



POWER AND FRICTION: EXPANDING INFLUENCE AND REGIONAL IMPACTS: CHINA'S WAR ON THE RULES-BASED ORDER

Date: November 21st, 2025

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KEY EVENTS

On November 21, 2025, Dr. Ian Ralby presented *China's War on the Rules-Based Order* at the 2025 West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with audience members and CASIS Vancouver executives. The presentation examined the conceptual ambiguity surrounding the rules-based international order, China's strategic efforts to undermine it, and the application of "unlawfare."

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Dr. Ralby emphasized that Western reliance on the concept of the rules-based international order without consistent definition has created strategic vulnerability. Conceptual ambiguity, he argued, enables adversaries, particularly China, to exploit uncertainty through non-kinetic means that reshape legal and regulatory norms. While China exerts sustained external pressure, the more acute weakness lies in internal Western uncertainty regarding foundational legal principles and governance standards.

BACKGROUND

Dr. Ralby argued that over the past twenty-five years, China has systematically leveraged the absence of a clearly defined and defended rules-based international order. Although widely invoked in Western diplomatic rhetoric, the term lacks precise articulation, allowing reinterpretation and strategic manipulation.

He referenced the 1999 publication *Unrestricted Warfare*, authored by two Colonels of the People's Liberation Army, which emphasized non-kinetic tools

as instruments capable of achieving strategic outcomes without traditional military confrontation. In Dr. Ralby's view, subsequent Chinese foreign policy behavior reflects this logic through the prioritizing of legal, economic, and informational tools to advance strategic objectives.

In Western discourse, "lawfare" typically refers to the strategic use of legal mechanisms to achieve outcomes historically pursued through force. Dr. Ralby distinguished this from what he termed "unlawfare". Rather than manipulating existing legal frameworks, unlawfare involves asserting regulatory authority or legal interpretations on fake, baseless and unlawful foundations in order to bully actors with a legal-sounding approach that has no actual basis in law. The objective is not to win within established rules, but to make others doubt the voracity of their own understanding of the law.

He argued that evident clarity and assertiveness in China's claims often outpace Western hesitation. By flooding digital and academic spaces with expert commentary, interpretative papers, and incremental "microchanges" to legal discourse, China introduces ambiguity into previously largely settled areas of international law. Over time, these cumulative reinterpretations generate doubt and erode shared understanding. Complementary tactics, including economic inducements and "chequebook diplomacy", reinforce acceptance of these revised norms.

Dr. Ralby further contended that Western responses frequently exacerbate the problem. In seeking to preserve geopolitical advantage, Western states sometimes deviate from their own stated principles, further weakening the normative credibility of the rules-based order.

He concluded that clarity is the principal counterweight to strategic doubt. Without clearly articulated principles and consistent adherence to them, the rules-based order becomes vulnerable to reinterpretation and erosion in an increasingly chaotic geopolitical environment.

Question and Answer

How does China use their own existing territory and resources to reinterpret norms within the international community? How is this translated with the competition for the Arctic between the great powers?

China's role as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council affords it considerable influence in shaping international discourse. While this structural leverage is not unique to China, its strategic use can suppress criticism and reinforce normative claims. Through engagement with the Arctic Council and China's self-identification as a "near-Arctic state", Beijing has secured a voice in regional governance discussions. Strengthening ties with Russia, including reported basing access in Murmansk and expanded joint military exercises, demonstrates how legal positioning and strategic partnership reinforce one another.

What are your thoughts on maintaining the mandate and responsibilities of the International Court of Justice in resolving disputes between UN member states, when their authority is often disregarded or ignored? Do you see the ICJ acting more as a diplomatic mechanism than a serious enforcement strategy?

International tribunals provide essential legal clarity but face enforcement challenges when states decline to recognize or comply with rulings. Non-compliance by major powers undermines the broader rule-of-law framework. In this respect, creative institutional and diplomatic mechanisms may be required to strengthen compliance incentives while preserving judicial legitimacy.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- The rules-based international order lacks a consistently articulated definition, which creates conceptual ambiguity that adversaries can exploit.
- China employs "unlawfare" by aggressively asserting fake, baseless and unlawful, but legally-sounding justifications for actions that violate actual international law.
- "Scholarship" saturation, reinterpretation, and economic inducement are used to erode shared legal understandings and amplify doubt.
- Western inconsistency in adhering to its own principles further weakens normative credibility; restoring clarity and coherence is essential to countering strategic erosion.

FURTHER READINGS

- Ralby, I. (2023, May 6). Confronting All Ten Modalities of Maritime Terrorism. *RealClearDefense*. https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2023/05/06/confronting_all_ten_modalities_of_maritime_terrorism_897900.html
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- Ralby, I. (2025, September 28). Fraudulent Flags in Illegal Fishing: State Risks and Obligations. *The Maritime Executive*. <https://maritime-executive.com/editorials/fraudulent-flags-in-illegal-fishing-state-risks-and-obligations>



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