

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Ukraine and the Geopolitics of Legitimacy

<https://www.e-ir.info/2025/05/17/ukraine-and-the-geopolitics-of-legitimacy/>

KONSTANTINA D. OIKONOMOU, MAY 17 2025

The war in Ukraine has emerged as a focal point in the accelerating disintegration of the post-1945 international order. Far beyond a regional conflict, the war crystallises an intensifying tension between the normative architecture of international law and the strategic imperatives of global hegemony. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine — a manifest violation of the prohibition of the use of force and a breach of peremptory legal norms — marked a watershed moment in the erosion of normative constraint in international relations. As peace proposals are negotiated without the substantive participation of Ukraine, and as legal principles are selectively invoked or ignored, a critical question arises: does international law still possess the normative force to constrain power, or has it been reduced to a vocabulary of legitimisation for the geopolitics of the strong?

Ukraine has become a paradigmatic illustration of how legal norms are increasingly instrumentalised within a shifting landscape of geopolitical realignment. What is frequently framed as a “crisis” in the international legal order is perhaps more accurately conceived not as a temporary breakdown or exceptional deviation from normative stability, but as a manifestation of enduring structural tensions at the heart of global governance — tensions between legality and strategic interest, formal commitments and uneven enforcement, the universalist promise of international norms and the asymmetries through which they are enacted. The language of crisis, often deployed to suggest a return to a prior normativity, obscures the deeper tensions within international rule of law: its simultaneous claim to universality and its subjection to asymmetrical power structures, its emancipatory aspirations and its use as a tool of justification for dominant interests. What is at stake is not merely the resolution of a particular conflict, but the viability of international legality as a mode of ordering power in a world increasingly defined by fragmentation.

This structural fragility becomes particularly evident in the case of Ukraine, where foundational principles of the post-war legal order—most notably the prohibition of the threat or use of force—have been strategically reinterpreted. Codified in Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter, this prohibition constitutes a peremptory norm universally recognised as binding and non-derogable. It was unequivocally violated by Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its full-scale invasion in 2022, marking a direct challenge to the normative integrity of the Charter and the institutional foundations of the international order.

Despite this, recent diplomatic initiatives — most notably a U.S.-proposed peace roadmap recognising de facto Russian control over occupied territories and offering only vague assurances of Ukrainian sovereignty — suggest a growing international willingness to set aside these fundamental principles in favour of geopolitical expediency. Such developments confirm a longstanding critique: international law tends to oscillate between a legitimising tool for state interest and a normative ideal devoid of material enforcement. In Ukraine, this oscillation has collapsed into the predominance of apology: legal frameworks are invoked rhetorically, but power dictates outcomes. Law is no longer a constraint on political will but a flexible vocabulary used to accommodate it.

The phenomenon exemplifies the propensity of international norms to function in a selectively operative manner, thereby entrenching—rather than constraining—prevalent asymmetries of power within the global order. In this context, the principle of non-recognition — a cornerstone of the post-World War II legal settlement — is dangerously undermined. The consistent refusal to recognise territorial acquisitions by force constitutes a fundamental mechanism for preserving international order. Its abandonment in Ukraine would signal a precedent with implications far beyond Eastern Europe.

Ukraine and the Geopolitics of Legitimacy

Written by Konstantina D. Oikonomou

Understanding the implications of this normative slippage requires situating Ukraine within the broader structural dynamics of global hierarchy and selective inclusion in the international system. Ukraine's current predicament, reflected in both its operational dependence on international assistance and the material toll of the war, exemplifies the contradictory position of semi-peripheral states in the international system. Simultaneously included and marginalised, these states are granted selective access to global governance structures while being denied full agency in shaping outcomes that affect them. Institutions of global governance frequently serve to reinforce hegemonic configurations of power, reproducing core-periphery dynamics that render sovereignty not an autonomous legal status, but a condition contingent on alignment with prevailing geopolitical and economic orders.

This structural entrapment is not merely a reflection of imbalanced power relations, but a manifestation of what critical international theory identifies as the embedded asymmetry of the liberal international order — an order that purports universality while functionally reproducing hierarchy. In Ukraine's case, this materialises in two mutually reinforcing forms: strategic dependence on Western security guarantees, and political instrumentalisation within larger geopolitical bargains. The result is the subordination of Ukrainian agency to the calculus of great powers, whereby legal entitlements — such as territorial integrity and the right to self-defence — are treated not as inviolable norms but as negotiable assets.

This dynamic of conditional inclusion is further reproduced in regional security architectures. Ukraine's marginalisation reflects a broader systemic pattern, wherein regional actors are embedded within security constellations that both enable and constrain them — what Buzan and Wæver have termed 'regional security complexes' shaped by external authority. Concurrently, the construction and deployment of international norms systematically exclude peripheral voices, integrating them into a normative structure that privileges conformity over contestation. Norm production, in this light, becomes less a site of deliberation and more a vehicle of epistemic closure.

Within this framework, the United Nations Security Council emerges as an institutional mechanism deeply imbricated in the maintenance of geopolitical equilibrium. Resolution 2774, adopted in March 2025, calls for a cessation of hostilities without explicitly identifying Russia as the aggressor or affirming Ukraine's sovereign rights. By adopting equidistant language that places Ukrainian self-defence and Russian aggression on the same normative plane, the resolution not only obfuscates the asymmetry of the conflict but also renders legal principles subservient to diplomatic convenience. Such rhetorical flattening undermines the principled consistency of the UN Charter and empties its provisions of normative force. In this context, the right to resist unlawful aggression becomes vulnerable to relativisation, and the prohibition on the use of force is reframed as an issue of narrative balance rather than legal obligation. What is at stake is not simply interpretative ambiguity, but the erosion of the boundary between legitimate resistance and imperial imposition.

The Security Council's posture must thus be read as a symptomatic expression of a broader crisis in multilateralism — one in which institutional legitimacy is subordinated to the imperatives of power management. The appearance of neutrality, far from de-escalating the conflict, operates as a technique of governance that deflects responsibility and consolidates impunity. It serves to suspend normative judgment in favour of political containment, thereby facilitating the incremental normalisation of unlawful violence.

This institutional tendency to accommodate coercion rather than confront it has direct implications for how peace is negotiated. Efforts to impose a peace settlement under conditions of coercion risk producing not only unstable outcomes, but also further eroding the normative foundations of global order. The question of post-war settlement must therefore be approached not simply in terms of cessation of hostilities, but in relation to the normative conditions under which peace becomes legally and politically sustainable. An agreement that entrenches territorial conquest by coercion would erode the foundational principle of sovereign equality and recalibrate the threshold for what constitutes acceptable international behaviour. Such outcomes, far from representing stability, institutionalise impunity and signal to future aggressors the malleability of institutional constraints.

This evolving pattern of selective enforcement and institutional ambivalence underscores the erosion of Ukraine's rights and reveals the fragility of the claim to universality that underpins the international political order. When norm

Ukraine and the Geopolitics of Legitimacy

Written by Konstantina D. Oikonomou

application becomes contingent on geopolitical alignment, norms cease to function as an impartial constraint and become a tool of conditional enforcement. The result is a stratified regime wherein the capacity to invoke, interpret, and enforce international law is unevenly distributed. In this context, Ukraine becomes not only the site of geopolitical rupture, but a diagnostic locus through which the structural contradictions of international legality are laid bare. The war exposes the limits of the liberal international order's normative architecture and compels a reconsideration of its foundational assumptions. The task is not to reclaim a lost purity, but to interrogate the conditions under which law might function as an emancipatory structure, rather than as a managerial technique of hegemony.

To this end, the defence of Ukraine must be decoupled from abstract idealism and reframed as a test case for the viability of international law as a mode of constraint on power. The international order's institutional credibility depends not on rhetorical commitments to peace, but on its ability to function as a site of contestation, accountability, and normative regeneration. Reasserting the centrality of legality in international relations requires confronting international law's limitations — not to abandon it, but to reimagine the international political and legal architecture in light of the demands of global justice and historical responsibility.

About the author:

Konstantina D. Oikonomou is an Adjunct Lecturer and Research Fellow in International Relations and International Law at the Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of the Peloponnese, Greece. Her research focuses on the intersections of international relations and international law.