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AT THE TWILIGHT OF THE 'LIBERAL' INTERNATIONAL LEGAL ORDER - VÖLKERRECHTSBLOG - 11.03.2026

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Blog No: 6
12.03.2026

Völkerrechtsblog (11 March 2026)

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Prospects After the US Special Military Operation in Venezuela

The operation launched by the United States in Venezuela on 3 January 2026, culminating in the abduction of President Nicolás Maduro, has already been analysed through familiar lenses: the legality of extraterritorial enforcement, the limits of intervention, immunities, and the perennial question of regime change under international law. Yet to approach this event merely as another controversial episode in the long history of US uses of force would be to miss its deeper significance. What makes this moment legally and structurally distinct is not that international law has once again been violated, but that the violation no longer appears to require legal persuasion or even the pretence of compliance.

This contribution argues that the Venezuela operation should be understood as a symptom of a broader transformation: the effective downfall of what has conventionally been described as the liberal international legal order. The term liberal is placed in quotation marks deliberately. Even at its height, this order was never fully democratic and equitable in practice, nor genuinely universal in application. Yet for roughly three decades after the Cold War, international law operated within a shared discursive framework in which power was at least required to speak the language of legality. That requirement now appears to be eroding. What we are witnessing is not simply a crisis of compliance, but the fading relevance of the justificatory architecture that sustained the post-Cold War

order itself.

The Post-Cold War Promise: Law as a Vocabulary of Power

The post-Cold War period was characterised by a powerful normative claim: that international relations would increasingly be governed by rules rather than raw power. This promise was embedded in a dense legal architecture □□□□□□□□□□ regimes on the use of force, international criminal justice, human rights, trade liberalisation, and investment protection. The US, supported by its allies, assumed the role of both architect and enforcer of this order. This role was never uncontested, but it was broadly tolerated, and even welcomed in core countries, as the price of systemic stability.

To read the rest of the article, please click: https://voelkerrechtsblog.org/at-the-twilight-of-the-liberal-international-legal-order/

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To cite this article: □□□□□□□□ Kaan KURTUL - Onur URAZ. 2026. "AT THE TWILIGHT OF THE □□□□□□□□A INTERNATIONAL LEGAL ORDER - VÖLKERRECHTSBLOG - 11.03.2026." Center For Eurasian Studies (AVİM), Blog No.2026 / 6. March 12. Accessed November 20, 2026. https://avim.org.tr/Blog/AT-THE-TWILIGHT-OF-THE-LIBERAL-INTERNATIONAL-LEGAL-ORDER-VOLKERRECHTSBLOG-11-03-2026

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