

HAIRAN Series IIUS

Expert Notes 2026-13



고려대학교 통일융합연구원
Institute for Interdisciplinary Unification Studies

Is the International Human Rights Order Collapsing?

Resilience in a “World of Orders” and the Implications for the Korean Peninsula

July 19, 2026

KIM, Hun Joon

Professor and Chair, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Korea University

Hun Joon Kim, Professor, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Korea University He received his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, and previously served as a Senior Research Fellow and Associate Professor at Griffith University in Australia. His research areas are human rights and transitional justice.

This article is a revised and expanded version of remarks delivered at the expert roundtable, “Reassessing the Role of the United Nations and International Organizations in a Changing International Order: Security, Human Rights, Humanitarian Crises, and the Future of the Korean Peninsula,” hosted by Korea University’s Institute for Interdisciplinary Unification Studies on June 29, 2026.

1. International Order Is Not a Fixed Structure but a Continuing Process

It has become increasingly common to hear that the international human rights order is in crisis. Wars and great-power competition are intensifying, authoritarianism is spreading, and the authority of international law and international institutions is under growing pressure. Even democratic states selectively invoke human rights principles when security and national interests are at stake. Against this background, some have gone so far as to declare the end of the liberal international order.

Yet it is difficult to understand the present transformation accurately if international order is viewed only as a fixed institutional structure. When order is understood as a noun, attention naturally falls on the stability and continuity provided by international law, organizations, treaties, and rules. When it is understood as a verb,

however, order becomes a dynamic process through which states, international organizations, civil society, and individuals continuously interpret, apply, contest, and revise those rules.

The international system is decentralized in the sense that it has no central government, but it is not therefore devoid of order. Diverse actors interact to sustain, challenge, and reshape institutions and norms. The international human rights order is likewise not a finished structure created at a particular historical moment and preserved unchanged thereafter. It is continuously reproduced through monitoring, adjudication, political advocacy, documentation, victims' claims, and the everyday practices of civil society and public institutions.

This perspective is not intended to minimize the seriousness of the current crisis. Rather, it enables us to examine more precisely where the international human rights order is weakening, which institutions and actors continue to sustain it, and where new forms of resistance and adaptation may be emerging.

2. We Live Not under a Single International Order, but in a “World of Orders”

There are also limitations to treating the liberal international order as a single, unified system. In reality, international society consists of overlapping orders in areas such as security, trade, the environment, human rights, humanitarian affairs, and development. These sectoral orders do not progress or decline at the same pace. At times they reinforce one another; at others, they compete or come into direct conflict.

Even as the international security order is rapidly reorganized through great-power rivalry, some rules governing trade or environmental cooperation may remain resilient. Political institutions at the international level may lose influence while domestic courts, regional organizations, and civil-society actors continue to apply international human rights standards. Conversely, treaties may formally remain in force even as declining financial resources and political support hollow out the institutions responsible for implementing them.

The crisis of the liberal international order therefore does not necessarily mean that the entire international human rights order is collapsing at the same time and in the same way. It is necessary to distinguish which institutions are weakening, which norms remain operational, and where new actors and practices are emerging. The most useful framework is not a simple binary between total collapse and complete recovery. We need instead to examine a “world of orders” in which different institutional and normative arrangements move in different directions and at different speeds.

3. Strongmen and Great Powers Are Selectively Using and Revising the Human Rights Order

The challenges confronting the international human rights order are nevertheless real and severe. The most direct challenge comes from great powers and so-called strongman leaders who disregard international human rights principles or attempt to reinterpret them in ways that serve their political interests.

Major powers, including the United States, Russia, and China, have faced criticism for applying international law and human rights standards selectively according to sovereignty, national security, and geopolitical advantage. Accusations of double standards, particularly regarding the different approaches taken toward the war in Ukraine and the crisis in Gaza, have damaged confidence in the universality of international norms.

There are also growing efforts to attack or weaken institutions such as the International Criminal Court, the International Court of Justice, and the European Court of Human Rights when their decisions conflict with the interests of powerful states.

The politicization of financial support for international organizations is equally troubling. When states reduce funding, threaten withdrawal, or obstruct the participation of nongovernmental organizations and individuals because an international institution has reached an unwelcome conclusion, that institution may continue to exist formally while gradually losing its capacity to function.

Even more serious is the connection between this international retreat and domestic political developments. Authoritarian powers such as China and Russia emphasize national particularity and cultural relativism over the universality of human rights, partly to legitimize their own political systems. The claim that each state should be free to define human rights and democracy on its own terms can become a justification for rejecting international scrutiny and accountability.

Newly authoritarian or democratically backsliding states similarly portray international recommendations, rankings, and review procedures as illegitimate foreign interference. This creates a vicious cycle: authoritarian regression within states weakens international human rights norms, while weakened international norms provide further justification for domestic authoritarianism.

4. New Human Rights Challenges Are Being Layered onto Unresolved Crises

Traditional human rights and humanitarian emergencies, including war, mass atrocities, refugee crises, and forced displacement, remain unresolved. At the same time, artificial intelligence, digital surveillance, online platforms, and climate change are generating new categories of human rights concern.

Artificial intelligence is transforming decision-making in public administration, criminal justice, policing, and military affairs. Yet no adequate international consensus exists on who should bear responsibility for algorithmic discrimination, opacity, or error. Digital platforms and private corporations now exercise enormous influence over freedom of expression, privacy, elections, and political participation, but the existing international human rights system was largely designed around the conduct and responsibilities of states. It is therefore poorly equipped to regulate transnational corporate power.

Climate change raises interconnected questions concerning the rights to life, health, housing, migration, and intergenerational justice. Yet the sharper great power competition becomes, and the more governments prioritize narrowly defined national interests, the more difficult multilateral cooperation on these transboundary issues becomes.

The international human rights order must therefore respond simultaneously to longstanding crises and to emerging technological and environmental challenges. The number and complexity of the problems are increasing precisely as the financial resources, political authority, and cooperative foundations of international institutions are weakening. This imbalance lies at the heart of the present crisis.

5. The Human Rights Order Will Retreat in the Short Term, but It Is Unlikely to Disappear

In the short term, the international human rights order is likely to experience further retreat. The space available for human rights advocacy will narrow, and sovereignty, security, and national interest will more frequently prevail over human rights principles. Financial and political pressure on international organizations and civil-society groups is also likely to continue.

Yet retreat does not necessarily mean disappearance. Institutions and actors already established at the domestic, regional, and international levels will continue to perform routine functions based on accumulated norms and experience. Domestic courts will cite international human rights principles. Civil-society organizations will continue to document abuses. International and regional institutions will maintain monitoring and review processes, even under increasingly restrictive conditions.

The resilience of the international human rights order does not depend exclusively on a single leading state or international organization. States, international institutions, regional bodies, domestic courts, national human rights institutions, civil society, victims, and researchers all sustain different parts of the order. Because it is supported at multiple levels, the entire system does not immediately disappear when one institution or leading power withdraws.

Over the medium to long term, these actors may draw on accumulated norms, institutional routines, and existing legal frameworks to develop new responses. They may not restore the previous order in its entirety, but they can correct and rebuild at least parts of what has been lost. Human rights are therefore likely to survive as an important component of international politics. That survival, however, should not be taken for granted. It will depend on the sustained efforts of actors committed to maintaining and renewing human rights order.

6. The History of Human Rights Has Always Been One of Progress and Reversal

The first basis for this cautious expectation lies in the history of the international human rights order itself. Contemporary human rights norms were not created by a single state or civilization. They are the accumulated product of contributions by countries with different histories, international institutions, civil society, and victims of abuse.

The development of human rights has never been a linear process of uninterrupted progress. Serious reversals have followed nearly every major advance. The Cold War, dictatorship, armed conflict, and genocide continued long after international human rights norms had begun to take institutional form. Yet these reversals did not erase everything achieved by previous generations.

Principles such as the prohibition of torture, the elimination of racial discrimination, the rights of women, children, and persons with disabilities, and individual criminal responsibility for international crimes have become embedded in international and domestic law and in wider social expectations. Each generation has inherited the achievements of those before it while further developing human rights principles through renewed struggles against repression and exclusion.

Nor did the current challenges begin suddenly with the rise of particular political leaders. The international human rights order has always been contested. It has developed through continuing tensions between sovereignty and universality, politics and law, Western influence and regional diversity. The very fact that the order was produced through contestation demonstrates its vulnerability, but it is also a source of resilience. The order has survived because it has repeatedly been debated, resisted, adapted, and reconstructed.

7. Transitional Justice Shows How Victims and Evidence Can Reactivate the Human Rights Order

A second basis for cautious optimism can be found in the development of transitional justice. Efforts to address past mass human rights violations demonstrate that neither states nor the international community can easily extinguish victims' suffering or their demands for accountability simply by choosing silence.

Unresolved violations do not end with a single generation. When the truth is not established and responsibility remains unaddressed, suffering and silence are transmitted to later generations. Denial and distortion can themselves become new forms of harm. Victims and their families often continue for decades to demand truth, accountability, recognition, and restoration of dignity. Their persistence has been one of the most important driving forces behind the expansion of transitional justice.

The development of international humanitarian law, international criminal law, international human rights law, and relevant domestic legislation has also provided institutional languages through which victims' demands can be expressed. In the past, accountability was often impossible without immediate political transition. Today, international courts, domestic courts, truth commissions, universal jurisdiction, and other investigative mechanisms can interact across borders and over time.

Technological developments have further expanded the possibilities for accountability. Satellite imagery, digital forensics, geographic information systems, mobile-phone footage, and artificial intelligence can be used to collect and analyze large quantities of evidence concerning armed conflict and mass human rights abuses. Digital information gathered in places such as Ukraine and Gaza may not result in immediate prosecutions, but it can provide a foundation for future investigations, trials, and historical documentation.

Truth commissions, investigative methods, and victim-centered practices have also spread across countries, creating opportunities for learning. Victims in one society can draw on the experiences of others to identify new routes to accountability and to address issues such as statutes of limitation, evidence preservation, reparations, and public remembrance.

Transitional justice therefore demonstrates that the human rights order does not cease to operate merely because powerful states refuse to act. The combination of victims' memory accumulated international law, technological capacity, and transnational solidarity can reopen possibilities for accountability even many years after violations have occurred.

8. Conclusion: The Human Rights Order Will Not Survive Automatically

The international human rights order is clearly experiencing a period of serious retreat. Great powers and strongman leaders apply international norms selectively and seek to weaken the authority of international institutions. Wars and humanitarian crises continue, even as new challenges such as artificial intelligence and climate change emerge. In the short term, sovereignty, security, and national interest are likely to continue to take precedence over human rights.

Yet a different picture appears when the international human rights order is understood not as a single institution with one center, but as a decentralized and interactive system. Domestic courts, regional organizations, international institutions, civil society, victims, and researchers continue to use existing norms and practices in their daily work. The history of human rights has always involved alternating periods of progress and reversal. Victims' persistent demands, the accumulation of international law, technological innovation, and cross-border learning continue to create new possibilities for accountability.

The international human rights order will not survive automatically. The formal existence of laws and institutions is not enough. Its continued operation requires people who apply norms, civil-society organizations that document violations, courts and international institutions capable of independent judgment, and states willing to provide financial and political support. It is premature to declare that the present retreat marks the end of the international human rights order. It would be equally dangerous, however, to assume that past institutional achievements will guarantee its recovery.

For South Korea, the challenge is not simply to defend an abstract international order. It is to strengthen the domestic, regional, and international foundations through which human rights norms can continue to operate, and to prepare responsibly for the human rights and transitional justice questions that any future transformation of the Korean Peninsula will inevitably raise.

The next international human rights order will not emerge merely by preserving what already exists. It will be produced through the efforts of multiple actors to resist regression, adapt institutions to new challenges, preserve the testimony and dignity of victims, and restore human beings to the center of politics and law.