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The West Asian Crisis Could Upend the International Order. India Should Revise its Approach

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The West Asian crisis threatens the international system in a manner unseen since the belligerence of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. It is in India's interests to resist the American-Israeli project that wants to retrieve a colonial order of Western expansion by force.

Domestic conversations over India's official response to the Iran war have been bracketed by critics who have expressed concerns that India's actions amount to siding with the aggressors and supporters who argue that India's core interests lie with the coalition of the United States, Israel, and the Gulf states. Such a framing is limited by a straitened understanding of what is at stake for India in the ongoing crisis in West Asia.

Seen narrowly, the Iran war appears to be the final round in a decades-old rivalry between Iran on the one side and Israel and the United States on the other. On this view, a balanced counsel for India would be to not get entangled in the war and work with whatever configuration of forces emerges after it.

But what is happening in the region is broader, deeper, and more consequential than a regional war.

A convergence of Israeli and American policies threatens not just the contemporary international order but the modern, Westphalian system of sovereign states. Their ideologies and actions-the latter spread across multiple continents-amount to a project of replacing the modern international system with an imperium informed by racism, driven by settler colonialism, and drawing its justification in outdated and sectarian ideas, including 'human nature', 'law of nature', and 'the Promised Land'.

The situation in West Asia is part of this systemic crisis. It portends a dissolution of the regional international system, which would be disastrous for the region and hit Indian interests adversely and severely.

India's response should be to stand up and defend the basic principles on which the modern international system and the postwar international order are based.

The Spectre of System Dissolution

Modern international relations play out on a two-level foundation. The first level comprises the international system, whose core features are sovereign equality of states, honourable diplomacy, and war limited by international law. The system functions when states recognise mutual sovereign equality, participate in diplomacy in good faith, exhaust all diplomatic options before waging wars, and wage wars within red lines, including not targeting heads of state or government and civilian populations. Crystallised over time, these features originate in the mid-17th century Treaty of Westphalia-hence the term 'Westphalian system'.

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Mounted atop the Westphalian system is the postwar-postcolonial international order. The order comprises a set of rules, norms, and institutions that have emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War and decolonisation. It includes the network of UN and allied institutions, the international courts, the Geneva and Genocide Conventions, and norms against racism, colonialism, and other oppressive and degrading practices. It is also called the rules-based international order.

All international crises strain elements of the international order, and some-like the contemporary polycrisis-also threaten the order. However, it is not a given that a crisis that threatens the order will also threaten the underlying system. The international system was last upended during the 1930s and the 1940s, when Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan pursued, and for a time succeeded in creating, political entities like the Greater German Reich and a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, which extinguished the sovereignty of states across Europe and Asia. When the international order was re-built in the wake of the Second World War and decolonisation, it was done by reinforcing the principles of the Westphalian system, evidence of which can be found in the UN Charter and the

Panchsheel Principles of inter-state conduct.

The West Asian crisis is shredding the order apart and once again, threatens to dissolve the underlying system. System dissolution occurs when a state's goals require not merely violation of particular norms of inter-state conduct but effective elimination of sovereign equality itself. Events in West Asia since late 2023 have been destroying not just the regional variant of the postwar-postcolonial order but also threatening the regional international system. In the name of 'self-defence' and securing its sovereignty, Israel is pursuing a strategy of turning its neighbours into weak or fragmented quasi or semi-sovereign states. This policy draws both ideological and military support from the US, which is itself attempting to undo both the international order and the underlying system on a larger, transcontinental scale.

In normal times, when the order and the system are not threatened, states can focus narrowly on their national interest through their foreign policy. But in times of crisis, they must pay close attention to how their policy impacts the order and the system because the effectiveness of their policy depends on the health of the order, and even the system. No national interests can be realised if the system within which a policy should play out itself ceases to exist. This means that states like India-which are middle powers crucial to the stability of the international system and the endurance of the international order-must be clear-headed about the nature of the crisis and act to preserve the two bases of world affairs.

System dissolution and order violation

To understand how the crisis in West Asia is one of system dissolution, we should juxtapose it with Russia's war on Ukraine, which is a case of order violation.

> The US envisions the purpose of its power to be the revival of a West that embraces the values and spirit of imperialism and colonisation.

Russia's key war goals are to grab Ukrainian territory that it considers part of *Russkiy Mir*-the 'Russian World'-and to revise the European security architecture by putting an end to NATO's eastward expansion, thus creating a buffer between itself and Europe along Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova. Towards these ends, Russia has violated Ukraine's sovereignty, killing thousands of civilians, targeting civilian infrastructure, and reportedly abducting over 100,000 Ukrainian children to Russify them. There are credible allegations of war crimes by Russia, and there is an ICC arrest warrant against President Vladimir Putin. These actions have clearly violated the tenets of the rules-based international order, including the laws of war related to the treatment of civilians.

But there is no evidence of systematic killing and maiming of civilians at such a scale as to destroy Ukrainian nationhood and the basis of Ukraine's sovereign statehood.

Numbers are instructive. Ukraine's population is about 39 million. The war may have caused over 600,000 military casualties, which is about 1.5% of the total population. However, at about 14,000 dead and about 42,000 wounded, Ukraine's civilian casualties amount to about 0.04% killed and 0.10 percent wounded. Any harm to civilians is unacceptable, but this difference with military casualties is consistent with a conventional inter-state war.

Furthermore, Russia's foreign policy discourse, including about its relations with Europe, does not reject the fundamentals of the postwar order. Russia has also not crossed certain red lines that are critical to the survival of the deeper international system. It has not rejected international law, including laws of war, as evidenced by the fact that the two sides exchange prisoners of war. It has not gone after the Ukrainian head of state. Russia would like to militarily weaken Ukraine, perhaps even have a pliant government in Kyiv, but is oddly also open to Ukraine joining the European Union. And it has consistently maintained openness to, and participated in, diplomacy, including through mediators since the early days of the war. And finally, there is also no evidence that Russia plans to invade or wreck another European country after concluding the Ukraine war.

Russian actions are inexcusable. But moral condemnation must not mar a clinical sifting of evidence. Russia has acutely violated the postwar order and also assaulted international law, which is one of the pillars of the international system. But it continues to adhere-though in breach-to two other pillars, namely diplomacy and sovereign equality of states.

The contrast between Russian actions in Ukraine and Israeli actions in West Asia is stark and illustrative.

The evidence that Israel's conduct has destroyed the regional order is clear. The nature of violence committed in Gaza is the worst since the Second World War, relative to the strip's size and demography. There are credible assessments that Israel has carried out a

genocide by killing over 75,000 Gazans (which may be an underestimate), most of whom are civilians. This is about 3.75% of Gaza's approximately 2 million population, which is staggering when compared with civilian casualties in Ukraine. Furthermore, by besieging the territory, Israel has caused famine and thus impaired conditions for healthy future generations of Gaza Palestinians.

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Through the destruction of housing and habitat conducive to decent human living, Israel, it is suspected, is seeking to drive the Gaza Palestinians out of their homeland, which is ethnic cleansing. It has hastened the settler colonial project in the West Bank, which it has also *de facto* annexed, entrenching an apartheid system that institutionalises racist practices. It has created 'facts on the ground' that render the emergence of a Palestinian state impossible, the Israeli leadership denies nationhood to Palestinians, and the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is committed to preventing the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state.

These actions have violated the Geneva and Genocide Conventions, the norms against racism and colonialism, and the principle of national self-determination, which goes back to the end of the First World War, and which became the basis of postwar decolonisation.

In addition to destroying the regional order, Israeli actions also upturn the underlying international system in the region. First, the shredding of international law, including laws of war, has happened as part of the actions described above. Second, the sovereign equality of regional states is also being undone. Since October 2023, Israel has attacked its neighbours at will. It has routinely bombed Lebanon and Syria, in addition to strikes on Yemen and the Palestinian territories. It has also occupied new territories in Syria and Palestine-in Gaza under the pretext of a security perimeter and in the West Bank through continuous settler colonialism-and in the past few days it has occupied Lebanese territory up to the Litani river. This pattern of territorial expansion is consistent with the notion of ' Greater Israel'. Endorsed by Netanyahu, 'Greater Israel' has been condemned by the Muslim world, including 31 Arab and Islamic countries.

Israel is expanding its territory by disintegrating the sovereignty of its neighbours. It justifies these actions by claiming that it has a 'right' to self-defence and security. The implication is that Israel believes its existence as a sovereign state requires that its neighbours do not have the capacity to defend their own sovereignties; that they should become or remain quasi or semi-sovereign states. This negates the principle of sovereign equality of states. It is crucial to note here that Israel has already partly succeeded in this project, as no other state in the region barring Israel enjoys sovereignty over their own skies. And Israel is unlikely to stop with the defeat, degradation, or dismemberment of Iran. The former Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett has identified Turkey as posing a threat to Israel "similar to the Iranian one".

Finally, Israel has disregarded the cardinal principle that diplomacy must be exhausted before war is waged, and that it must be conducted honourably, which in practice means that it must not be deceptive, mediators are not harmed, and the political leadership of states one is negotiating with is not targeted. Israel has twice started a war on Iran while its ally-the United States-was engaged in diplomatic negotiations with Tehran. It has killed the previous Iranian head of state and has attempted to eliminate his successor. More egregiously, in September 2025, it bombed Qatar while that country was acting as a mediator between Israel-US and Hamas. This is perfidious-as opposed to honourable-diplomacy, and it reinforces the conclusion that Israel does not believe in established protocols of inter-state conduct.

American Aid to System Dissolution

Israel draws both ideological and military support from US foreign policy, which itself is undoing both the postwar-postcolonial order and the underlying system on a larger, transcontinental scale.

> New Delhi's current policy takes a narrow view of national interest and leans too much on military, intelligence, commercial, and technological gains that may accrue to India for tilting towards the US, Israel, and the Gulf Arab states.

In his speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2026, the US Secretary of State Marco Rubio called the postwar rules-based order a "dangerous delusion". Other officials of the Trump Administration have been more direct about how they see international law, rules, and norms. Vice President J.D. Vance has said he did not "give a shit" if America's killing of civilian alleged drug traffickers in the Caribbean Sea amounted to a war crime. Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth has frequently dismissed laws of war,

calling rules of engagement "stupid" and declaring a policy of "no quarter, no mercy for our enemies" as regards the Iran war. The term 'no quarter' denotes a policy of not taking prisoners, which violates the Hague and the Geneva Conventions on the laws of war. And President Donald Trump has said that international law does not impose any limits on what he can do. The only constraints he recognises are "my own morality, my own mind".

It is power, and not rules, that matters for America. As he justified the abduction of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, long-time Trump aide and White House official Stephen Miller invoked "iron laws" of world politics marked by power, strength, and force. He said that America was and would behave like a "superpower". At Munich, Rubio appeared to suggest that power politics was borne out by "human nature" and five millennia of "recorded human history".

It is worth noting that this type of thinking and vocabulary were features of prewar international relations. Unsurprisingly, at Munich, Rubio spoke approvingly of the long historical period before the Second World War: "For five centuries, before the end of the Second World War, the West had been expanding-its missionaries, its pilgrims, its soldiers, its explorers pouring out from its shores to cross oceans, settle new continents, build vast empires extending out across the globe". He claimed that the West has declined since the postwar period, a tendency accelerated in part by decolonisation, which he described as "anticolonial uprisings". In other words, the West's golden age was the long period of its imperialism and colonisation of the world. Rubio's speech seems to be inspired by Trump's 2025 inaugural speech, which valorised the "frontier spirit"-a euphemism for settler colonialism and denial of sovereignty to indigenous peoples-and spoke of America as a "growing nation" that "expands our territory".

It is clear from these remarks that the US envisions the purpose of its power to be the revival of a West that embraces the values and spirit of imperialism and colonisation. And in this enterprise, Rubio has asked Europeans to drop the "polite pretence" that Western civilisation was "just one among many and that asks for permission before it acts". In other words, the West should not be bound by rules and, therefore, the rules-based international order. But because imperialism and colonialism are inconsistent with the modern international system, it is clear that America wishes to undo that system as well.

As I have argued in a recent essay, the Trump Administration has gutted the international order. But what Hegseth has called "Greater North America" threatens the international system as well. In pursuit of this imperialist strategic construct, America has violated or threatened the sovereignty of Venezuela, Greenland, and Canada, in addition to renaming the Gulf of Mexico and militarising the Caribbean Sea. And the affinity of this project with 'Greater Israel' extends beyond a commonality of names. If Turkey could be Israel's next target, then Trump has said that he would "take" Cuba next. The two projects are complemented by a convergence in foreign policy: Israel killed Iran's top leaders while the US was engaged in diplomacy with Tehran, the two thus complicit in perfidious diplomacy.

India's response

There are resonances between the ideologies and practices behind the Greater North America and Greater Israel of our times and the Greater German Reich and Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere of the prewar period. Whether and to what extent these latest imperial projects materialise is immaterial to the fact that they are being pursued, and this pursuit is bound to rip the international system apart.

It is within this combined American-Israeli assault on the international system that India must locate its own response.

> Like its Global South peers, India needs to take a stand to defend the principles of sovereign equality of states, honourable diplomacy, and wars governed by international law.

The crisis in West Asia is about an attempt to transform international relations along the lines that are inconsistent with India's strongest principles, values, and interests. India upholds sovereign equality, international law, and honourable diplomacy. It wants to reform, and not destroy, the postwar order. It abhors colonialism and territorial expansionism. And it believes in human dignity and rights, even if it is uncomfortable with how the West defines them.

But New Delhi's current policy takes a narrow view of national interest and leans too much on military, intelligence, commercial, and technological gains that may accrue to India for tilting towards the US, Israel, and the Gulf Arab states. It must recognise that if these foundations of international affairs are dented-or worse, if they cave in-then the country's commercial, technological, or strategic gains will matter far less than if the foundations remain intact.

India is a catalytic power in international affairs. Its adherence to rules lends stability to the international system and strength to the international order, and its inaction can impact that system in ways that the inaction of smaller states with lesser capabilities will not. It is one of the leading pillars of the system and is tasked by its position within the system to defend it.

And this is what its peers and partners from the Global South have done. Russia has described the assassination of Ayatollah Khamenei and his family as "a cynical violation of all norms of human morality and international law". It clarified the country's position that it "strongly and consistently condemns the practice of political assassination and manhunt for leaders of sovereign states that goes against the fundamental principles of civilised interstate relations and constitutes a grave violation of international law". At the UN, its permanent representative described the strikes as a "genuine betrayal of diplomacy". China has opposed and condemned the killings, calling them a "grave violation of Iran's sovereignty and security". Brazil too has condemned the aggression. And South Africa has challenged Israel's framing of its aggressive wars in terms of a 'right' to self-defence: "Anticipatory self-defence is not permitted under international law and self-defence cannot be based on assumption or anticipation."

> The costs of not defending the modern international system and the postwar-postcolonial order go far beyond reputation erosion within the Global South.

These remarks have condemned specific actions and upheld general principles. In contrast, India has struggled to appear unentangled in the project. In late February 2026, announcing the Indian prime minister's visit to Israel, Netanyahu identified India as part of a "hexagon of alliances", an "axis of nations" spanning West Asia and beyond to counter what he described as Shia and Sunni 'axes'. Alliances and sectarian groupings are inconsistent with the principles of India's foreign policy, and the term 'axis' has a loaded past in the infamous 'axis of evil' and the Axis powers of the Second World War. The remark should have been upsetting to New Delhi, but it issued no response. Furthermore, the latest war was launched within two days of the Indian prime minister's departure from Israel, which has led to speculation about the timing and wisdom of the visit. It has not helped that India's official responses since the war began have, when seen together, struggled to be balanced.

Given India's pivotal role in upholding the international system, New Delhi must revisit official policy. Like its Global South peers, India needs to take a stand to defend the principles of sovereign equality of states, honourable diplomacy, and wars governed by international law. Furthermore, it must also defend the principles of the postwar-postcolonial order.

The costs of not defending the modern international system and the postwar-postcolonial order go far beyond reputation erosion within the Global South. We could potentially operate in a world lacking not only in rules but even in an appreciation for them; a world so morally diminished that it would not possess even the baseline appreciation for values such as human dignity, solidarity, non-discrimination, and national self-determination. For India, the right thing to do is also that which will genuinely serve our national interest.

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