

WIN WITHOUT WAR



Progressive Foreign Policy Debrief

Intel for Advocacy

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SL: Whose rules? What order?

The Takeaway:

- Secretary of State Tony Blinken this week claimed that China represents a threat to the “rules-based order.” What exactly is this order he speaks of? In short: it’s a worthy idea that has fallen far short in reality.
- The “rules” of the world order have, for the most part, been designed to benefit a select few at the expense of the many. These rules are enforced at the barrel of a U.S.-made gun, and have rarely ever applied to the United States itself.
- A rules-based international order *would* be a good thing. But to make it a reality, we need to both rewrite the existing rules to benefit everyone, and commit the United States to their abidance.

Building the Rules-Based Order Back (Much) Better

In [an interview](#) on 60 Minutes this week, Secretary of State Antony Blinken had this to say about the supposed threat of China’s growing wealth and influence: *“Our purpose is not to contain China, to hold it back, to keep it down. It is to uphold this rules-based order that China is posing a challenge to.”*

The “rules-based international order” — it’s a common refrain, used to justify everything from blanket sanctions that suffocate the people of Venezuela to, as in this case, a growing and catastrophic new [Cold War with China](#). But what exactly does Blinken mean when he talks about a rules-based international order? Does it truly exist? And if not, what would it take to make it?

A New World Order

Out of the wreckage of World War II came a growing recognition that the international system was much in need of an overhaul — and a new superpower nation with the influence and aspiration to determine what would come next. The United Nations, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, the “[Bretton Woods](#)” monetary system, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights — what emerged from the messy process of reorganization was a new set of institutions, laws, and norms that would, it was claimed, overcome the “anarchy” of international relations and hold the world to a shared set of rules, decrease conflict, and establish an even playing field for all.

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What Rules?

But the reality has fallen short of these worthy ambitions. While many of the ideas and structures that came out of this era had some noble intent (and in some cases represent the aspirations we still fight for today), the overall system tends to benefit the few and powerful at the expense of the many. The United Nations may have given each country a voice, but it was held hostage by the [veto power of the P5](#) on the Security Council. The IMF and World Bank were to operate [according to the whims](#) of those who paid in the most — i.e. the wealthiest countries — with the United States holding sole veto power. Two small examples, but with a clear implication: while the exact rules changed over time, and despite certain steps forward for equality and universal human rights, the “rules-based order” was by and large designed for the powerful, not the powerless; for the wealthy few, not the working many.

Whose Rules?

Not only did these new rules not *benefit* everyone equally, they also did not, in reality, *apply* to everyone equally. So who has to follow the rules, and who doesn't? The short answer in Washington is: it's up to the United States. Instigating [coups](#) against democratically-elected governments; invading nations unprovoked; labeling its enemies as “human rights abusers” while [shielding](#) itself and its allies from the same accountability; imposing [suffocating sanctions](#) in contravention of international law; [refusing](#) to sign near-universal global treaties protecting fundamental rights; threatening to [invade](#) the Netherlands if the International Criminal Court dares question its actions — as the unparalleled superpower, the United States, could, and still does, determine for itself to whom the rules apply. This inconsistent application of the so-called rules and our silence in face of certain abuses but not others in the name of national security fuels our own, and the world's insecurity.

Defending The Order — At the Barrel of a Gun

To proponents of this order, the United States' and its military allies' exemption from the rules is a feature, not a bug. The United States is simply the rule enforcer. In a twisted logic reminiscent of the idea that we can bomb our way to peace, apologists of the U.S.-led order claim that the United States *has* to break the rules itself in order to hold others to account. And so, time and again, the United States invokes the defense of this order to justify all manner of violent economic or military interventionism.

Ultimately, while the myth of the rules-based order is that the United States uses its power sparingly to enforce a fair, shared set of rules, the reality is that the United States uses its global military dominance to [further](#) its own military and economic dominance — and to enforce the interests of the few at the expense of the many.

Making a New Rules-Based Order

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The rules-based international order as presented by the likes of Secretary Blinken has never matched its rhetorical claims. But that's not to say the *idea* of a rules-based order is the wrong one. In a world of global problems, we need global cooperation and global solutions. Multilateral institutions and a fair, shared set of rules that apply to all are worthy goals. But to make this a reality will take two things: first, the United States must itself abide by the rules. No country, from China and France to Russia and Saudi Arabia, will submit itself to an order to which the United States is an exception. Second, we must [rewrite the rules](#) to *actually* work for the many. There is neither justice nor legitimacy in a system designed to exploit the majority, and no reason to expect others to accept it.

Progressives fundamentally support creating a fair, shared set of global rules. And conventional foreign policy wisdom may be right that the best way to prevent the emergence of “bad actors” is to ensure that they are constrained by such an order. But aggression and antagonism won't get us there — quite the opposite, it will only serve to underscore the current reality that the rules are unfair and unevenly enforced. What we need instead is clear: **a rules-based order for all.**

You're Invited! Supporting Changemakers in Iran

Facing immense challenges from within and without, everyday Iranians are fighting for a better future for their country. But blocking progress is the devastating toll of U.S. sanctions. Join us on Wednesday May 12, at 12:00pm ET for “Supporting Changemakers in Iran,” a conversation exploring the impact U.S. sanctions have on Iranian civil society and how we in the United States can best be allies to Iranian activists.

[Register now!](#)

BURIED LEDES

How might a Black woman in the 1960s have [thought about national security](#)? “The US will **never achieve true security so long as it believes that the lives of people of color, here and abroad, must be destroyed** to accomplish this goal,” writes our own Annika London.

In a remarkable and hard-fought victory, **the Biden administration** [announced](#) **its support for a waiver on Covid-19 vaccine patents.** The details are still unclear, and much remains to be done, but this is one big step toward a system that puts people over profit.

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Newly-released documents [reveal](#) that **the Trump administration dramatically weakened safeguards put in place to protect civilians from U.S. drone strikes**... not that those were particularly strong to begin with.

Worsening instability? Growing tensions with China? Endless war? **Good news! — so [said arms manufacturers to their investors this week](#)**. Maybe we shouldn't let war profiteers influence our foreign policy?

"Peace can and should be an American value, and it is one that we have neglected for a very long time." [Listen to Win Without War Policy Director Kate Kizer on this week's Eumonia podcast](#).

Colombia's Duque government — a longtime U.S. "ally" and recipient of U.S. "security assistance" — is [massacring people in the streets](#) for daring to demand an economy that works for everyone.

The U.S. military's massacre of Indigenous people at Wounded Knee was a bloody act of genocidal violence — and its perpetrators still hold the government's highest honor. **It's time to [rescind the Wounded Knee Medals of Honor](#)**.

Started from the bottom now we're...at 62,500. That's **the [new refugee admissions cap, up from an abysmally low 15,000 under Trump](#)**. It's a meaningful improvement, but it must be just the start of rebuilding the refugee resettlement program.

In [a speech this week](#), **VP Harris called on governments in Latin America to tackle corruption**. Madam Vice President: yes, but let's also not forget the **United States' own continued role in [enabling corruption](#)** in the region (oh, and coups, civil wars, dictatorships).

The "Strategic Competition Act" is a dangerous new bill that **scapegoats China to justify more militarization. It would not only [lead to escalation](#) and essentially end diplomacy with North Korea before it even gets started, but also would [endanger Taiwan](#)** (not to mention the rest of the world) by putting it in the crosshairs of a new U.S.-China Cold War.

With Biden's announcement of a withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, "He acknowledged a truth that many of us had accepted many years ago: **The war was unwinnable. Why,**" [writes one veteran](#), "had this taken so long" to accept?

And finally, all of the dancing memes and tween catchphrases were worth it for **TikTok bringing [this](#) into the world**.