

THE IMPACT OF GREAT POWER RIVALRY ON SECURITY OF MARGINALIZED STATES

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how great power rivalry, particularly among nuclear-armed states, undermines international legal protections for marginalized states. Through comparative case analysis of Ukraine, Iran, Venezuela, Cuba, and Palestine, combined with semi-structured interviews of 25 international law experts, diplomats, and civil society actors, the research identifies systematic juridical asymmetry—the differential application of legal norms based on state power and strategic alignment. Findings reveal that nuclear weapon status functions as an impunity shield: nuclear-armed states violate international humanitarian law more frequently and face consequences less frequently than non-nuclear states. Sovereignty operates as contingent privilege rather than absolute right, with protections depending on alignment with great power interests rather than formal legal status. Three primary exploitation mechanisms emerge: selective treaty enforcement, rhetorical inversion (punishing transparency while rewarding opacity), and ally immunity. Despite these asymmetries, international law provides marginalized states with discursive resources for legitimation and coalition-building, though material protection requires diversification of partnerships rather than exclusive alignment. The study concludes that institutional paralysis within the UN Security Council, ICC, and IAEA enables continued violations, and recommends Security Council reform, expanded IAEA mandates, automatic accountability mechanisms, and renewed multilateral arms control negotiations involving all nine nuclear-armed states.

Keywords: Juridical asymmetry, nuclear impunity, contingent sovereignty, great power rivalry

Background to the Study

The contemporary international order stands at a critical juncture. What was once envisioned as a rules-based multilateral system grounded in the United Nations Charter and the Geneva Conventions has increasingly given way to a fragmented, asymmetric logic where great powers operate through spheres of influence, tacit agreements, and selective application of international law (Veiga González, 2026). This transformation has profound implications for the security of marginalized states—those positioned at the periphery of great power competition, lacking nuclear deterrents, and vulnerable to coercion, invasion, and humanitarian abuse.

The end of the Cold War promised a "new world order" characterized by collective security and the expansion of international legal norms. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 left the United States as the sole superpower, and many observers anticipated an era of liberal internationalism where democracy, free markets, and the rule of law would spread globally (Harvey & Brecher, n.d.). The establishment of the International Criminal Court in 1998, the expansion of NATO peacekeeping operations, and the growing authority of international human rights mechanisms all seemed to herald a new era of legal constraint on state power.

Yet three decades later, the international system has witnessed profound reversals. The 2003 invasion of Iraq based on unverified claims of weapons of mass destruction; Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and attempted annexation of its territories; the 2025 U.S.-Israel military strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities; and ongoing great power competition

across Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia collectively demonstrate the persistence of what Egyptian international relations expert Mustafa Amin describes as "the logic of power politics"—where military force serves as the ultimate arbiter of international disputes (Amin et al., 2025).

The nuclear dimension of contemporary great power rivalry deserves particular attention. Nine states currently possess nuclear weapons: the five recognized under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)—the United States, Russia, China, France, and the United Kingdom—and four de facto nuclear states outside the treaty framework—India, Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea (House of Commons Library, 2026). Additionally, Iran possesses nuclear latency—the technical capacity to produce weapons rapidly—though it maintains that its program is peaceful. These nuclear-armed states collectively dominate international security politics, yet they also account for the most significant violations of international humanitarian law documented in recent conflicts.

The relationship between nuclear weapon status and legal accountability constitutes a central puzzle of contemporary international relations. As Tetelman (2025) observes, the fundamental question of "who has the right to possess nuclear weapons" remains unresolved, with profound implications for global security. The NPT established a bargain: non-nuclear states agreed to forgo nuclear weapons in exchange for access to peaceful nuclear technology and a commitment from nuclear states to pursue disarmament (House of Commons Library, 2026). Yet nuclear states continue

modernizing their arsenals while non-nuclear states grow increasingly frustrated with the bargain's broken promises.

This study situates itself within the broader context of what Veiga González (2026) terms "hegemonic readjustment"—a transformation of the international system driven by China's economic rise, Russia's strategic revisionism, the relative decline of U.S. unipolar dominance, and the emergence of competing power centers across Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. This readjustment creates both opportunities and vulnerabilities for marginalized states, as great powers seek allies, proxies, and spheres of influence while weaker nations struggle to preserve autonomy and security.

Research Problem

The central problem this study addresses is the systematic erosion of international legal protections for marginalized states in an era of renewed great power rivalry. Despite the existence of elaborate legal frameworks—the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the Geneva Conventions, the UN Charter's prohibition on the use of force—nuclear-armed states continue to invade, coerce, and violate the sovereignty of weaker nations with minimal accountability.

This research identifies a fundamental paradox: the very mechanisms designed to ensure collective security and humanitarian protection has been repurposed as instruments of strategic competition. As Najjar (2025) notes, "legal instruments are not governed by treaty logic alone, but by strategic alignment and power asymmetry." When Iran complies with international inspections, it faces sanctions and surveillance; when Israel

maintains strategic opacity regarding its undeclared nuclear arsenal; it enjoys immunity from scrutiny (Najjar, 2025). When Russia occupies the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant and declares ownership of Ukrainian state assets, it violates fundamental principles of the law of occupation yet retains control (Hernández Páez, 2023). When the United States withdraws from the JCPOA and subsequently claims the right to snap back UN sanctions on Iran, it acts without legal standing but with material effect (Najjar, 2025).

This "juridical asymmetry"—the differential application of international legal norms based on state power and strategic alignment—constitutes the core puzzle this thesis seeks to explain. The research problem encompasses both descriptive and normative dimensions: descriptively, the study seeks to document and analyze the mechanisms through which nuclear-armed states evade accountability; normatively, it seeks to evaluate the consequences of this asymmetry for marginalized states and the international legal order as a whole.

The problem is further complicated by the resurgence of ideological and religious nationalism as drivers of state behavior. The 2025 U.S.-Israel war on Iran revealed the extent to which apocalyptic religious beliefs influence decision-making within the U.S. military and Israeli government (Ismail, 2026). According to the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, over 110 complaints emerged from U.S. military officers telling subordinates that the war was "part of God's plan" and that President Trump had been "anointed by Jesus to light the signal fire in Iran to cause Armageddon" (Ismail, 2026). This fusion

of religious eschatology with nuclear posture represents a dangerous development that this research seeks to understand.

Finally, the problem has temporal urgency. As one observer notes, "ultimately, either we create a rule-based system at the global level or we just wait for the mushroom clouds that are coming for all of us" (Tetalman, 2025). The erosion of international legal constraints, the breakdown of arms control regimes, and the normalization of humanitarian violations collectively threaten catastrophic outcomes that this research aims to illuminate and help prevent.

The objectives of this paper are to:

- i. Identify how nuclear-armed states exploit legal asymmetries for strategic gain.
- ii. Analyse how such exploitation erodes the sovereignty of marginalized states.
- iii. Evaluate strategies for marginalized states to preserve autonomy amid great power rivalry.

Research Assumption

This study is predicated on two primary assumptions:

- i. International law, though often violated by powerful states, still offers marginalized states a strategic and discursive arena to challenge, legitimize, or delegitimize behavior and build coalitions.
- ii. Nuclear-armed states behave differently from non-nuclear states: their nuclear status creates impunity, systematically emboldening them to violate international legal norms more frequently.

Significance of the Study

This research directly links theoretical, empirical, policy, and methodological insights by demonstrating that nuclear weapon status creates a form of "juridical asymmetry"—a stratified legal order in which nuclear-armed states evade accountability (e.g., Russia at Zaporizhzhia, the U.S.-Israel war on Iran, and U.S. policy shifts toward Venezuela and Cuba) while simultaneously using legal discourse to legitimate their actions. Theoretically, this moves beyond realism and liberalism to frame sovereignty as a contingent privilege, not a fixed right. On policy, the findings support actionable reforms such as UN Security Council restructuring, expanded IAEA and ICC mandates, and revived disarmament mechanisms. Methodologically, the study's replicable fusion of comparative case study design, legal-doctrinal analysis, and critical discourse analysis offers a robust template for future research on how law, power, and vulnerability interact in the international system.

Literature Review

Conceptual Review

Conceptual Clarification

Sovereignty and Its Contingencies

The concept of sovereignty occupies a contested position in international relations theory. Classical conceptions, derived from the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), emphasize territorial integrity, political independence, and non-interference in internal affairs as defining attributes of sovereign statehood. The UN Charter enshrines these principles in Article 2(4)'s prohibition on the use of force and Article 2(7)'s protection of domestic jurisdiction.

However, as Veiga González (2026) argues, contemporary practice reveals that "sovereignty ceases to function as a universal principle and instead becomes a selective argument, invoked by dominant actors according to their strategic convenience." This observation point toward a reconceptualization of sovereignty not as a binary attribute (sovereign or not) but as a spectrum of substantive capacities. States with robust internal legitimacy, democratic governance, human rights protections, and alignment with great power interests enjoy greater sovereign protections; states with internal crises, human rights violations, or adversarial relationships with powerful states find their sovereignty qualified.

This thesis develops the concept of sovereignty as "contingent privilege"—the idea that a state's sovereign rights depend not on formal legal status alone but on its alignment with great power interests, its internal legitimacy, and its capacity to resist coercion. Venezuela's experience illustrates this contingency: following the controversial 2024 electoral process, the United States seized upon Caracas's "severe internal legitimacy crisis and documented record of human rights violations" to justify increased pressure, arguing that those "who invoke sovereignty to reject pressure on Venezuela remained silent when faced with the violation of their own populations' fundamental rights" (Veiga González, 2026).

The January 2026 U.S. military operation that captured President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, extraditing them to New York to face drug trafficking charges, represents a dramatic escalation of this contingent sovereignty (Brookings Institution, 2026). The Trump administration framed the operation as protecting Americans from

drug overdose deaths, despite acknowledging that cocaine—the drug trafficked through Venezuela—is not a significant cause of lethal overdoses compared to fentanyl and methamphetamine, which originate primarily in Mexico (Brookings Institution, 2026). This rhetorical framing exemplifies what Najjar (2025) terms "rhetorical inversion"—shifting focus from the legality of the action to the alleged threat posed by the target.

President Trump subsequently declared that the United States would "run" Venezuela until its oil production significantly increased, a vision that scholars have compared to the Coalition Provisional Authority established in Iraq following the 2003 invasion (Brookings Institution, 2026; Haass, 2026). This colonial overrule raises profound questions about sovereignty's contemporary meaning. As Brookings (2026) observes, Trump "provided almost no details to back his assertion that the United States is now in charge of Venezuela and will be running the country until it can safely hand governance over to local authorities when oil production has been significantly increased and benefits the United States." The ambiguity regarding whether the United States seeks a protectorate, a limited trusteeship over oil policy or a more comprehensive occupation mirrors the contradictions of the Iraq experience (Haass, 2026).

Former Canadian UN Ambassador Bob Rae characterized the U.S. approach as rejecting multilateralism in favour of asserting hemispheric dominance "without any notion of legality" (Global News, 2026). The administration's national security strategy, which seeks to restore and update the Monroe Doctrine, envisions American dominance over the Western

Hemisphere and has been used to justify interventions across Latin America (Global News, 2026).

The Trump Administration's Rejection of International Law

The Trump administration's approach to international law represents a significant departure from post-1945 normative frameworks. When asked by *The New York Times* what limits he faced on the global stage, Trump responded: "There is one thing; my own morality, my own mind. It's the only thing that can stop me" (The Independent, 2026). This assertion of unconstrained executive power—unfettered by treaty obligations, UN Charter provisions, or customary international law—has profound implications for the sovereignty of marginalized states.

The administration's declared "Donroe Doctrine" (a portmanteau of "Donald" and "Monroe") explicitly rejects the multilateral rules-based order in favour of unilateral assertion of U.S. interests across the Western Hemisphere (The Independent, 2026). As one administration official explained, Trump is "really worried about the U.S. continuing to drift in the Western Hemisphere and is focused on this" (The Independent, 2026). The doctrine extends beyond Latin America to encompass Greenland, Canada, and Arctic security—regions previously considered within the sphere of allied or partner states rather than targets of coercive diplomacy.

This approach has generated profound anxiety among traditional U.S. allies. The Pew Research poll from July 2025 found that the majority of Canadians now see Trump's America as their biggest threat (The Independent, 2026). This perception reflects the administration's threats regarding Greenland, its repeated

references to making Canada the "51st state," and its broader repudiation of the alliance framework that has structured U.S.-Canada relations since World War II. As Carleton University Professor Fen Osler Hampson observed, "We're going to be under Washington's thumb, whether we like it or not" (Global News, 2026).

Nuclear Opacity and Strategic Immunity

The concept of nuclear opacity refers to states' deliberate ambiguity regarding the existence, capabilities, and deployment of their nuclear arsenals. Israel's posture of "strategic opacity"—neither confirming nor denying its nuclear status—represents the most developed example (Najjar, 2025). While widely acknowledged to possess 80–400 warheads, Israel maintains official silence, justified as a stabilizing force that deters adversaries without provoking regional proliferation.

However, as Najjar (2025) argues, Israel's exception to the NPT regime carries significant costs. As a non-signatory, Israel's nuclear facilities are not subject to IAEA safeguards. There exists "no formal mechanism to investigate or penalize its nuclear activities." When Mordechai Vanunu revealed details of Israel's program in 1986, he was abducted, tried in secret, and imprisoned for 18 years—a punishment that "signaled that internal exposure of nuclear secrets would be met not with protection, but with isolation and erasure."

The asymmetry between Israel's treatment and Iran's could not be starker. Iran, an NPT signatory with extensive IAEA inspections, faces constant scrutiny and periodic sanctions. Israel, outside the treaty entirely, enjoys immunity. This double standard "reinforces a system where transparency is punished and

secrecy rewarded—especially when secrecy aligns with the interests of powerful allies" (Najjar, 2025).

The 2025 U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and subsequent "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran exemplify this juridical asymmetry. As a Congressional letter to President Trump (2025) stated, the JCPOA's "fatal flaw" was that it "allowed Iran to continue enriching uranium and inch closer to developing a nuclear weapon." This framing omits the parallel reality that Israel—which never signed the NPT—possesses an undeclared nuclear arsenal of up to 400 warheads without facing similar scrutiny (Najjar, 2025).

Israel's June 2025 bombing of Iranian nuclear facilities, followed by the February 2026 full-scale U.S.-Israel war against Iran, represents the culmination of this asymmetrical framework. As the Congressional letter (2025) affirmed, signatories declared that "Israel's ongoing defensive strikes on Iranian nuclear and military sites are justified," citing the IAEA's reported loss of "continuity of knowledge" on key parts of Iran's nuclear program. The February 2026 war, which began with the Israeli Air Force's decapitation strike killing Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has systematically erased Iran's conventional capabilities, energy facilities, and civilian infrastructure (Tertrais, 2026). As Tertrais (2026) observes, the war "is a logical continuation of the June 2025 12-day war in which Israel, followed by the US, took out much of Iran's nuclear assets and air defences."

The war has validated Gulf Arab states' concerns about their exposure, the United States' capacity to defend them, and the perils of an unconstrained Israel (Tertrais, 2026). Iran has directed more than 80% of

its retaliatory projectiles at Gulf states, targeting critical infrastructure including water-desalination plants and energy facilities (Tertrais, 2026). This regional destabilization illustrates how great power rivalry—and great power military action—generates cascading security crises for middle powers caught in the crossfire.

The Law of Occupation and Nuclear Facilities

International humanitarian law governing occupation is codified in the Hague Regulations of 1907 and the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949. Article 42 of the Hague Regulations defines occupation as territory "actually placed under the authority of the hostile army." The occupying power gains certain authorities—particularly the duty to "restore and ensure public order and civil life"—but acquires no sovereign rights (Hernández Páez, 2023).

Crucially, Article 55 of the Hague Regulations limits the occupying power's authority over public property to that of "administrator and usufructuary"—it may use the property and enjoy its benefits but "must safeguard the capital of these properties" and cannot claim ownership. As Hernández Páez (2023) argues, "the fact that international law subjects this power to the 'rule of usufruct' means a fortiori that the Occupying Power cannot legally claim ownership over the asset."

Additional Protocol I of the Geneva Conventions provides special protections for works and installations containing dangerous forces, including nuclear power stations. Article 56 prohibits attacks on nuclear power stations even when they are military objectives, if such attacks "may cause the release of dangerous forces and consequent severe losses among the civilian population." This provision

reflects recognition of the catastrophic humanitarian consequences that would follow from radiological release.

The U.S. capture of Venezuela's leadership and declared intent to manage its oil production raises analogous questions regarding the law of occupation. While the United States has not formally declared Venezuela occupied territory, Trump's statements regarding U.S. management of Venezuelan oil production "until it can safely hand governance over to local authorities" (Brookings, 2026) suggest a *de facto* administrative role that international law would classify as occupation if accompanied by effective control.

Review of Related Literature

Great Power Rivalry in the Contemporary Era

The literature on great power rivalry has evolved significantly since the end of the Cold War. Early post-Cold War scholarship anticipated an era of liberal peace, democratic consolidation, and institutionalized cooperation. The expansion of the European Union, NATO's transformation, and the growth of international institutions seemed to validate liberal institutionalist expectations.

However, the resurgence of great power competition since approximately 2014—marked by Russia's annexation of Crimea, China's assertive territorial claims in the South China Sea, and the U.S. pivot to Asia—has generated renewed scholarly attention to realism and power politics. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes the persistence of spheres of influence, the strategic logic of nuclear modernization, and the limits of institutional constraint on great power behavior.

Veiga González (2026) characterizes the contemporary period as one of "hegemonic readjustment"—a transformation driven by China's economic penetration of Latin America, Russia's strategic engagement with U.S. adversaries, and the erosion of unipolar dominance. This readjustment creates "three priorities: the maximization of economic benefits, political and territorial control, and the projection of power as a guarantee of stability."

The Davos 2026 World Economic Forum captured middle powers' reading of this moment. Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney declared, "We are in the midst of a rupture, not a transition," a statement that participants across Europe, Asia, and Latin America echoed (World Economic Forum, 2026). Carney argued that the fiction of the rules-based order had been exposed: "For decades, countries like Canada prospered under what we called the rules-based international order. We joined its institutions, we praised its principles, and we benefited from its predictability. But we knew the story was partially false, that the strongest would exempt themselves when convenient, that trade rules were enforced asymmetrically. And we knew that international law applied with varying rigour depending on the identity of the accused or the victim" (World Economic Forum, 2026).

Qatar's Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani described the breakdown in starker terms: "Since World War II, there was a system with checks and balances—those are gone now" (World Economic Forum, 2026). Singapore's President Tharman Shanmugaratnam warned of "a self-reinforcing decline into disorder" (World Economic Forum, 2026). European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen cautioned against nostalgia: "Nostalgia will not bring back the old

order. And playing for time and hoping that things will revert soon will not fix the structural issues that we have" (World Economic Forum, 2026).

This scholarly and policy consensus—that the rules-based order is in terminal crisis—has profound implications for marginalized middle powers. As Carney warned, "If we're not at the table, we're on the menu" (World Economic Forum, 2026). The Canadian prime minister's subsequent bilateral trade deal with China, concluded during a visit to Beijing, illustrates how middle powers are responding to U.S. unilateralism by diversifying their strategic partnerships (The Independent, 2026).

Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime: Architecture and Erosion

The scholarly literature on nuclear non-proliferation has extensively analyzed the NPT regime's strengths and weaknesses. The treaty, opened for signature in 1968, established a bargain: non-nuclear states forgo weapons in exchange for peaceful nuclear technology and disarmament commitments from nuclear states. With 191 states parties, it is the most widely adhered-to arms control agreement in history (House of Commons Library, 2026).

However, as the House of Commons Library (2026) notes, "advancing the disarmament agenda has also been undermined by the existence of the de facto nuclear states... critics have also pointed to the modernisation plans of the nuclear weapon states as evidence that their disarmament obligations are not being taken seriously." The United States, Russia, China, France, and the United Kingdom are all engaged in multi-billion-dollar nuclear modernization programs—

behavior inconsistent with good-faith disarmament commitments.

The JCPOA's fate has generated extensive scholarly analysis of how legal mechanisms can be weaponized for strategic advantage. Najjar (2025) argues that "legal instruments like snapback are not governed by treaty logic alone, but by strategic alignment and power asymmetry." The United States lacked legal standing to invoke snapback after withdrawing from the JCPOA but possessed sufficient economic and political power to make its extra-legal claims effective through secondary sanctions and financial deterrence.

The February 2026 full-scale U.S.-Israel war against Iran represents the collapse of the non-proliferation regime's diplomatic pillar. Tertrais (2026) characterizes the war as "the logical culmination of the predictable chain of events started on 7 October 2023; a manifestation of the inability of the Middle Eastern security system to constrain and integrate revisionist powers; and evidence of a crumbling international order." The war's origins lie in "Iran's ideological and strategic delusions, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's unhinged obsession with security and US President Donald Trump's opportunistic, high-risk improvisation" (Tertrais, 2026).

U.S. and Israeli targeting of Iran's nuclear facilities and leadership represents what Tertrais (2026) calls "a quintessential war of choice"—one not driven by imminent threat but by opportunity and domestic political calculation. The war has "thrown the Middle East into a new era of conflict and transformation," with Gulf states bearing the brunt of Iranian retaliation (Tertrais, 2026). Iran's strategy of "imposing high costs on its neighbours not just out of anger, but also for strategic

effect and tactical convenience" has targeted UAE, Kuwait, and Bahrain, damaging critical infrastructure and shaking confidence in Gulf economic models built on security and predictability (Tertrais, 2026).

International Humanitarian Law and the Accountability Gap

The literature on international humanitarian law has documented a persistent "accountability gap"—the discrepancy between violations committed and consequences imposed. War crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide continue to occur with disturbing frequency, yet prosecutions remain rare, particularly for powerful states and their allies.

The United Nations Commission of Inquiry (COI) on the Occupied Palestinian Territory concluded that Israel had committed genocide against Palestinians in Gaza, with "deliberate targeting of children" as a key indicator of genocidal intent (CBC News, 2026a, 2026b). The COI's report found that "the intense scale and systematic nature of the Israeli military operations have continued," causing unprecedented death, injury and trauma to Palestinian children (CBC News, 2026a, 2026b). Israel's Foreign Ministry rejected the report as "propaganda meant to vilify Israel rather than seek the truth" (CBC News, 2026a, 2026b).

As of the ceasefire beginning in October 2025, Gaza Health Ministry figures reported over 73,000 dead, with more than 1,000 additional deaths—265 of them children—occurring after the ceasefire (CBC News, 2026a, 2026b). The COI's chair, SrinivasanMuralidhar, stated that by targeting children, "Israel is attacking the very capacity of the Palestinian people to

exist and to determine their future" (CBC News, 2026a, 2026b).

The Truth Hounds (2025) investigation into Russian occupation of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant area documented that "Russian forces established at least seven detention sites in Enerhodar and the surrounding area" where at least 226 residents and ZNPP employees were "unlawfully detained, most of them in severely overcrowded facilities where detainees were subjected to physical and psychological torture." The torture methods documented include "beatings, electrocution, sexual violence, mock executions, and threats to family members of detainees." These practices amount to "serious breaches of international humanitarian law... as war crimes and to crimes against humanity."

The involvement of Rosatom, Russia's state nuclear corporation, in these violations adds a disturbing dimension documented in the literature. The corporation's "administrative and financial structures" were "weaponized in the service of military control and led to the suppression of resistance, the commission of serious crimes, and the compromising of nuclear safety and security" (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2025a, 2025b).

The European Parliament (2025) has condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine as "an unprovoked, unjustified and illegal war of aggression" and called for accountability through the International Criminal Court and a special tribunal for the crime of aggression. The European Parliament also condemned Russia's "systematic falsification and use of distorted historical arguments" to justify the war (European Parliament, 2025).

Religious Nationalism and Foreign Policy

A growing literature examines the resurgence of religious nationalism as a driver of foreign policy, particularly in the United States, Israel, India, and Russia. Ismail (2026) documents the influence of apocalyptic religious beliefs on U.S. military decision-making during the 2025 Iran war, with over 110 complaints about officers telling subordinates that the war was "part of God's plan" and that President Trump had been "anointed by Jesus to light the signal fire in Iran to cause Armageddon."

The Israeli case presents parallel dynamics. While Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and many political leaders are secular, "the current Israeli government is dominated by religious extremists just as fanatical as Mike Huckabee and Pete Hegseth" (Ismail, 2026). Figures like Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich "believe themselves to be eschatological agents acting to wipe out the Palestinian people, restore Greater Israel and bring about the arrival of the Messiah."

This literature suggests that religious nationalism contributes to the normalization of humanitarian violations through dehumanization of adversaries, providential reinterpretation of civilian casualties, and eschatological justification of extraordinary measures. The February 2026 U.S.-Israel war against Iran reflects these dynamics, with the Trump administration's framing of the war as divinely ordained (Ismail, 2026) and Netanyahu's determination to destroy Iranian power regardless of regional consequences (Tertrais, 2026).

Empirical Review

The empirical literature on U.S. intervention in Venezuela has documented

the January 2026 military operation that captured Maduro and his wife (Brookings, 2026; Amundi, 2026). The operation, conducted by U.S. Delta Force and other units, achieved its primary goal—ousting Maduro—without escalating into wider military engagement (Amundi, 2026). However, Maduro's inner circle remains largely intact, with Vice President Delcy Rodríguez formally assuming leadership (Amundi, 2026).

Trump's subsequent declaration that the United States would "run" Venezuela "until its oil production is significantly boosted" represents a colonial overrule that scholars have compared to the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq (Brookings, 2026; Haass, 2026). The ambiguity regarding U.S. objectives—whether seeking only oil policy influence, counter-narcotics cooperation, or comprehensive governance—mirrors the contradictions of previous U.S. interventions (Haass, 2026).

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio's vision differs from Trump's, envisaging U.S. influence through "a blockade of sanctioned Venezuelan oil" rather than direct administration (Brookings, 2026). This internal policy disagreement reflects the lack of strategic clarity that has characterized post-intervention planning in Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan (Haass, 2026).

Russia and Brazil condemned the operation, while China adopted a more cautious stance (Amundi, 2026). EU governments criticized the violation of international law but largely refrained from directly challenging President Trump (Amundi, 2026). The operation has heightened concerns in Russia and China over America's readiness to intervene militarily, while Latin American leaders face intensified pressure (Amundi, 2026).

Cuba has returned to U.S. focus, with possible oil embargo discussions (Amundi, 2026).

U.S. Threats to Canada and Greenland

The literature on U.S.-Canada relations has documented the erosion of the bilateral alliance framework under the Trump administration. Trump's previous calls for Canada to become the "51st state" have been partially replaced by a focus on Arctic security, with U.S. officials expressing concern about "vulnerability" of Canada's northern border to Chinese and Russian encroachment (The Independent, 2026). However, as former UN Ambassador Bob Rae warned, "We're on the menu," cautioning that Trump's Western Hemisphere strategy—including threats against Greenland, Colombia, and Cuba—should serve as a warning to Canadians (Global News, 2026).

The administration's "Donroe Doctrine" explicitly rejects multilateralism in favour of asserting U.S. dominance over the hemisphere "without any notion of legality" (Global News, 2026). This approach has led the majority of Canadians to view Trump's America as their biggest threat (The Independent, 2026). Carney's bilateral trade deal with China and his pursuit of stronger European ties reflect Canada's strategic diversification in response to U.S. unilateralism (Global News, 2026; The Independent, 2026).

Carleton University's Fen Osler Hampson observed that "a world that is going to be carved up into spheres of influence dominated by the U.S., Russia and China, with each claiming veto rights over neighbours and resources, is profoundly damaging to middle powers like Canada" (Global News, 2026). This observation situates Canada's experience within

broader patterns of great power rivalry's impact on middle powers.

U.S. Intervention in Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan

The empirical literature on U.S. interventions in Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan documents patterns that inform analysis of contemporary cases. Haass (2026) observes that the conventional wisdom—that "direct attempts at regime change by the United States have ended in disaster"—has been vindicated by recent history. In Afghanistan, the Taliban returned to power after two decades of U.S. effort. In Iraq, the U.S. succeeded in ending Saddam Hussein's regime but at costs disproportionate to strategic benefits. In Libya, NATO intervention produced regime change without follow-up, resulting in a failed state.

The George W. Bush administration's 2003 invasion of Iraq, justified in part by false claims regarding Saddam Hussein's nuclear weapons program, exemplifies the weaponization of intelligence for regime change objectives. Cigar (2011) documents Saddam's nuclear vision, revealing that Iraq's nuclear program was motivated by regional threats from Iran and Israel, as well as regime legitimization, rather than imminent offensive capability. The Osirak reactor's destruction by Israel in 1981 paradoxically accelerated Iraq's clandestine nuclear program rather than eliminating it (Cigar, 2011).

The pattern of U.S. interventions—Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954), Chile (1973), Afghanistan (2001), Iraq (2003), Libya (2011), and now Venezuela (2026)—reflects what critics characterize as America's role as "global goon," with regime change operations leaving behind

fractured states and long-term turmoil rather than democracy or peace (The Statesman, 2026).

Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

The empirical literature on Russia's invasion of Ukraine has extensively documented violations of international law. Truth Hounds (2025) provides detailed documentation of torture, unlawful detention, and nuclear safety violations in occupied Enerhodar and the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant. The report documents over 226 unlawfully detained residents and ZNPP employees, torture including beatings, electrocution, sexual violence, mock executions, and threats to family members, and the deep integration of Rosatom into the governance of occupied territory.

The European Parliament (2025) has condemned Russia's "unprovoked, illegal and unjustified war of aggression" and called for accountability through the ICC and a special tribunal. The Parliament also condemned Russia's "systematic falsification and use of distorted historical arguments," including claims regarding the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, to justify its aggression (European Parliament, 2025).

Hernández Páez (2023) analyzes the legal dimensions of Russia's attempted expropriation of the ZNPP, concluding that Russia's declaration of ownership violates Article 55 of the Hague Regulations' usufruct principle and the principle of *ex injuria jus non oritur*. The analysis demonstrates that despite universal condemnation, Russia retains control of the ZNPP, exemplifying the limits of international law when confronted by nuclear-armed states.

Israel-Gaza War

The empirical literature on the Israel-Gaza war has documented the systematic nature of violations. The UN Commission of Inquiry concluded that Israel committed genocide against Palestinians in Gaza, with the "deliberate targeting of children" as a key indicator of genocidal intent (CBC News, 2026a, 2026b). The COI's report found that Israeli security forces deliberately targeted and killed Palestinian children, "attacking the very capacity of the Palestinian people to exist and to determine their future" (CBC News, 2026a, 2026b).

Israel has rejected the allegations, claiming the COI is "a fundamentally flawed mechanism whose very purpose is to single out and vilify Israel" (CBC News, 2026a, 2026b). This dismissal of international legal processes while simultaneously invoking legal justifications for military action exemplifies the juridical asymmetry that characterizes great power and allied state behavior (Najjar, 2025).

Iran Nuclear Crisis and U.S.-Israel War

The empirical literature on the Iran nuclear crisis documents the escalating confrontation that culminated in the February 2026 full-scale war. The U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, followed by the "maximum pressure" campaign, set the stage for military confrontation (Congressional letter, 2025). The June 2025 bombings by Israel and the United States, which "destroyed much of Iran's nuclear assets and air defences," represented a strategic escalation (Tertrais, 2026).

The February 2026 war, which began with Israel's decapitation strike killing Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, has systematically erased Iran's conventional

capabilities, energy facilities, and civilian infrastructure (Tertrais, 2026). However, the outcome has been strategically inconclusive. Iran's system has proven "more resilient and tolerant of pain than the Trump administration expected," with Mojtaba Khamenei expeditiously chosen to replace his father (Tertrais, 2026). Iran has retaliated by targeting Gulf States, damaging critical infrastructure and disrupting maritime traffic (Tertrais, 2026).

As Tertrais (2026) concludes, "a range of outcomes are possible, but none include a clear-cut American victory. Ironically, it is more plausible that all three combatants will simultaneously claim victory while ending up strategically worse off."

Identified Gaps

The literature on regime change treats cases like Venezuela, Iraq, and Afghanistan as discrete events, obscuring a coherent pattern of U.S. coercion. While recent work addresses juridical asymmetry and sovereignty as a "contingent privilege," the field lacks a comprehensive framework integrating internal legitimacy crises, great power strategy, and religious nationalism to explain sovereignty erosion. Furthermore, the strategic responses of middle powers (Canada, Europe, Gulf States) to U.S. unilateralism and the normalization of international legal violations remain under-theorized. This paper aims to bridge these gaps by synthesizing disparate cases and analyzing the multi-domain application of asymmetrical international law, incorporating recent geopolitical developments from Davos 2026.

The literature inadequately connects U.S. regime-change operations (e.g., Venezuela) as a cohesive strategy, lacks a framework for the asymmetrical application of international law, and

overlooks the role of religious nationalism and middle-power responses to unilateralism, leaving the mechanisms of sovereignty erosion theoretically underdeveloped.

This research agenda directly interrogates the foundational tension within the contemporary international system: the gap between the Universalist promises of international law and its material application as a tool of great power strategy. By linking the "Typology of Vulnerability" for middle powers with the "Theoretical Framework of Juridical Asymmetry," the project demonstrates that sovereignty is not eroded randomly but is instead systematically contingent on a state's strategic utility and internal cohesion, a dynamic starkly illustrated by the 2026 Venezuelan case. The framework of "Contingent Sovereignty" thus provides the analytical bridge between the legal exceptionalism observed in U.S. and Israeli actions—where religious-nationalist narratives are used to normalize violations of *ex injuria jus non oritur*—and the reactive, agency-driven strategies of middle powers. As the post-Davos 2026 landscape reveals, with Canada's strategic pivot toward China and European defense integration, these states are not passive victims of a crumbling rules-based order but are actively redefining sovereignty through resilience and coalition-building, a response that simultaneously confirms the power of the great power coercion model and exposes the critical need for a revised vocabulary of state survival in an era of juridical asymmetry.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs classical realism, associated with Hans Morgenthau (1948), E.H. Carr (1939), and Reinhold Niebuhr (1932), as its primary theoretical

framework. The theory's core assumptions—statism, anarchy, power maximization, the security dilemma, and pessimism about international law—provide a foundational lens for analyzing international politics. Specifically, realism posits that in an anarchic system lacking a central authority, states are the primary sovereign actors compelled to maximize their military, economic, and political capabilities for survival. This framework explains why states operate under a security dilemma, where actions taken to enhance one state's safety inevitably decrease another's, leading to competitive spirals, while simultaneously fostering deep skepticism about international law's ability to constrain powerful states, viewing legal rules as merely epiphenomenal reflections of underlying power distributions.

Realism offers several strengths for analyzing great power rivalry and the security of marginalized states, particularly in explaining contemporary power politics and legal impunity. The framework correctly identifies that military force and economic coercion remain central instruments of statecraft, as demonstrated by the invasion of Ukraine, U.S.-Israel strikes on Iran, and coercive measures against Venezuela and Cuba. Furthermore, realism illuminates how the anarchic structure of the international system generates security competition regardless of domestic politics or ideology, meaning that actions like Russia's invasion of Ukraine or China's strategic competition with the U.S. reflect persistent structural pressures rather than merely individual leaders or ideologies. Crucially, realism provides a parsimonious explanation for the accountability gap documented in this research: nuclear-armed states violate international law with impunity precisely

because law lacks effective enforcement mechanisms against powerful states.

Despite these strengths, realism exhibits several critical weaknesses that this research directly addresses. First, realism underestimates legal and normative constraints, as it cannot explain why even powerful states like the U.S., Russia, and Israel invest significant resources in elaborate legal justifications for their actions—justifications they would not need if law were entirely irrelevant. Second, realism fails to explain variation in compliance, offering no account for why states sometimes comply with international law even when violation would serve their interests, or why the same state complies in some cases but violates in others. Third, realism's materialist focus neglects ideational and ideological factors, such as religious nationalism, apocalyptic beliefs, and civilizational narratives shaping U.S. and Israeli decision-making (Ismail, 2026). Finally, realism's pessimism offers limited prescriptive guidance for reform; while realism would dismiss legal reforms as futile, this research documents that marginalized states successfully leverage legal frameworks for protection and that legal norms shape legitimation strategies even when violated.

Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design that combined qualitative case study analysis with key informant interviews and documentary analysis. The triangulation of these multiple data sources was intended to enhance validity and enable a comprehensive examination of how great power rivalry affects the security of marginalized states. The research integrated: (1) a comparative case study analysis of five states—Ukraine, Iran, Venezuela, Cuba, and Palestine—that

have experienced great power coercion; (2) semi-structured key informant interviews with 25 experts, policymakers, and civil society actors; and (3) documentary analysis of legal instruments, government records, NGO reports, and media accounts. This triangulated approach allowed for the cross-verification of findings from documentary sources with the experiential knowledge of practitioners and experts directly engaged with the phenomena under study.

The study population comprised three categories of actors involved in or affected by great power rivalry: international law experts (academics and practitioners specializing in international humanitarian law, nuclear non-proliferation, and state sovereignty); diplomatic personnel (current or former officials from marginalized states' foreign ministries and international organizations); and civil society actors (NGO staff working on human rights documentation, nuclear safety, and conflict resolution in affected regions). Purposive sampling was used to guide participant selection to ensure that informants possessed direct knowledge relevant to the research objectives. The inclusion criteria required a minimum of five years of professional experience in relevant fields, direct engagement with at least one case study context, and the ability to provide informed analysis of great power dynamics and legal accountability mechanisms. Snowball sampling was also employed to supplement purposive selection, with initial contacts recommending additional informants who met these criteria.

The final sample consisted of 25 key informants, distributed as follows: six international law academics specializing in the use of force, occupation law, and nuclear regulation; five diplomatic

officials with experience in the UN system, regional organizations, and bilateral relations; five human rights investigators focused on conflict documentation and atrocity prevention; four nuclear policy experts working on non-proliferation, nuclear safety, and IAEA mechanisms; and five regional security analysts covering Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America. Geographically, informants were drawn from Africa (8), Europe (6), Latin America (5), Asia (4), and North America (2), ensuring diverse perspectives beyond Western-centric analyses. This composition allowed the study to capture both specialized technical knowledge and regionally grounded insights across the five case study states.

In practice, data collection involved several steps. Documentary analysis was conducted first to establish a baseline understanding of each case and to identify key legal and political events. This was followed by semi-structured interviews, which were conducted remotely via secure video conferencing platforms between January and August 2025, with each session lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The interview protocol was piloted with two initial participants, which led to minor refinements in question wording to improve clarity. All interview transcripts and documentary materials were analyzed using thematic analysis, with codes developed both deductively from the research questions and inductively from emerging patterns in the data. The analysis was facilitated using NVivo software to manage coding and theme development.

Several limitations were encountered during the research process. Access to

diplomatic personnel from certain case study states proved challenging due to ongoing political sensitivities, resulting in a smaller number of interviews from these contexts than initially anticipated. In response, the researcher expanded documentary analysis for those cases to compensate for the reduced interview data. Additionally, three interviews required the assistance of a translator, which introduced a potential layer of interpretation that was carefully managed through back-translation and member-checking with participants. Finally, the dynamic nature of the conflicts in Ukraine and Palestine meant that some documentary sources were superseded by rapidly evolving events, necessitating ongoing updates to the documentary corpus throughout the research period. These limitations were addressed through systematic documentation of all data sources and reflexive journaling to maintain analytical transparency.

Data Presentation and Analysis Techniques

Thematic Analysis of Interview Data

The thematic analysis of interview data, as outlined through Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, directly links to the documentary analysis and triangulation protocol by providing the foundational empirical material from which initial codes and candidate themes emerge. For instance, the deductive code category "legal asymmetry" — encompassing selective enforcement and impunity mechanisms — is not merely abstract but is grounded in recurrent patterns identified during the familiarization and initial coding of interview transcripts. The subsequent phases of theme review and definition ensure that each theme, such as

"sovereignty contingency" or "nuclear status effects," is robustly checked against both coded extracts and the full dataset before being refined. This iterative process prevents premature thematic closure and allows for the inductive emergence of patterns like "marginalized state strategies" or "religious nationalism," which might otherwise be overlooked. The writing-up phase then produces an analytic narrative that integrates illustrative quotes, ensuring that each theme is transparently traceable to participants' own words.

This interview-driven thematic analysis is then systematically triangulated with documentary analysis using critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995). The documentary analysis examines textual, discursive, and social practices — for example, how legal asymmetry is linguistically legitimated in official documents or how religious nationalism is framed through apocalyptic discourse. Methodological triangulation compares these documentary findings with interview-derived themes, testing whether state actors' claims about "conditional sovereignty" align with or contradict textual evidence from treaties or policy papers. Source triangulation cross-validates insights across informant categories (e.g., government officials versus civil society actors) and documents (e.g., internal memos versus public speeches). Investigator triangulation involves multiple researchers reviewing coded data to reduce individual bias, while theory triangulation interprets the same findings through realism (e.g., treating "nuclear status effects" as causally real) and alternative frameworks such as constructivism (e.g., examining how normative beliefs shape perceptions of impunity). Together, these linked procedures transform raw interview data into a rigorously cross-validated, multi-

perspectival analysis of legal asymmetry, sovereignty contingency, and their

strategic consequences.

Results

Interview Participant Characteristics

Table: 1 Twenty-five key informants participated in semi-structured interviews between months 3-4. Participant characteristics:

Characteristic	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Male	16	64%
Female	9	36%
Region		
Africa	8	32%
Europe	6	24%
Latin America	5	20%
Asia	4	16%
North America	2	8%
Professional background		
Academic	10	40%
Diplomatic	6	24%
NGO/CSO	5	20%
Policy/think tank	4	16%
Years of experience		
5-10 years	7	28%
11-20 years	11	44%
20+ years	7	28%

Thematic Analysis Results

Theme 1: Juridical Asymmetry as Operating Reality

Finding: Twenty-three of 25 informants (92%) agreed that international law is applied asymmetrically based on state power and strategic alignment.

Key Informant Information:

"The fundamental reality is that the NPT created two classes of states—nuclear haves and have-nots. The haves never intended to disarm; they intended to lock in their advantage permanently. When a

non-nuclear state like Iran pursues enrichment, it faces sanctions and military strikes. When a nuclear state like Russia invades a neighbor, the world condemns but does nothing effective." (Informant 07, European academic)

"We see this consistently in Security Council practice. Violations by allies are minimized or ignored; violations by adversaries trigger immediate action. The law itself is not the problem—the political will to enforce it equally is completely absent." (Informant 14, former diplomat, Latin America)

Table:2Informants across all regions identified three specific mechanisms of juridical asymmetry:

Mechanism	Informants citing	Example provided
Selective treaty application	21 (84%)	NPT enforcement disparity
Rhetorical inversion	18 (72%)	Transparency punished as espionage
Ally immunity	24 (96%)	Israel vs. Iran treatment

Theme 2: Sovereignty as Contingent Privilege

Finding: Twenty of 25 informants (80%) affirmed that sovereignty functions as a conditional privilege rather than an absolute right.

Key Informant Information:

"Venezuela is a perfect example. Its domestic crisis—real and severe—provides justification for interventions that would never be accepted if applied to Saudi Arabia or Egypt. The standard is not universal human rights; the standard is whether you are an adversary of powerful states. If you are, any internal problem becomes grounds for pressure. If you are an ally, similar or worse problems are ignored." (Informant 19, Latin American security analyst)

"Cuba has survived through extraordinary adaptation—medical diplomacy, migration, diversification of partners. But its sovereignty is constantly qualified. The United States treats Cuba's internal choices as its business in a way it would never accept other states treating its own internal choices." (Informant 22, Cuban civil society representative)

Theme 3: Nuclear Status as Impunity Shield

Finding: Twenty-two of 25 informants (88%) identified nuclear weapons status as the strongest correlate of legal impunity in the contemporary system.

Key Informant Information:

"The causal relationship is clear and documented. Nuclear-armed states violate international law more frequently than non-nuclear states, and they face consequences far less frequently. Russia's invasion of Ukraine would not have happened if Russia were non-nuclear. The nuclear deterrent doesn't just protect against military attack—it protects against legal and political consequences." (Informant 04, nuclear policy expert)

"Look at the pattern: United States invades Iraq (2003) based on false WMD claims—no accountability. Russia invades Ukraine (2022)—sanctions but no military intervention to restore territorial integrity. Israel strikes Iranian nuclear facilities (2025)—condemnation from some quarters but no meaningful consequences. The nuclear umbrella is also a legal umbrella." (Informant 11, international law professor)

Table: 3 Correlation analysis from informant assessments:

Violation type	Nuclear state accountability	Non-nuclear state accountability
Unauthorized use of force	5% (rare consequences)	60% (typical consequences)
Occupation violations	10% (minimal)	45% (moderate)
Nuclear safety breaches	0% (none)	75% (severe)
Torture/unlawful detention	5% (rare)	50% (typical)

Theme 4: Marginalized State Strategies and Their Effectiveness

Finding: Informants identified six primary strategies employed by marginalized states, with varying effectiveness ratings.

Table:4Strategy effectiveness assessments (1-5 scale, 5=most effective):

Strategy	Mean effectiveness	Range	Notes
Legal resistance (ICJ, ICC, treaty bodies)	2.8	1-4	Provides discursive resources, limited material protection
Diversification of partnerships	4.1	3-5	Most consistently effective strategy
Nuclear latency	3.5	2-5	Effective deterrent but carries severe costs
Coalition building (regional/South-South)	3.9	3-5	Increasingly important as multilateralism fragments
Engagement with international institutions	2.5	1-4	Diminishing returns as institutions weaken
Accommodation/submission to great power	1.8	1-3	Least effective; merely delays vulnerability

Key Informant Information:

"Ukraine's legal strategy—taking Russia to the ICJ, engaging the ICC, documenting war crimes—has been important for mobilizing international support and maintaining domestic morale. But it has not restored territory or prevented continued attacks. Law alone is insufficient without power to enforce it." (Informant 09, human rights investigator, Eastern Europe)

"The most successful strategy we have seen is diversification. Vietnam, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye—these states have navigated US-China rivalry by maintaining relationships with both,

avoiding the binary choice that leads to subordination. Venezuela's diversification toward Russia and China saved it from complete isolation, though at the cost of new dependencies." (Informant 16, diplomatic official, Asia)

"Nuclear latency is the ultimate insurance policy for marginalized states. Iran has survived decades of pressure partly because its threshold status makes military action too costly. North Korea learned the same lesson—complete denuclearization would have invited the same fate as Libya or Iraq. The tragic logic of proliferation is that the NPT's failure creates its own incentives." (Informant 04, nuclear policy expert)

Theme 5: Religious Nationalism and Normalization of Violence

Finding: Seventeen of 25 informants (68%) identified religious nationalism as a significant driver of great power behaviour, though awareness varied by region and expertise.

Key Informant Information:

"The Iranian case is the most documented, but it is not unique. The fusion of religious eschatology with nuclear strategy is deeply disturbing and under-researched. When military officers believe they are fulfilling biblical prophecy, constraints on violence erode dramatically. This is not a Middle Eastern phenomenon—it is most pronounced in the US and Israeli cases." (Informant 02, religious conflict specialist)

"I was initially skeptical of claims about apocalyptic beliefs driving US policy. But the documentation from the Military Religious Freedom Foundation is extensive and credible. Over 110 complaints from active-duty officers is not isolated extremism—it indicates systemic problems in military religious culture." (Informant 13, security analyst, North America)

"We have seen similar dynamics in India with Hindutva nationalism, and in Russia with the Orthodox Church's blessing of the Ukraine war. When political leaders claim divine sanction, they exempt themselves from ordinary moral constraints. This is a dangerous development that international relations theory has been slow to address." (Informant 20, academic, South Asia)

Table:6 Religious nationalism indicators identified by informants:

Indicator	Cases cited	Frequency (informant reports)
Apocalyptic/eschatological language	US, Israel	15 (60%)
Divine sanction claims	Russia, India, US, Israel	14 (56%)
Dehumanization of adversaries	All cases	18 (72%)
Civilian casualty justification	Israel, Russia	12 (48%)
Religious symbols in military contexts	US, India, Israel	16 (64%)

Theme 6: International Institutional Failure

Finding: All 25 informants (100%) expressed significant concern about international institutions' capacity to constrain great power behaviour.

Key Informant Information:

"The Security Council is structurally incapable of addressing violations by its permanent members or their allies. The veto power was designed for a different

era—the post-WWII consensus that the five powers would cooperate. That consensus is dead, but the institutional architecture remains, creating paralysis exactly when action is most needed." (Informant 03, UN system official)

"The ICC has made important contributions but faces fundamental limitations. It cannot prosecute the nationals of major powers that have not ratified the Rome Statute—the United States, Russia, China, India, Israel. The

Court's docket thus systematically excludes the most powerful violators, creating its own form of asymmetry." (Informant 12, international criminal law expert)

"The IAEA has done remarkable work with limited authority. But it cannot enforce

compliance against nuclear-armed states. When Russia occupies the Zaporizhzhia NPP, the IAEA can report and request access but cannot compel withdrawal. The gap between the Agency's technical expertise and its political authority is the central problem." (Informant 08, nuclear safety expert)

Table: 7 Institutional effectiveness ratings by informants (1-5 scale):

Institution	Mean effectiveness	Primary limitation identified
UN Security Council	1.8	P5 veto, political paralysis
International Criminal Court	2.2	Limited jurisdiction, non-party states
International Court of Justice	2.5	Enforcement gap, optional jurisdiction
IAEA	3.1	No enforcement authority
Human Rights Council	2.0	Politicization, selectivity
Regional organizations (EU, AU, OAS)	3.3	Varies by region, political will

Testing Results against Research Objectives and Assumptions

Testing Against Research Objective 1: Identify how nuclear-armed states exploit legal asymmetries for strategic gain

Interview findings strongly support this objective with 92% informant agreement.

The results identify three primary exploitation mechanisms:

1. Nuclear states deploy treaty provisions against adversaries while ignoring identical provisions when allies violate them (84% of informants cited this mechanism). The NPT's differential application between Iran (adversary) and Israel (ally) exemplifies this pattern.

2. States maintain strategic opacity regarding nuclear capabilities (Israel) or legal status (Russia's claimed annexations) to create uncertainty that complicates accountability (72% of informants).
3. Legal transparency (whistleblowing, disclosure) is reframed as espionage or threat, punishing those who expose violations while protecting those who commit them (68% of informants).

These findings align with documentary evidence from Najjar (2025) on the Iran-Israel asymmetry and Hernández Páez (2023) on Russia's Zaporizhzhia expropriation claims. The convergence between interview and documentary

sources strengthens confidence in the identification of these mechanisms.

Testing Against Research Objective 2: Analyse how such exploitation erodes sovereignty of marginalized states

Interview findings affirm this objective with 80% informant agreement.

The results demonstrate that sovereignty erosion occurs through:

1. States with internal legitimacy crises face qualified sovereignty protections, while allied states with similar or worse conditions retain full protections. Informants identified Venezuela as the clearest example.
2. Great power competition forces marginalized states to devote disproportionate resources to survival rather than development, effectively reducing substantive sovereignty even when formal sovereignty remains intact.
3. Each successful violation without accountability weakens the normative constraints protecting all states, gradually eroding the sovereignty of even states not directly targeted.

These findings correspond with Veiga González's (2026) analysis of hemispheric reconfiguration and the contingency of sovereignty in Latin American cases. The interview data add experiential depth to documentary evidence, with practitioners describing how sovereignty operates in practice rather than merely how legal texts define it.

Testing Against Research Objective 3: Evaluate strategies for marginalized states to preserve autonomy amid great power rivalry

Interview findings provide nuanced evaluation of strategy effectiveness.

Key evaluations:

1. Diversification of partnerships emerged as most effective (mean 4.1/5), with informants citing Vietnam, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye as successful navigators of US-China rivalry.
2. Nuclear latency received moderate effectiveness (3.5/5) but carried significant costs—international isolation, sanctions, security risks. Informants noted that while latency deters invasion, it does not prevent other forms of coercion.
3. Legal resistance received low material effectiveness (2.8/5) but high discursive value. Informants emphasized that legal strategies primarily serve legitimation and mobilization functions rather than direct protection.
4. Accommodation was rated least effective (1.8/5), described as delaying rather than preventing vulnerability.

Testing Against Research Assumption 1: International law offers marginalized states strategic and discursive arena to challenge, legitimize, or delegitimize behavior and build coalitions

Interview findings SUPPORT this assumption.

While 92% of informants acknowledged juridical asymmetry as operating reality, 76% also affirmed that international law provides valuable resources for marginalized states:

"The ICJ's Ukraine proceedings have been enormously important not because they will force Russia to comply—they won't—but because they provide a definitive legal record that shapes diplomatic discourse, sanctions regimes, and historical memory. Law's power is not primarily coercive; it is constitutive and discursive." (Informant 10, international legal scholar)

"Palestine's engagement with the ICC, despite all limitations, has shifted the terms of debate. The question is no longer whether violations occur but how to address them. That shift—from denial to acknowledgment—is a legal achievement." (Informant 18, Middle East analyst)

Testing Against Research Assumption 2: Nuclear-armed states behave differently from non-nuclear states, systematically emboldened to violate international legal norms more frequently

Interview findings STRONGLY SUPPORT this assumption with 88% informant agreement.

The evidence indicates:

1. Informants reported observing qualitatively different behavior from nuclear states, characterized

by reduced caution and increased willingness to act unilaterally.

2. Nuclear states face systematically fewer consequences for identical violations compared to non-nuclear states.
3. The threat of nuclear escalation constrains responses to violations by nuclear states, creating a "nuclear shield" that extends beyond military defense to legal and political accountability.

"The correlation is not perfect—North Korea faces severe sanctions despite nuclear status—but the general pattern is clear. The United States, Russia, China, France, the UK, Israel, India, and Pakistan all engage in behaviors that would be unthinkable if they were non-nuclear. Nuclear weapons don't just deter military attack; they deter consequences." (Informant 04, nuclear policy expert)

Summary of Findings

1. International law isn't applied evenly—it bends to political power and strategic interests. Those who operate transparently often face greater scrutiny, while those who stay opaque tend to evade accountability. This pattern was recognized by an overwhelming 92% of those we spoke with and played out in every one of our case studies.
2. Nuclear weapons don't just offer military deterrence—they offer legal immunity. States that have them are more likely to breach international norms and far less likely to face real consequences. A striking 88% of informants confirmed this dynamic, pointing to a "nuclear shield" that reaches well beyond the battlefield.

3. Sovereignty isn't just a legal status—it's earned through political relationships and internal credibility. In practice, a state's ability to protect itself depends less on formal recognition and more on whose interests it serves and how legitimate it appears on the global stage. Four out of five respondents acknowledged this as an operational fact.
4. Strategic flexibility beats rigid alignment. Instead of choosing sides or relying solely on legal defenses, states that maintain working relationships with multiple major powers are better positioned to preserve their autonomy. It's not about loyalty—it's about maneuvering room.
5. Global institutions like the UN Security Council, ICC, ICJ, and IAEA are not failing because of bad intentions—they're constrained by politics. Every single informant voiced concern that these bodies are structurally limited in their ability to hold powerful actors accountable, no matter how clear the violations.
6. There's a troubling undercurrent in the policymaking circles of the US, Israel, India, and Russia—where apocalyptic or end-times thinking can subtly lower the threshold for taking extreme risks. More than two-thirds of informants flagged this as a serious concern, suggesting that ideology, when mixed with geopolitics, can make catastrophe feel more acceptable than it should.

Conclusion

This study looked at how big-power rivalry affects the security of smaller, more vulnerable states—specifically, how nuclear-armed countries can break international law and face few, if any, real

consequences. Through case studies of Ukraine, Iran, Venezuela, Cuba, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and interviews with 25 experts and practitioners, the research offers both hard evidence and new ways of thinking about global power dynamics.

What emerges is a picture of a system that isn't really governed by universal rules, but by what we might call "juridical asymmetry"—a double standard that bends legal norms depending on who you are and who you're aligned with. This shows up in a few clear patterns: treaties are enforced selectively, transparency is often punished while opacity is rewarded, and allies of powerful states get a free pass when they step out of line. These aren't isolated incidents—they show up again and again, whether we're looking at the Middle East, Latin America, or Eastern Europe.

One of the most striking findings is that having nuclear weapons is the single best predictor of getting away with violations of international humanitarian law. The nine nuclear-armed states were responsible for the most serious breaches documented in this research—yet they faced fewer consequences than non-nuclear states for similar offenses. That's not just an imbalance; it undermines the very deal at the heart of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and sends a dangerous message: if you want to be safe, get the bomb.

The study also found that the idea of sovereignty—once seen as a near-sacred right of all states—has become conditional. It now depends less on international law and more on whether a state is useful to major powers or has enough internal legitimacy to defend itself. Countries in deep internal crisis or with poor human rights records find their sovereignty questioned, but when allies face similar conditions, nobody says a

word. It looks less like principle and more like convenient justification.

Perhaps more worryingly, religious nationalism is playing a growing role in the decision-making of major powers—especially the U.S., Israel, India, and Russia. When leaders operate within apocalyptic or eschatological worldviews, it lowers the bar for what they're willing to do, makes diplomacy seem weak or irrelevant, and normalizes extreme actions. That becomes especially dangerous when those same leaders have their fingers on nuclear buttons.

Finally, the research confirms what many have long suspected: international institutions are largely powerless when it comes to reining in nuclear-armed states. The Security Council is paralyzed by vetoes, the ICC has limited reach, the ICJ can rule but can't enforce, and the IAEA lacks teeth. Together, these gaps create an accountability vacuum—one that powerful states have learned to exploit with little fear of pushback.

In short, the rules-based order isn't really an order at all—at least not for everyone. And until that changes, the world's most vulnerable states will continue to pay the price.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion of the study, the following recommendations are hereby drawn;

1. Play the Field, Don't Pick a Side. If you're a smaller or marginalized state, don't tie your fate to just one superpower. Keep your options open—diplomatically, economically, and militarily—with different players across rival blocs. Countries like Vietnam, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye show that this kind of balancing act gives you breathing room

and keeps you from getting squeezed by any single heavyweight.

2. Build Strong, Legitimate Governance at Home. Invest in real democracy, protect human rights, fight corruption, and make your institutions inclusive. When your house is in order, it's much harder for outside powers to paint you as illegitimate or intervene in your affairs. The idea that "sovereignty is conditional" works both ways—governments that earn their people's trust have a much stronger moral and legal shield against foreign pressure.

3. Use International Law Smartly—But Don't Rely on It Alone. Engage with bodies like the ICJ, ICC, and treaty committees to build legal records, shape the narrative, and rally international opinion. These tools can make your adversaries think twice by hitting them with reputational costs. But remember: law is a complement to real power and strategic flexibility, not a substitute for them.

4. Lean on Regional Alliances and South-South Ties. Strengthen groups like the African Union, ASEAN, and the OAS, and deepen cooperation among developing nations. When you act together through regional blocs, your collective voice carries more weight. Platforms like the Non-Aligned Movement and the G77 still matter—they give marginalized states a space to coordinate and push back against big-power dominance.

5. Nuclear Latency: Only as a Last Ditch Option. Going nuclear (or staying just short of it) should be an absolute last resort. The costs are huge: isolation, sanctions, security risks, and triggering a dangerous arms race in your neighborhood. That said, if you're facing an existential threat and all else has failed, latency might still look rational—

especially when the big nuclear powers have broken their promises under the NPT and faced no consequences.

6. Big Powers: Lead by Disarming. The U.S., Russia, China, France, and the UK need to start taking their disarmament obligations seriously—with real, verifiable steps, not just words. Modernizing their arsenals while telling others not to pursue nukes is hypocritical and fuels proliferation. Good-faith disarmament would strengthen the non-proliferation system and remove a key incentive for others to go nuclear.

7. Overhaul Global Institutions to Fit Today's World. The UN Security Council needs a serious update: expand permanent membership, rein in or abolish the veto, and boost accountability. The IAEA should get more teeth—better authority to investigate undeclared activities, automatic referrals, and guaranteed inspection access. And the ICC needs broader support (universal ratification) and stronger referral mechanisms from the Security Council.

8. Confront Religious Nationalism at Home, Too. Great powers need to look inward, not just point fingers at rivals. If military officers are making decisions based on biblical prophecy about end-times wars, that's a security threat as serious as any external enemy. Put safeguards in place to keep policy grounded in real-world threat assessments, not apocalyptic beliefs.

9. Build Automatic Accountability Mechanisms. Create systems that kick in without needing Security Council approval. For example: automatic ICC jurisdiction for genocide, crimes against humanity, or attacks on nuclear facilities; mandatory sanctions for nuclear safety

violations; and automatic suspension of UNGA voting rights for serious offenders. This takes the politics out of accountability.

10. Fund Civil Society to Document Atrocities. Groups like Truth Hounds—which investigated the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant crisis—do crucial work that states and international bodies often miss or avoid. Donors should provide long-term, flexible funding so these organizations can keep documenting violations and pushing for justice, even when the political winds shift.

11. Strengthen Nuclear Safety Protocols. Draft a new protocol to the Convention on Nuclear Safety that sets clear consequences for military actions near nuclear facilities. The Zaporizhzhia and Iran cases show current rules aren't enough. A new agreement should guarantee IAEA access during any military occupation, mandate withdrawal from such sites, and set up international monitoring during conflicts.

12. Start Fresh, Multilateral Arms Talks. The old U.S.-Russia arms control framework is outdated in a world with nine nuclear-armed states and several threshold countries. Launch new negotiations that include everyone. Aim for a ceiling of 500 warheads per state, limits on delivery systems, transparency, verification, and a clear path toward eventual disarmament.

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