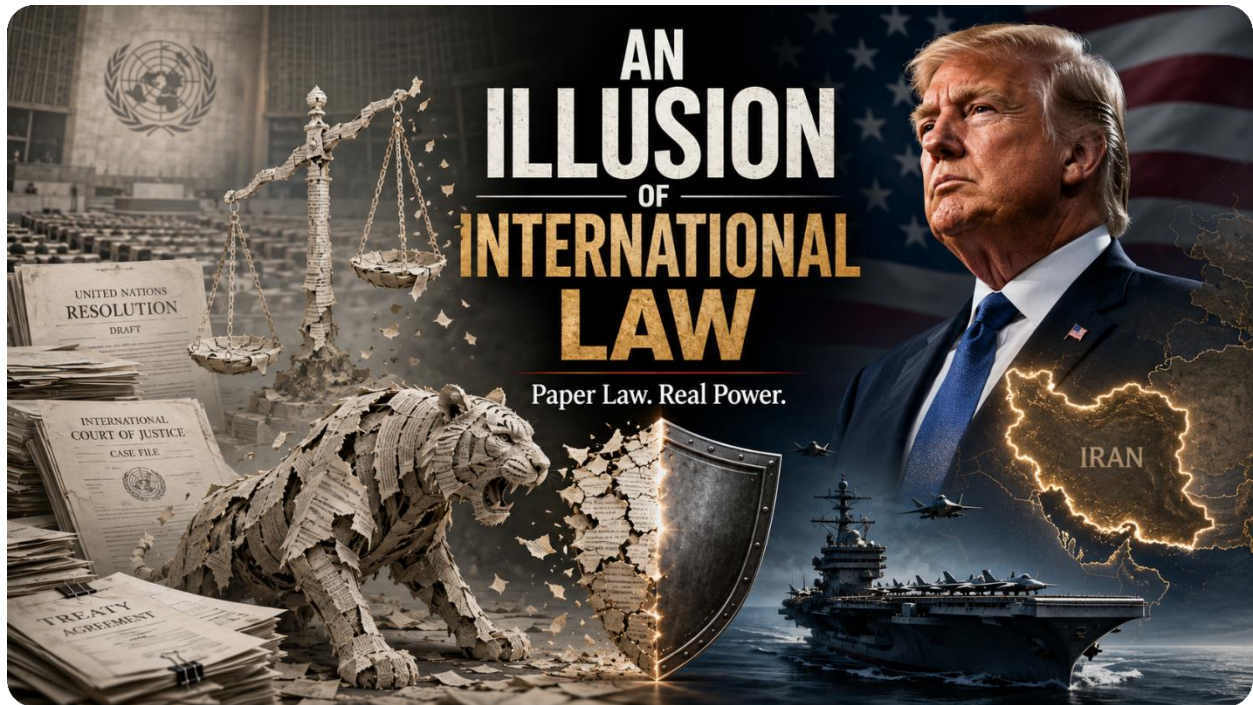




An Illusion of International Law

Law Without Power, Power Without Law, and the Iranian Lesson

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Uncompressed Thinking

I began thinking about international law from a question that sounds almost too crude for polite discussion: when was the last time international law actually worked as law?

Not as a speech. Not as a resolution. Not as a panel discussion, a prosecutor's announcement, a moral condemnation, or a carefully phrased diplomatic statement. Those things may be useful, and sometimes they are necessary. But they are not quite law in the way ordinary people understand law.

In ordinary life, law has a physical shadow. We may not see it every day, and civilized people prefer not to think about it too much, but it is always there. Behind the printed rule stands the policeman. Behind the judge stands the court officer. Behind the sentence stands the prison. Behind the idea that one may not steal, kill, rape, invade, or terrorize stands the practical knowledge that, at some point, someone may arrive with authority, take the violator by the arm, and remove him from freedom.

That is why domestic law is not merely advice. It is not a philosophical suggestion. It is not a beautiful sentence mounted on the wall. It is morality connected to consequence.

International law has the morality. It has the language. It has the documents. It has courts, conventions, charters, prosecutors, committees, mandates, rapporteurs, investigations, sanctions, and resolutions. It has a rich vocabulary: aggression, genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, proportionality, jurisdiction, accountability, compliance, noncompliance, occupation, sovereignty, collective security.

But when the question becomes practical — who arrests the guilty man, who stops the missile, who frees the hostage, who disarms the regime, who makes the aggressor pay — the grand architecture suddenly becomes much quieter. The polished table is still there. The microphones are still there. The translators are still there. The expressions of grave concern are still there. But the policeman is often missing.

That absence is the beginning of the illusion.

This does not mean international law is worthless. That would be too easy, and also untrue. International law can preserve memory. It can record crimes. It can help victims be believed. It can give future courts a record to use if power later changes hands. It can make the language of civilization available when barbarism tries to rename itself as necessity. It can remind the world that there are still standards, even when those standards are being violated.

But recording evil is not the same as stopping evil. Naming a crime is not the same as interrupting it. A resolution does not make a missile turn around in the sky. A warrant does not open the bunker door by itself. A statement of condemnation does not release a hostage from a tunnel. A dictator does not step voluntarily into The Hague because a document was written with legal precision.

Evil may dislike condemnation, but it fears consequence. This is where the dream of international law repeatedly meets the hard ground.

Nuremberg is remembered as a triumph of international law, and in an important sense it was. It established the principle that state power does not immunize mass murder. It rejected the excuse that a crime becomes innocent because a government ordered it. It gave legal form to the moral horror of the Nazi project. But Nuremberg also teaches something that is often forgotten: it came after military victory.

Nazi Germany was not persuaded into the courtroom by international legal reasoning. It was defeated, occupied, disarmed, and broken. The court followed the army. The judgment followed the surrender. The gallows followed the battlefield. This does not diminish Nuremberg. It clarifies it. It reminds us that international law did not float above power like an angel. It rode on the back of power, and only then did it become visible as law.

That is the uncomfortable equation. Law without power becomes theater; power without law becomes tyranny. The two need each other. Law needs power because otherwise it cannot enforce itself. Power needs law because otherwise it becomes only appetite, domination, and revenge. The tragedy of our time is that we often speak as if the first half of the equation can be ignored. We talk as if legal language itself can produce safety, as if enforcement were an unpleasant technical detail, as if the right moral vocabulary were already a form of action.

It is not.

This is why sanctions have become the modern substitute for the absent international policeman. If no one is going to arrest the dictator, if no world sheriff exists, if no army of civilization is going to march into the palace and remove the aggressor, then perhaps bank accounts can be frozen, ships delayed, weapons restricted, officials denied travel, oil limited, technology withheld, and companies penalized for doing business with the wrong people.

Sanctions can matter. They can make violence more expensive. They can slow a weapons program. They can complicate supply chains. They can divide elites. They can give negotiators leverage without immediately turning pressure into war. A serious world cannot dismiss them.

But sanctions are not justice. They are pressure. And pressure is often messy, corruptible, leaky, and morally imperfect. Goods move through intermediaries. Money finds side doors. Black markets grow. Friendly states provide cover. Regimes shift pain onto their own populations and then blame the outside world for the suffering. The innocent may feel the cost before the guilty feel fear. In the worst cases, sanctions become a performance of seriousness rather than seriousness itself: a way for civilized governments to say, "We did something," while the machinery of violence continues to operate.

A sanction says, "We disapprove, and we will make this more difficult for you." Real law says, "You will be stopped."

The distance between those two sentences is the distance between international law as aspiration and international law as power.

Iran exposes that distance with unusual clarity. For decades, the Iranian question has lived inside the full vocabulary of international legality: nuclear obligations, inspection regimes, enrichment limits, sanctions, Security Council debates, human rights concerns, maritime security, terrorism designations, proxy warfare, diplomatic frameworks, and repeated warnings about escalation. The words have never been missing. The serious faces have never been missing. The reports, deadlines, formulas, and frameworks have never been missing.

And yet the practical question has always been much simpler: what changes behavior? What makes a regime calculate differently? What makes the next step too expensive? What makes negotiation preferable to escalation? What makes the leadership believe that continuing on the same path will cost more than changing course?

That question is not answered by legal language alone. It is answered by leverage. Sometimes the leverage is economic. Sometimes military. Sometimes diplomatic. Sometimes psychological. Sometimes it is the pressure of allies, the fear of isolation, the threat of force, or the promise that sanctions can be lifted if the dangerous behavior stops. Sometimes it is not the blow itself, but the credible uncertainty that the blow may come.

This is where Mr. Trump becomes difficult to discuss and impossible to avoid.

I do not want this essay to become a political argument about Mr. Trump. That would be too small for the subject. The subject is not one man, one administration, one election, or one party. The subject is the gap between paper law and enforceable order. But the current Iran situation makes the Trump method impossible to ignore, because it reveals something that polite observers often miss: leaders do not speak only to their friends, their voters, journalists, diplomats, or law professors. They also speak to adversaries. And sometimes, to be understood by an adversary, a leader must speak in the adversary's language.

This is not a pleasant thought. We prefer civilized leaders to speak only in civilized language. We want consistency, clarity, decorum, and well-lit sentences. We want international affairs to resemble a courtroom, where the rules are known, the parties behave, and the judge eventually restores order. But the world is often not a courtroom. Sometimes it is a bazaar, sometimes a poker table, sometimes a hostage negotiation, sometimes a street corner at night where the other man is watching not your words but your hands.

A regime built on denial, intimidation, concealment, proxy violence, and strategic bargaining does not necessarily fear transparent legal grammar. It understands condemnations. It has heard them before. It understands deadlines. It has outwaited them before. It understands negotiations. It has stretched them before. It understands the civilized desire to avoid escalation, and it may even use that desire as one more instrument of pressure.

Such a regime may understand something else more immediately: ambiguity, leverage, face-saving exits, sudden pressure, and the possibility that the other side may not behave according to the familiar script.

This may be one reason Mr. Trump is so difficult for many observers to read. To some, he looks reckless when he threatens force. To others, he looks weak when he negotiates. To some, he looks inconsistent when he praises one day and attacks the next. To others, he looks unserious because he does not speak in the polished grammar of the international establishment. He is criticized from both sides of the political spectrum because each side often isolates one fragment of the performance and mistakes that fragment for the whole.

But perhaps the confusion is not only an accident. Perhaps, at times, it is part of the instrument.

A predictable diplomacy can be priced. An adversary can calculate the next communiqué, the next meeting, the next deadline, the next extension, the next expression of concern. A

predictable system can be manipulated because everyone knows where the corners are. A predictable threat can be discounted. A predictable negotiator can be delayed.

Unpredictability, when backed by real power, is harder to price.

This must be said carefully, because unpredictability by itself is not wisdom. Sometimes it is only disorder. Sometimes it is vanity. Sometimes it frightens friends more than enemies. Sometimes it produces motion without strategy. No serious analysis should pretend that confusion is automatically brilliance simply because it produces confusion.

But in dealing with a regime that has lived for decades inside ambiguity, denial, and calculated confrontation, the ability to create uncertainty may itself become pressure. The regime must ask not only what America says, but what America might do. It must ask whether the threat is theater or warning. It must ask whether delay improves its position or invites a worse one. It must ask whether the open door will remain open, and whether the next step will be a handshake, a sanction, a blockade, or a strike.

That is a very different psychological environment from the world of paper law.

In this sense, Trump's style may function as a kind of strategic translation. He does not always speak the language in which respectable observers prefer international relations to be discussed. He sometimes speaks the language of the other side: the language of pressure, ambiguity, insult, praise, risk, bargaining, threat, retreat, sudden warmth, and sudden punishment. This does not make the method elegant. It does not even guarantee that it is safe. But it may help explain why adversaries sometimes understand him more quickly than commentators do.

Observers in the United States and abroad often judge presidential language as if it were addressed mainly to them. The lawyer listens for legal consistency. The diplomat listens for decorum. The journalist listens for the next contradiction. The partisan listens for confirmation of love or disgust. But the adversary may be listening differently. He may hear not rudeness but risk, not inconsistency but uncertainty, not performance but possible consequence, not merely words but a man backed by a state that can make the next move very expensive.

This is why the Iranian case is so instructive. The actual enforcement of the desired international norm — a non-nuclear Iran, reduced regional violence, safer maritime routes, fewer proxies, less killing — is not coming primarily from an abstract international mechanism. It is coming from national power willing to combine threat, pressure, ambiguity, negotiation, sanctions, and possible relief. The "international community" speaks in universal language, but the enforcement, when it exists, comes from capitals that can actually move ships, freeze money, arm allies, intercept weapons, and make credible threats.

That is uncomfortable because we are trained to prefer institutions over power. Institutions sound civilized. Power sounds dangerous. Institutions sound neutral. Power sounds political.

Institutions speak in smooth paragraphs; power moves aircraft carriers. Institutions prepare reports; power changes calculations.

But if institutions cannot enforce the rules, and restrained power can, then the moral question changes. The issue is no longer whether power is inferior to law. The issue is whether power sometimes becomes the only available carrier of law.

This is not an argument for brutality. It is precisely the opposite. Power without restraint is not law; it is conquest. Power without moral limits becomes another name for the evil it claims to oppose. Power that enjoys humiliation, destruction, or revenge is not civilized enforcement. It is simply appetite with a flag.

But restrained power is different. A country that has the capacity to destroy and still prefers not to kill occupies a rare moral position. A government that can escalate but tries pressure first, that can strike but also negotiates, that can punish but leaves room for an exit, may be doing what international law cannot do by itself. It may be supplying consequence without abandoning restraint.

That is what I mean by benevolent power. Not innocence. Not perfection. Not sentimental softness. Benevolent power is power that hates killing even when it is capable of killing. It understands force but does not worship it. It wants the violent actor stopped, not the population destroyed. It can distinguish between defeating a dangerous policy and humiliating an entire civilization.

In the Iranian case, this distinction is essential. The goal should not be the destruction of Iran. Iran is an old civilization, not merely a regime. Its people are not identical with its rulers. A serious policy should not seek a ruined Iran, but a new and non-nuclear Iran: a country no longer organized around threat, hostage-taking, proxy war, and nuclear bargaining; a country able to return to the world without carrying the shadow of apocalypse in its pocket.

Whether this goal will be achieved, no honest person can know. Hope is not analysis. But the direction matters. If pressure, ambiguity, and credible consequence can produce a non-nuclear outcome without a larger war, then the world may discover that what looked like disorder from the outside was, at least in part, a language the adversary understood.

This brings us back to international law and to its dangerous illusion.

International law is valuable as a moral grammar. It helps the world name crimes. It preserves memory. It helps distinguish aggression from defense, civilians from combatants, peace from surrender, negotiation from blackmail, and justice from revenge. Without such language, we would be left only with propaganda and raw force.

But moral grammar is not enforcement. A court without handcuffs is not useless, but it is incomplete. A sanction without credible enforcement is not meaningless, but it is porous. A

resolution without consequence may comfort the civilized and amuse the violent. A peacekeeping force that cannot enforce peace may become an impressive symbol standing in a field where predators already know the symbol will not bite.

The world needs international law, but it must stop pretending that law enforces itself. The world also needs power, but it must stop pretending that power is justified merely because it is strong. The real need is the marriage of the two: civilized strength.

Civilized strength is rare. There are not many countries capable of global enforcement. There are fewer still that can combine force with restraint. There are fewer still whose leaders can threaten violence without loving violence, negotiate with enemies without surrendering to them, and confuse adversaries without losing moral direction themselves.

When such power exists, the world should not be too quick to dismiss it simply because it does not look like a courtroom. The courtroom may come later. First, someone must make evil stop, or at least make evil calculate.

That is the Iranian lesson, and perhaps the larger lesson of our time. International law still matters, but often as a map rather than the vehicle. It can tell us where civilization should go. It can mark forbidden territory. It can record who crossed the line. But when the road is blocked by armed men, the map does not move the car. Power moves the car, and law tells power where it must not go.

Separate them, and each becomes dangerous. Law without power becomes theater. Power without law becomes tyranny. Together, when civilization is lucky and disciplined, they become something closer to order.

That is why the phrase “international law” should be used with more humility. It is not a magic shield. It is not a world government. It is not a global police force. It is not a machine that turns evil into justice by issuing documents. It is an aspiration, a record, a standard, and sometimes a courtroom waiting for someone else to open the door.

The illusion of international law is not that it has no value. The illusion is that it has power by itself.

It does not.

And when people believe that it does, the illusion becomes dangerous. It allows the civilized world to feel protected when it is only speaking. It allows leaders to substitute statements for consequences. It allows victims to be told that justice is coming while the machinery of violence continues to run.

The world may be safer when we admit the truth. International law needs civilized power. Civilized power needs moral law. If the institutions cannot enforce the rules, then the burden

falls on those few countries still able to act, and still restrained enough not to become what they oppose.

That is not a perfect world. It may be the only world we have.