

Call for Papers

SWAIL II

**Mapping International Law's Second Worlds:
Middle Powers, Semi-Peripheries and Shifting Hierarchies in the Global Legal Order**

**Yong Pung How School of Law, Singapore Management University
16 – 17 November 2026, Singapore**

Synopsis

The global legal order faces growing contestation. Multilateralism and transnational cooperation increasingly yield to competitive bilateralism and transactional coexistence. Grave violations of international norms become routine and fear of great power backlash dilutes responsibility. Yet, while hegemonic and (neo-)imperial ideologies, concepts, and arguments are retrieved, refined, and reasserted, uncertainty reigns about how these shifts are best understood and conceptualized, with divergent perspectives emerging from the Global East(s), South(s) and West(s).

International law's role in perpetuating hierarchy, domination and exclusion – and the (post-) colonial foundations of global order – are increasingly acknowledged even in mainstream disciplinary accounts. However, less attention has been paid to the experiences, practices, processes, vocabularies and perspectives of *in-betweenness* that defy binary classifications of North-South, core-periphery, liberal-illiberal, etc. Recent debates have centered the notion of 'middle powers', a term encompassing actors as diverse as Canada or Australia at one end of the spectrum, or Turkey and BRICS+ at the other end. Applied unevenly to Latin America or Eastern Europe, the 'semi-periphery' traditionally described in-between and incomplete (usually economic) subordination or transition. Drawing on Second World Approaches to International Law (SWAIL), a self-reflexive project exploring how international law produces and manages 'in-betweenness' across different registers, this call for papers invites contributions that explore these themes, whether articulated as conceptual semi-peripherality and incomplete integration, or as actor-based claims to middle-power or emerging-power agency, including practices of asserting legally grounded sovereignty under imperial pressure. The central question is how international law's dominant classificatory schemes shape doctrines, institutions, and epistemic authority while flattening, marginalizing and occluding in-betweenness that does not fit within the hegemonic paradigm(s).

Building on emerging scholarship from Eastern Europe and Central Asia, [SWAIL](#) seeks to unsettle binary, and often hegemonic classificatory schemes like North/South, market-/state-based economy, liberal/illiberal, core/periphery, democratic/authoritarian, capitalist/socialist, developed/developing, Europe/non-Europe, civilized/uncivilized, perpetrator/victim, colonizer/colonized, empire/subaltern divisions of the globe. Arguing that 'Second Worldness' does not fit neatly within such categories, SWAIL conceptualizes the Second World(s) not merely as a geographical label nor as a historical or ideological Cold War category, but rather as an **analytical device** for exploring structural and epistemic governance within the global order. Accordingly, Second World actors occupy in-between, liminal or semi-peripheral positions, characterized by conditional inclusion, legal mimicry, and persistent narratives of transition, incompleteness, or 'catching up' with ever-receding dominant standards defined elsewhere, often in the West or North Atlantic but increasingly also by competing global and regional hegemonies like China, Russia, Turkey or Nigeria. Seen from a liminal perspective, international law operates not primarily through binary systems of domination or exclusion, but rather through complex techniques of incremental disciplining and adjustment. Middle powers or semi-peripheral actors are

encouraged, and often compelled, to internalize dominant legal vocabularies while remaining structurally marginalized, albeit not entirely excluded, as producers of theory or legal subjectivity. Legal doctrines, institutional practices, evaluative frameworks, and quantitative indicators, including those used in rule of law assessments, human rights monitoring, security governance, and economic conditionality, operate as technologies of benchmarking, normalisation, translation, and adaptation through which multidimensional hierarchies and inequalities are registered, reproduced and contested.

Building on an [inaugural event](#) in Vienna in 2025, this conference broadens exploration of SWAIL as a critical lens for exploring international law's operation across openly defined liminal contexts. Contributions need not focus on the geographically defined Second World *qua* former Soviet space or processes. Papers that interrogate broader dynamics of semi-peripherality, inter-imperial contestation, and conditional ex-/in-clusion in international law are encouraged. We welcome contributions that engage theoretically, empirically, historically, etc. with the following non-exhaustive themes:

- Second World(s) as in-between actors in international law and global governance, including middle powers and semi-peripheral (economic) agents but also various non-state actors that shape and contest normative authority
- Epistemic marginalization and the politics of knowledge production in international law as seen from in-between spaces, including scholars, civil society, international institutions and states
- Practices of conditional sovereignty, liminal recognition, and multidimensional hierarchies
- Processes of translation, imitation, and mimicry in international legal discourse, including how such practices reproduce, negotiate, or destabilise classificatory schemes framed in terms of civilisation, development, or liberalism
- The political economy of middle-power support for international law, including the costs and benefits of disengagement
- Critiques of transition narratives, modernization, and legal temporality
- Case studies from Eastern Europe, Latin America, Eurasia and other semi-peripheral contexts, for instance (Ottoman) Turkey, (Imperial) Japan, China or Ethiopia
- Applications of SWAIL to specific fields, e.g. human rights, security and foreign policy, development, investment, rule of law, environment and sustainability
- SWAIL in dialogue with critical international scholarship, Marxism, feminism, TWAIL, political economy, queer studies, cross-disciplinary methods, etc., including self-reflection on the promise and limits of SWAIL

By foregrounding in-betweenness, SWAIL offers a complementary perspective to existing critical approaches and opens new avenues for dialogical, comparative and reflexive inquiry. This project aims neither to develop (a) new universalism(s), nor to champion exclusionary regionalisms or particularisms. The conference hopes to diagnose overlooked forms of hierarchy and expand the critical vocabulary available for understanding international law's uneven global functioning. Submissions from scholars at all career stages are welcome.

Call for abstracts

Abstracts of no more than **500 words** should be emailed to lawandsustainability@smu.edu.sg by **1 August 2026**. Please also attach a brief bio or 1-page CV. Selected speakers will be notified by **21 August 2026**.

All speakers will be required to submit a working paper (4,000 - 6,000 words) before the conference by **1 November 2026**. It is anticipated that a special issue based on the conference will be published by a prominent peer-reviewed journal.

Practicalities

This conference is organised by CCLA's Singapore Sustainable Futures Initiative (SSFI), with support of Prof Liu Nengye's Yong Pung How Fellowship. It will be held at SMU Yong Pung How School of

Law as an in-person event. The event is free of charge for selected speakers, though travel expenses are expected to be self-funded.

Conference Co-Chairs

Associate Professor LIU Nengye, Yong Pung How School of Law, Singapore Management University



Prof LIU Nengye teaches and conducts research at the nexus of the law of the sea and international environmental law. Prof LIU has taken the lead to edit three books: “*The European Union and the Arctic*” (Brill, 2017), “*Governing Marine Living Resources in the Polar Regions*” (Edward Elgar, 2019); “*The Law of the Sea and the Planetary Crisis*” (Routledge, 2025); published 50+ refereed journal articles and book chapters; and delivered 100+ presentations about his research findings across five continents. He sits on the editorial board of *Marine Policy*, *Ocean Development and International Law* and *Polar Record*. Prof Liu is the Founding Chair of Steering Committee, Asia Pacific Research Alliance on Law and Sustainability, Founding Director of Singapore Sustainable Futures Initiative and Co-Chair of American Society of International Law’s Law of the Sea Interest Group.

Assistant Professor Patryk Labuda, Central European University



Dr. Labuda works at the intersection of international law, peace and security studies, and global history. Trained in law and history at Adam Mickiewicz University, Dr. Labuda earned his PhD from the Geneva Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies. Drawing on his work and research experience in Africa, he supports justice initiatives and dialogue between the Global South(s) and Global East(s). An elected Board Member (2024-28) of the European Society of International Law, Dr. Labuda's scholarship includes an award-winning book (2024 ABILA Best Book for a First-Time Author, *International Criminal Tribunals and Domestic Accountability*) and an award-winning article (2025 ASIL International Criminal Law Scholarship Prize, *Countering Imperialism in International Law*).