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We’re Entering a World Run by Trump and Putin’s Rules

By Daniele Stracquadanio

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Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump during a meeting in Alaska. **Kremlin.ru**

The second Trump administration’s surge of interventionism has sent shockwaves across the globe. To Moscow, watching from the sidelines, this is long-awaited confirmation that the era of multilateralism has ended, replaced by the unapologetic return of Great Power politics.

Violations of sovereignty like the invasion of Ukraine are no longer treated as international pariah acts; they are being normalized as the standard currency of 21st-century statecraft.

Four years after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine was condemned by the West, the United States has adopted very similar language to Moscow. U.S. Secretary of State Rubio defended the need for preventive strikes to avoid further damage from Iran’s retaliation against Israel, while Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth declared that the U.S. did not start this war but was seeking to end it. Today, calls for uprisings against “illegitimate” regimes — whether “Iranian terrorists” or “Ukrainian neo-Nazis” — have become propaganda tools for both

powers.

Meanwhile, Russia's Foreign Ministry now describes the attack on Iran as an "act of planned and unprovoked aggression against a sovereign UN member." Yet, President Vladimir Putin has refrained from direct condemnation. Instead, by calling for de-escalation and offering Moscow as a mediator, Putin is quietly validating the new status quo: a world where Great Powers no longer ask for permission when it comes to their strategic interests.

While double standards are the bread and butter of international relations, this shift seems to go deeper than the usual hypocrisy of foreign policy.

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Washington's unilateralism and preventive wars are not new, as seen in President George W. Bush's attempts to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq. However, there is a fundamental difference from today, in that the Bush administration at least attempted to operate through the UN Security Council, famously presenting manufactured evidence of Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction. Failing to secure a direct legal mandate, Washington pivoted to organizing a Coalition of the Willing, recruiting dozens of nations that provided support.

This trend of seeking some form of consensus continued in 2011, when the Security Council issued a partial authorization for the intervention in Libya. In 2014, the military campaign in Syria was defended by citing the Syrian government's inability to suppress terrorist factions within its borders during the civil war, an effort backed by the 90-member Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS.

Now, any pretense has been dropped. The U.S. unilaterally carries out operations aimed at decapitating foreign governments based on generic national security needs, utterly sidelining the United Nations or any other form of multilateral consensus, mirroring the logic of Russia's wars in Georgia and Ukraine.

Even Washington's allies are starting to acknowledge and accept this shift. At the 2026 World Economic Forum in Davos, Canadian Prime Minister Carney said that the "pleasant fiction" of a rules-based order is over and has been replaced by a "harsh reality" where the powerful pursue their interests without constraint.

In her speech at the 2026 EU Ambassadors Conference, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen argued that the EU cannot be the guardian of the "old-world order" and must adapt to a new era of realism. At the same event, the bloc's chief diplomat, Kaja Kallas, lamented "the weakening of existing international norms, rules and institutions that we have built over 80 years." Unfortunately, by focusing exclusively on the chaos sowed by Iran and Russia while remaining silent on the U.S.-Israeli Operation Epic Fury, she highlighted the very double standard rendering international law a fading fiction.

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The growing similarities in the behavior of Washington and Moscow signal a final break from

the tentative rules-based order forged after World War II. By normalizing unilateral, preventive military action as a standard instrument of foreign policy, the U.S. is steering the world toward a new system where the invasion of Ukraine is no longer deemed a serious breach of international law but rather a legitimate act of statecraft. In this emerging reality, Great Powers claim an inherent right to their own spheres of influence — spanning from the "near abroad" to far-flung strategic regions depending on their capabilities.

Nation-states are being divided into tiers. Small and middle powers — Ukraine, Venezuela, or Iran today and maybe Taiwan or even some European countries — have been relegated to secondary actors, whose security is always secondary to the neighboring hegemon's interests. As Washington and Moscow increasingly sacrifice the principle of territorial integrity at the altar of pre-emptive security, they erode the principle of equality among sovereign states in favor of a hierarchical international community.

While the concept of limited sovereignty echoes the Cold War's Brezhnev Doctrine and U.S. covert operations to topple regimes in South America, today's landscape is arguably more volatile. During the Cold War, the world operated within the rigid predictability of two ideological blocs and a shared (at times, cynical) understanding of the rules of the game. Those boundaries have now dissolved into fluid power blocs. The rules are being rewritten in real-time, the violations are more blatant, and even the hierarchy of the major powers at the top of the system has become dangerously blurred.

In this landscape, the U.S. and Russia appear less like ideological rivals and more like the joint architects of a world where the rule of law does not play any role in restraining the rule of force.

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