

Policy

**Brief**

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**The “Crisis” in the Rules-Based International Order (R BIO): Recommendations for Canadian Engagement**

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## About the Author

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Sarah Sharma is a Vanier Scholar in International Relations in the Department of Political Studies at Queen's University. She has recently completed fieldwork for her doctoral dissertation, which examines how urban flooding is being governed through a global policy paradigm, climate resilience, to understand the unique position cities are in when adapting to climate change. Her two case studies are Amsterdam, the Netherlands and Dhaka, Bangladesh, two diverse locales that both grapple with heightened urban flooding from intensifying rainstorms. In undertaking field research, Sarah was a Visiting Research Fellow at the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) at the Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB), in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and a Visiting PhD Scholar at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration, in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

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The development of this policy brief was inspired by the working paper "The "Crisis" in the Rules-Based International Order (RBIO): Recommendations for Canadian Engagement" written by Dr. Stéphanie Martel.

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## ISSUE

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1. It is widely held that the rules-based international order (hereafter: RBIO) is in crisis by Canada, its partners, and other global actors such as Russia and China. There is, however, contention on what the RBIO is understood to embody and how its perceived crisis can be rectified.
2. International discussions on the RBIO involve GAC significantly, however, DND is also implicated as a lack of consensus on accepted global rules generates a greater threat of violent contestation and uncertainty on how to predict patterns of activity. Decision-making to address and resolve conflicts over specific rules and domains of the RBIO is made much more complicated when there are misunderstandings on the source of conflict, as well as how to interpret actions, signal intent, and respond in a robust manner.
3. As a middle power, it is in Canada's interests that a RBIO prevails. A significant problem for Western actors defending the status quo is, however, concerns over how this order is spread and maintained. If Canada wishes to contribute to the development of a more consensually derived RBIO amongst a greater diversity of adherents, it must first acknowledge that it is currently committed to an order that is not universally accepted and is met by forms of resistance. To be an effective contributor to international order, Canada needs policy and communications strategies that credibly position it as a legitimate, reflective, and responsive partner in multilateral affairs.

## BACKGROUND

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4. The "rules-based international order," despite what is commonly assumed, does not have a fully fixed consensual meaning. Indeed, there is presently a power struggle among competing authorities to define "legitimate order," which is propelled by conflicting ideologies, values, and interests.
5. Canada and its partners consider the RBIO to be in crisis due to external threats – chiefly Russia, China, and Iran – that seek to expand their geostrategic "spheres of influence," undermine international institutions, and suppress values of human rights and the rule of law. There are also perceived internal threats from within Western countries themselves that are being increasingly recognized, most notably the rise of right-wing populism and the Trump administration's hostility to multilateral institutions.
6. Canada and its partners view the RBIO as a liberal multilateral system predicated upon international law that promotes common security, freedom of navigation, principles of democracy, human rights, open trade, and combatting climate change.
7. While Russia and China are typically portrayed as challengers to the RBIO by Canada and partners, they also further their own accounts that the RBIO is under threat. Russia positions itself as a defender of a more legitimate, democratic, polycentric "post-West" order predicated upon a "consensus of civilizations" based on mutual respect and international law. China presents itself as a champion of open trade and multilateralism, while suggesting an evolution of the existing system to reflect a different configuration of the relationship between order and justice at the global level.

8. Ultimately, actors on both sides of this dialogue, including Canada, place themselves as superior protectors and champions working towards international peace and security, simultaneously maintaining that their image of the RBIO is the most normatively, morally, and practically superior version of international order.

## CHALLENGES

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9. A lack of global consensus on the precise configuration of the RBIO, i.e. the “rules of the game,” makes it difficult for countries to understand one another, as well as predict and interpret each other’s actions. This consequently presents significant challenges for Canada to maintain readiness to engage productively on the international sphere where required – both within DND and across partner Departments such as GAC.

10. Canada’s public diplomacy asserts a moral high ground in defending the RBIO. This position is vulnerable, however, when incoherence between the values Canada promotes rhetorically are not consistent with its actions abroad or at home. This includes an inability to be a constructive order builder on indigenous rights, climate change and the maintenance of highly unequal income levels, making it difficult to promote this order as effective and equitable.

11. Canada, amongst others, has thus far engaged in counter-productive rhetoric when it comes to criticizing those whom it perceives to undermine its conception of the RBIO. This stark delineation between “right” and “wrong” actions, however, limits Canada’s opportunities to lead and participate in conciliatory alliance-building that may contribute to building potential areas of consensus on shared rules. Canada’s position is also rooted in an overestimation of the lack of compliance of non-Western states, instead of careful examination of compliance and non-compliance with regards to specific rules and domains.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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### **In the wake of the challenges, it is recommended that Canada:**

12. Maintain capability to respond effectively to acts of aggression while demonstrating an openness to dialogue on the RBIO that actively seeks to foster consent from a broader set of stakeholders (state and non-state). The current unpredictability over security issues requires Canada to be able to respond effectively across a broad set of theatres. This complex situation underlines the necessity for Canada to engage more productively with international partners while strengthening its ability to deal more effectively with countries with which tensions are on the rise due to not only strategic interests, but also a desire for recognition, and resistance to stigmatization.

13. Draw from alternative models of public communication on the RBIO to assert a new Canadian approach to navigating international tensions on contentious topics. For instance, Canada can draw on lessons learned from partners such as Japan and Singapore who navigate power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific arena in a more productive way through public diplomacy. Their communication has focused on fundamental threats to a shared RBIO, rather than seeking to apportion blame. Singaporean leadership in particular has demonstrated empathy with others’ positions while encouraging mutual recognition of concerns.

14. Demonstrate commitment to listening and understanding issues that disadvantaged actors have with current conceptions of the RBIO to move forward with policy and resources to meet legitimate demands. This includes engaging a variety of stakeholders in its engagements abroad, as well as reaching beyond the state. As an example, Canada can work to better understand local indigenous issues in its missions overseas, as historical tensions deeply inform present-day conditions where Canada is stationed internationally. It is important to note that any potential for Canada's moral leadership to be recognized globally requires continual engagement within Canada for minority rights and social justice.

15. Work with GAC regarding improved communications and multilateral efforts to strengthen the RBIO through the exercise of normative leadership towards productive avenues for discussion, and co-operation with like-minded actors on specific domains, such as climate change, indigenous rights, maritime security, as well as gender and security.