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THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL LAW IN REGULATING CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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Abstract

International law constitutes a foundational element of contemporary international relations, providing legal norms and institutional mechanisms that regulate interactions among states and other international actors. In the context of globalization, increasing interdependence, and complex transnational challenges, international law plays a vital role in maintaining international order, promoting cooperation, and addressing global problems such as armed conflict, human rights violations, environmental degradation, and economic inequality. This article analyzes the role of international law through the IMRAD framework. Using a qualitative analytical approach, the study examines theoretical perspectives, legal instruments, and institutional practices. The results demonstrate that international law significantly influences state behavior by shaping norms, facilitating cooperation, and offering mechanisms for dispute resolution, despite persistent challenges related to enforcement and power asymmetry. The discussion highlights the continued relevance of international law as a core component of global governance in the contemporary international system.

Keywords: International law, international relations, global governance, sovereignty, international institutions, human rights.



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Introduction

The contemporary international system is characterized by complex interactions among political, economic, legal, and social forces. Unlike earlier periods in which power politics and diplomacy dominated international relations, modern global affairs are increasingly regulated through legal norms and institutional frameworks. International law has emerged as a central mechanism for structuring relations among states, international organizations, and non-state actors.

Globalization, technological advancement, and growing interdependence have intensified the need for legally binding cooperation. Transnational challenges such as climate change, cyber security threats, international terrorism, migration, and global health crises cannot be effectively managed through unilateral state action. International law provides a normative and institutional foundation for collective responses to these challenges by defining rights, obligations, and procedures for cooperation.

Despite its expanding scope, international law remains contested. Critics question its effectiveness due to weak enforcement mechanisms and the dominance of political interests. Nevertheless, international legal norms continue to shape state behavior, influence international decision-making, and contribute to the stability of the international system. This article aims to examine the role of international law in regulating contemporary international relations by addressing its theoretical foundations, functional roles, institutional mechanisms, and existing limitations.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and analytical research methodology. The research is based on a comprehensive review of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include international treaties, conventions, charters, and official documents of international organizations, particularly the United Nations.



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Secondary sources consist of academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and scholarly analyses in the fields of international law and international relations. The study applies descriptive and analytical methods to examine how international legal norms operate within the international system. Theoretical approaches—realism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism—are used as analytical frameworks to interpret the role and effectiveness of international law. Case examples from peace and security, human rights, and global governance are incorporated to illustrate practical applications of international legal principles.

Results

The analysis reveals several key findings regarding the role of international law in contemporary international relations.

First, international law plays a significant regulatory role by establishing fundamental principles such as sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-intervention, and the legal equality of states. These principles, enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, provide a stable legal foundation for international interaction and reduce uncertainty in state behavior.

Second, international law contributes to international peace and security through the prohibition of the use of force and the promotion of peaceful dispute settlement. Institutions such as the United Nations Security Council and the International Court of Justice offer legal and institutional mechanisms that help prevent and manage conflicts. Although compliance is not universal, the existence of these mechanisms influences state calculations and legitimizes collective responses to threats to peace.

Third, the development of international human rights law has transformed the traditional state-centric nature of international relations. International legal instruments impose obligations on states to protect individual rights, thereby limiting absolute sovereignty. Monitoring bodies and international courts have



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increased accountability and encouraged the incorporation of human rights norms into domestic legal systems.

Fourth, international economic law facilitates cooperation and stability in global markets. Legal frameworks governing trade, investment, and finance contribute to predictability and dispute resolution, particularly through institutions such as the World Trade Organization.

Finally, international organizations play a crucial role in implementing and monitoring international law. Through reporting mechanisms, dispute settlement procedures, and norm diffusion, these institutions enhance compliance and strengthen global governance, despite political constraints and resource limitations.

Discussion

The results indicate that international law remains a central, though imperfect, instrument for regulating contemporary international relations. From a realist perspective, the findings confirm that power and national interest continue to shape compliance with international law. Powerful states often influence legal processes and enforcement, which limits the universality and perceived fairness of international legal norms.

However, liberal institutionalist theory helps explain why states continue to rely on international law despite these limitations. Legal rules and institutions reduce transaction costs, enhance transparency, and facilitate long-term cooperation. The observed effectiveness of international trade regimes and dispute settlement mechanisms supports the argument that international law can shape behavior even in an anarchic system.

Constructivist insights are also reflected in the findings. International law functions not only as a set of rules but also as a normative system that shapes identities, expectations, and legitimacy. The global acceptance of human rights



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norms and humanitarian principles demonstrates the capacity of international law to influence state behavior through moral authority and social pressure.

At the same time, the study highlights persistent challenges. The lack of centralized enforcement, fragmentation of legal regimes, and unequal power relations undermine the effectiveness of international law. Globalization further complicates the legal landscape by introducing new actors and issues that existing legal frameworks struggle to regulate.

Nevertheless, the discussion suggests that international law is adaptive. Developments in environmental law, international humanitarian law, and global health governance illustrate the potential of legal cooperation in responding to emerging global challenges. Strengthening institutional coordination and enhancing compliance mechanisms remain essential for improving the effectiveness of international law.

Conclusion

International law plays a vital role in regulating contemporary international relations by providing legal norms, institutional mechanisms, and frameworks for cooperation. Although it faces significant challenges related to enforcement, power asymmetry, and fragmentation, international law continues to influence state behavior and support global governance.

The analysis demonstrates that international law is neither irrelevant nor omnipotent; rather, it is an evolving system that reflects both legal principles and political realities. For students and scholars of international relations and law, understanding international law is essential for analyzing global order and addressing future transnational challenges. Strengthening international legal institutions and promoting greater compliance will be crucial for sustaining peace, justice, and cooperation in an interconnected world.



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