald Trump and the onslaught of his administration's actions have led many pundits to question the (final) end of the liberal international order (LIO) or rules-based order (RBO). While few question that the United States and its Western allies have championed this post-WW2 architecture, fewer yet have sought to ask what these terms really mean and whether a consensus exists. Understanding and defining these terms is not only critical in assessing current global shifts — and the *types* of shifts — but in identifying and understanding areas of continued multilateral cooperation.

Defining LIO and RBO

For some, LIO and RBO are synonymous and used [interchangeably](#). Others have asserted that rather than being a rebranding of sorts, LIO was [supplanted](#) by RBO. Yet [another viewpoint](#) is that these are separate concepts but with overlaps. That said, the term “liberal” is as [ambiguous](#) as they come, with contention about whether one refers to political, economic, or social liberalism, among other disagreements.

Regardless, three common features and elements are widely accepted. Firstly, both are based on a specific vision of liberalism led by the United States and generally sponsored by the West in the post-WW2 environment. Secondly, both are premised on state sovereignty, expressed through territorial integrity, political independence, and equality between nation-states. Thirdly, the “rules” are primarily established through multilateral institutions, most notably the United Nations and related agencies. While other common features may exist, the preceding three remain at the core; without them, neither order would have occurred.

If we agree that these features form the crux of LIO and RBO, then panic at the impending end of these is unwarranted. State sovereignty and multilateral institutions — the United Nations or not — are concepts and mechanisms unlikely to be contested. If anything, they are likely to strengthen against the outlier(s). Instead, it is the *fragility in leadership* — and the consequences of that — from which the frenzy stems. The trade war instigated by President Trump against traditional friends and foes alike is ostensibly the most immediate and greatest concern.

American foreign and domestic policies are changing, but this does not necessarily signal the end of LIO or RBO. However, it could certainly mean the end of liberal *dominance* — more specifically, the end of American, or Western, hegemony. To this, experts have pointed to the emergence of a [multipolar world order](#), but even that is a polarised concept and debate.

A Multiplex World Order

A more likely shift is one towards what Amitav Acharya has described as a [multiplex world order](#). In this vision, powerful global actors, norms, ideas, and interaction patterns beyond the state are recognised for their critical influence on the world order, without the need for or heed of a hegemon. Indeed, globalisation has given rise to these elements alongside increased interdependence.

Features of a multiplex world order are already on the rise. Among many, we see non-United Nations-based regional institutions gain prominence and offer alternative systems and processes to LIO; “Global South” entities increasingly play more significant roles; and forms of interdependence no longer centre solely on the primacy of US- and Western-led trade. The growth of [BRICS](#) and its establishment of the New Development Bank is one example. Elements of LIO will persist (we see this in BRICS nations emphasising the “[central role of the United Nations](#)”), but alongside other systems and forms of organising the world. This shift gives way to greater inclusivity — the democratisation of the world order.

Multiplexity, Disasters, and Opportunities for Cooperation: The Growth of International Disaster Law

Emerging patterns and forms of interdependence also feature strongly in multiplexity. As the world has recently experienced, the consequences arising from a pandemic are deep and far-reaching. The same can be said for climate change and natural hazards, particularly as anticipatory and mitigation measures fail to keep up with their impact on societies. In [2024](#) alone, 167.2 million people were affected by natural hazards, with economic losses at US\$241.95 billion. Such transboundary issues have an indiscriminate impact. They will rise on the agendas of policy and decision-makers, presenting sites for greater multilateral cooperation, albeit in a multiplex world.

ASEAN already leads with the world’s first legally binding instrument on disaster governance. The ASEAN [Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response](#) was signed in July 2005 — shortly after the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami — and entered into force in 2009. It represents one of the [fastest-negotiated agreements](#) in the institution’s history, demonstrating that when there is a will, there is a way.

As natural hazards and climate-related disasters are projected to [rise](#), cooperation around international disaster law (IDL) appears ever more imminent. As a growing body of law, IDL offers great potential for deepening partnerships among states and non-state entities across regions and the globe. The subject matter frequently bypasses traditional sensitivities (such as human rights) and reinforces the international duty to cooperate. While the duty to cooperate is typically state-centric, the indiscriminate nature of natural hazards and resulting disasters necessitates a [whole-of-society](#) approach, including efforts toward engaging non-state entities and enhancing civil-military coordination. A significant step was marked by the UN General Assembly’s adoption of [resolution 79/128 \(2024\)](#). The resolution commits to an international convention on disaster governance based on the International Law Commission’s 2016 [Draft Articles on the Protection of Persons in the Event of Disasters](#) by the end of 2027.

The growth of IDL is also reflected in the increasing number of domestic and regional legislation as well as collaborative practices that address disaster governance. Examples of such legislations include the African Union’s *Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (2009)* addressing internal displacement resulting from disasters; the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation’s *Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters (2011)*; and more recently, Ecuador’s adoption of the *Organic Law for Comprehensive*

Disaster Risk Management (2024), alongside a growing number of states seeking to strengthen domestic disaster law. Practices and commitments arising out of collaborative platforms, such as the Arab Regional Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction, also contribute to norm-building and hence customary international law.

Crucially, a multiplex world order would support the enhancement of cross-regional partnerships and collaboration. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, for example, emerged from the Tsunami Core Group (comprising the US, India, Japan, and Australia). The group coordinated extra-regional assistance in response to the Indian Ocean tsunami and laid the foundations for broader cooperation.

Recent events indicate that multiplexity is likely. Elements of LIO and RBO will persist alongside the democratisation of the world order. Within this paradigm, pressing transboundary issues such as disasters continue to necessitate cooperation while enhancing cross-regional collective action. It signals the creation of new, more, or alternative “rules” to the present order.

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