

The international order, Russia and the rules based system

We constantly hear these days that there is a rules based international order which all decent states follow. Russia is condemned for not following these same rules.

Those who think like this usually divide the world up into a majority of states who follow these rules, and a minority of rogue states like North Korea who pose problems for the rest. When it is one of the world's larger military powers who has greater diplomatic reach, some world support and a seat on the UN Security Council that does not follow the world order this analysis has its limitations.

I am no apologist for Russia, and understand the ruthless pursuit of Russian interests by that state can lead to unacceptable conduct. I condemn atrocities and illegal acts whichever state carries them out when they are reported and proved.

The truth is there is no one set of rules, no single world order that is codified in many areas of government activity which every state should obey. Within NATO and the advanced west there are varying rules of law. The USA has its own set of laws and legal constraints on the actions of its President and senior officials. The EU has another set of laws and legal requirements on its member states. The EU will not accept all the US rules, and will certainly not accept US jurisdiction, nor will the USA of course accept EU rules and control.

The West does come together in some world bodies and helps shape a global approach. There are world trade rules supervised by the WTO which all members accept, though the USA currently feels those rules are not fairly administered with regards to China and Germany. There are important conventions on nuclear and chemical weapons which most countries have signed. North Korea becoming a nuclear power and alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria causes problems under these global rules. As the current disputes reveal, the countries accused of breaking world rules often argue they have not. China and Germany pose as supporters of a world free trade order, whilst the USA cites evidence that they are not. The West rightly condemns chemical attacks in Syria, only to be told by Russia that no such attack has happened.

The main countries and blocs appeal to world rules when it suits them, and seek to interpret them in directions which fit with their national interests. Russia clearly plays by different rules to the West in several respects. In Syria it will accept more deaths as the regime seeks to restore its control over the country, as Russia judges an Assad government to be the least bad outcome. The West is against both ISIS and Assad, but lacks the power and commitment to enforce a different government on that country, whilst condemning the many deaths the current civil war is causing.

Those who protest most about the need to create and follow a rules based system need to be punctilious themselves to obey it. Any Western military intervention in Syria today will need a legal base, made more difficult by Russia's veto of any UN Resolution which could directly support action. The UN is a world body which comes closest to providing a rules based system for the conduct of diplomacy and where unavoidable to regulate the use of force between states. That body cannot have a clear single view or straightforward rule where the Security Council is divided and where a veto has been wielded.