

CONFERENCE REPORT

# INTERNATIONAL LAW YEAR IN REVIEW CONFERENCE 2026

## *Conflict, Disruption and Paradox*

22 January 2026  
Orchard Hotel, Singapore

NUS Centre for  
International Law



## About the Conference

The NUS Centre for International Law (CIL) held its annual, flagship International Law Year in Review Conference on 22 January 2026. The year 2025 was marked by important shifts in the geopolitical and geoeconomic landscapes. Incidents involving the use of force, impeded global trade, human rights violations, and a worsening climate crisis cast doubt on the potential for international law and multilateralism to regulate and respond to the most pressing crises. At the same time, somewhat

paradoxically, there were numerous achievements for international law in 2025, involving the creation, implementation and adjudication of norms in the domains of, for example, public health and climate change. The Conference brought together scholars, diplomats, government officials, and other experts to reflect on these paradoxes, exploring the most significant developments in international law of 2025 under the theme “Conflict, Disruption and Paradox”.



# Opening Remarks



## Welcome Address

**Dr. Nilufer Oral (Director, NUS-CIL)**, welcomed speakers and participants to the annual conference, noting the record turnout as evidence of international law's continuing relevance after a year of political discord and upheaval. She framed the conference theme, "Conflict, Disruption and Paradox", as reflecting today's realities: pervasive conflicts and constant disruption to the legal order, yet paradoxically significant achievements in the past that show international law remains relevant and responsive.

## Opening Address

**Ambassador Rena Lee (Chair, CIL Governing Board)** in her opening address) similarly pointed to the strong turnout and argued that, although respect for international law is eroding in some domains, breaches do not negate the system as a whole and there are



meaningful advances. She highlighted CITES as a concrete "international law in action" example, citing near-universal participation and substantial progress at its 20th Conference of Parties. She emphasised that international law concerns all States, not only great powers, and urged all States to exercise their agency responsibly.

## Keynote Address: Abdulqawi Ahmed Yusuf

**Judge Abdulqawi Ahmed Yusuf (former ICJ President)** delivered a powerful keynote address, which began with a stark diagnosis of the current moment as an "interregnum" - a transition in which the old order is fading and the new one has not yet emerged. He surveyed serious, ongoing violations of international law in multiple theatres including Gaza and the West Bank, Ukraine, Sudan, Syria, Lebanon. A central theme was the selective invocation and uneven enforcement of law - to

pointed to ICJ provisional selective invocation and uneven enforcement of law – he pointed to ICJ provisional measures concerning Ukraine and Gaza (2023–24) being openly ignored, and warned that recent US conduct resembled a return to gunboat diplomacy and resource colonialism, signalling a shift towards “might is right”. He also questioned whether the frequently invoked “rules-based international order” is truly synonymous with the international rule of law. Yet, this bleak backdrop, Judge Yusuf argued that international law remains universal and resilient; rules

remain valid even when violated and, while powerful lawbreakers can damage the quality and credibility of norms, the harm is not total because only a small number of States have “gone rogue” and their actions face real pushback. He identified “bright spots,” including the ICJ’s Advisory Opinions on climate change and humanitarian assistance in Gaza, and concluded with a forceful call, especially to the Global South, to defend the post-UN Charter international community and resist a world governed by power rather than law.



## Fireside Chat

# International Dispute Settlement in Uncertain Times

**Moderator: Ambassador Rena Lee**  
**(Ambassador for International Law, Singapore)**

**Sir Christopher Greenwood**  
**(Arbitrator | Former Judge, ICJ)**

**Dr. Hab. Marcin Czepelak**  
**(Secretary-General, PCA)**

**Prof. Donald M. McRae (Emeritus Professor, University of Ottawa)**

**Judge Tomas Heidar (President, ITLOS)**



To ensure that the international legal order remains effective and equitable, it is essential to maintain robust dispute settlement mechanisms that interpret rules and address conflicts. The Fireside Chat brought together experts of the subject to explore different modes of international dispute settlement and their significance in 2025.

**ITLOS President Judge Tomas Heidar** sought to shed a positive light on the current state of international law, pointing to increased activity in international courts and tribunals as evidence of trust, and noting that recent climate change Advisory Opinions evidence complementary, not conflict, in the jurisprudence of the ICJ and ITLOS.

**PCA Secretary-General Marcins**

**Czepelak** highlighted the strong caseload and global reach of the PCA, expressing his view that the current “crisis” in international law is largely one of trust and, as such, stressed that the PCA shall remain an accessible and reliable institution for the peaceful settlement of disputes.

**Professor Donald McRae (University of Ottawa)** recalling his experience as a mediator for the Timor Leste -Australia mediation, described the state of mediation and conciliation in 2025. He observed that there appears to be growing third party involvement in the successful resolution of disputes, but that these processes remain opaque and it is unclear to what extent they meaningfully engage with and address the root causes of conflict.

**Sir Christopher Greenwood (former ICJ Judge)**, recalling a time when the ICJ had few cases offered cautious optimism, suggesting that dispute settlement is more active and important than before. Nonetheless, he was of the view that Advisory Opinions and Provisional Measures have limits and political risks, and disagreements between different actors and

jurisdictions in arbitral proceedings expose deeper fragmentations. The panellists agreed that, despite increased pressure on the rule of law and the weak enforcement of international norms, international dispute settlement appears robust, hopefully, is enduringly so.



## Panel 1

# Peace and Security in a Year of Disruption

**Moderator: Ambassador Foo Chi-Hsia (Deputy Secretary, SEA & ASEAN, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore)**

**Dr. Cordula Droege (Chief Legal Officer & Head of the Legal Division, ICRC)**

**Dr. Moe Thuzar (Senior Research Fellow, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute)**

**Raja Dato' Nushirwan Zainal Abidin (Director General, National Security Council, Malaysia)**

The panellists reflected on the seemingly dire state of the UN's peace and security mandate, with rampant armed conflicts and international humanitarian law violations compounded by the involvement of non-State armed groups, weaponised technologies and AI, and other coercive tactics that harm civilians, strain multilateralism, and undermine the rule of law.

**Dr. Cordula Droege (International Committee of the Red Cross)** emphasised the massive human toll of conflict, warning that new technologies (drones, autonomous weapons, AI-enabled weapons) increase risks to civilians and contravene rules of IHL. She urged stronger compliance by embedding IHL in domestic military and political practice, while third States ought to exert greater pressure on those who violate its rules.

**Dr Moe Thuzar (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute)** highlighted the limits of IHL in Myanmar, where

compliance with IHL is limited due to persistent disregard of the rules by the military forces, deepening humanitarian crises, and shrinking civil liberties.

**Raja Dato' Nushirwan Zainal Abidin (National Security Council, Malaysia)** described de-escalation efforts in the Thailand/Cambodia conflict, with Malaysia and ASEAN helping broker and monitor a ceasefire that has largely held. He stressed that politics, reputation, regional dynamics, and external influences often matter as much as the law, and warned that conflict will undermine long-term development and prosperity in ASEAN.



## Panel 2

# Navigating Challenges to the Existing Rules-Based International Order

**Moderator: Solicitor-General Daphne Hong (Solicitor-General, Attorney-General's Chambers, Singapore)**

**Ng Bee Kim (Chief Trade Representative, Ministry of Trade and Industry, Singapore)**

**Prof. Bernard Oxman (Judge *ad hoc*, ITLOS & ICJ | Emeritus Professor, University of Miami)**

**Dr. Tara Maria Davenport (Co-Head, Ocean Law and Policy, NUS-CIL | Assistant Professor, NUS Law)**

**Ambassador Ma Xinmin (Legal Adviser, Foreign Ministry, China | ILC Member)**

This session explored the other pressing challenges that international law faced in 2025, outside of the threats to global peace and security. The panellists explored recent developments that expose major gaps in international norms and their enforcement, and considered whether multilateralism today is working as it should or, as sometimes suggested, is on the brink of collapse.

**Professor (Emeritus) Bernard Oxman (University of Miami)** began by noting that “we live in interesting times”, where reference to “international niceties” and contempt for international rules and their institutions reminds of a Hobbesian state of nature, where the world is governed by force. He noted that encouraging respect for international law is no easy task, while finding that two major factors posing challenges to the international legal order today are

the vulnerability of supply chains, and poor migration management.



**Ms. Ng Bee Kim (Ministry of Trade and Industry)**, highlighted contemporary challenges that the global trade regime faces, the effects on these challenges on the rules-based global order, and avenues for reform. She noted the United States’ recent “liberation day tariffs”, which contravene WTO rules and depart from the post-second world war regime that was premised on non-discrimination and equality between States. She called for stronger diplomatic

responses focused on, among other things, reforming the WTO and forming “coalitions of the willing” to strengthen resilience.

**Dr. Tara Davenport (NUS-CIL; NUS Law School)** described the most pressing threats to critical maritime infrastructure today, the challenges they pose to the international legal order, and potential responses that may be adopted. She noted that UNCLOS does not provide for responses to deliberate damage to States’ undersea infrastructure, but argued that, being a flexible and enduring Convention, should be leveraged to address contemporary challenges such as these.

**Ambassador Ma Xinmin (ILC member; Chinese Foreign Ministry)** explored the major breakthroughs of the ICJ’s recent Advisory Opinion on Climate Change, and reflected on its broader implications for climate governance. He argued that it sets out the legal foundations of States’ obligations relating to climate change, introduces the due diligence principle for assessing State conduct, and engages in progressive development by

adopting expansive interpretations of existing rules. Climate litigation is an important tool, but cannot replace consensus mechanisms and cooperation between States.

In the ensuing discussions, panellists explored how States and international communities should counter to the “might makes right” approach and flagrant disregard for the international rule of law, the importance of rebuilding consensus within the international community, responses to fraudulent ship registrations, and practical steps that the international law community can take to build respect for its norms and institutions in the real world.



## Panel 3

# A Time of Paradox: A Year of Achievements for International Law

**Moderator: Prof. Makane Moïse Mbengue (Distinguished Visiting Scholar, NUS-CIL | Professor of International Law, University of Geneva)**

**Steven Solomon (Principal Legal Officer, WHO)**

**Prof. Patricia Galvao Teles (Professor of International Law, Autonomous University of Lisbon | ILC Member)**

**Deputy Attorney-General Lionel Yee (Deputy Attorney-General, Attorney-General's Chambers, Singapore)**

The final panel elaborated on a central paradox of the international legal order – despite profound challenges that undermine some of the foundational international legal norms, there are notable achievements too.

As noted by **Prof. Makane Moïse Mbengue (University of Geneva)**, it is a “paradox of resilience”, characterised by the ability of international law to adjust to new realities, the institutional strength to maintain legitimacy in the face of political backlash, the resilience of legal norms, or the power of legal innovation.

**Deputy Attorney-General Lionel Yee (AGC-Singapore)** highlighted key developments in the implementation of the BBNJ Agreement, which entered into force merely two years after it opened for signatures. He noted that the growing number of States

Parties to the Convention is commendable, but stressed that all major States acting in the high seas must be party to the treaty, in order for its objectives to be meaningfully attained. The implementation of the Agreement’s provisions in the UK through the passage of a domestic Bill demonstrates the steps that dualist States Parties may take to give full effect to it.



**Stephen Solomon (World Health Organisation)** highlighted the paradoxes that characterised the work of the WHO in 2025, which saw notable

achievements such as the adoption of the Pandemic Treaty and substantial amendments to the International Health Regulations, as well as Palestine becoming member of the Regulations, despite notifications that the US and Argentina sought to withdraw from the organisation. Three paradoxes that arose in negotiating the Pandemic Treaty were the tension between sovereignty and solidarity, between equity and self-interest, and between feasibility and final success. Ultimately, the Treaty is an extraordinary achievement, and these paradoxes were merely stepping stones that pushed States to be more creative at negotiations.

**Prof. Galvao Teles (ILC Member; Autonomous University of Lisbon)** began by suggesting that paradox is perhaps central to the work of the International Law Commission, as it is said to have experienced its “golden years” during the Cold War. She argued that perhaps this is because the Commission should more robustly engage in progressive development and legal innovation during political disruptions and in the face of new and complex challenges. Climate change-induced sea level rise posed such a challenge for international law, leading States to

urge the Commission to address three crucial facets of the phenomenon: the preservation of baselines and maritime zones, Statehood, and the Protection of Persons. The final report of the Study Group was adopted by consensus in 2025.

In the discussions that followed, panellists were asked about what holds major powers back from ratifying the BBNJ Agreement, the process of Palestine joining the International Health Regulations, the UN’s potential role as a global regulatory watchdog to combat unlawful shipping practices, specific provisions of the Pandemic Treaty and the International Health Regulations, accountability mechanisms within the WHO, and whether there appear to be any underlying common factors that drove these international law successes.



# Roundtable Discussion

## International Law in Action

**Moderator: Professor Tommy Koh (Ambassador at Large, Singapore)**

**H.E. Ambassador Asim Iftikhar Ahmad (Permanent Representative of Pakistan to the United Nations)**

**H.E. Ambassador Kateryna Zelenko (Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Ukraine to Singapore)**

**Ambassador Artis Bertulis (Ambassador of the European Union to Singapore)**

**Dr. Nilüfer Oral (Director, NUS Centre for International Law)**

The roundtable discussion was moderated by **Prof. Tommy Koh (Singapore)**, who asked the speakers to bring the Conference to a close by looking beyond doctrinal debates to explore the relevance of international law in the day-to-day practice of States and international organisations. The speakers considered the interplay between international law and international relations, grappling with the political and institutional constraints that shape how norms are interpreted and applied, to identify where and how reform is most urgently needed.

**Ambassador Asim Iftikhar Ahmad (Permanent Representative of Pakistan to the UN)** reviewed the Security Council's work in past year, noting strong criticism over its failure to respond effectively to crises such as those in Gaza and Ukraine, which deepened divisions and hampered work on other issues.

He urged for practical appraisals of international rules, warning that selective application undermines the system as much as outright violations. This selectivity is evidenced in declining treaty compliance and the increased use of force by States. Despite legal and political constraints, he highlighted achievements such as the consensus adoption of Resolution 27/88 in a deeply divided Council, which reaffirmed the importance of peaceful dispute settlement. He argued that international law is followed more often than it is broken,



and pointed to robust multilateralism in adopting instruments like the BBNJ Agreement and in rising participation in ICJ proceedings. He also supported greater Security Council use of the ICJ's advisory jurisdiction when, for example, its work is paralysed by the use of the veto power. Looking ahead, he stressed the need for inclusive development of international law, backed by stronger legal capacity-building for the Global South, ending with the question: "should power dilute law, or should law discipline power?"

**Ambassador Kataryna Zelenko (Ukraine Ambassador to Singapore)** updated participants on Russia's war against Ukraine and ongoing, albeit slow, peace efforts. She noted that February this year will mark four years since the full-scale invasion and twelve years since Russia's aggression began, with far-reaching geopolitical consequences. She urged States to step-up support for Ukraine's sovereignty, noting that such efforts are essential for upholding international law and the UN Charter. On the peace negotiations, she outlined Ukraine's non-negotiable conditions: respect for its territorial integrity and security, freedom to choose alliances, no limits on defence capabilities, and no decisions about Ukraine without Ukraine's meaningful participation



She stressed that Ukraine must continue exercising its self-defence, while other States should raise the costs of aggression through non-military tools such as sanctions, asset freezes, export controls, and immunity waivers. While a number of States have taken such measures, she warned that they are often evaded via Russia's shadow fleet, which also poses significant environmental risks. Other steps that are essential to ensure accountability and the non-recurrence of violence are thorough assessments of Russian IHL violations, potentially reimagining international crimes, and ensuring punishment for aggression.

Amidst growing tensions over the United States' declared intention to acquire Greenland, **Ambassador Artis Bertulis (EU Ambassador to Singapore)** outlined recent developments



and the European Union's position on the matter. He struck a note of cautious optimism, noting that, however fraught, dialogue is preferable to silence and that recent transatlantic talks show that negotiations remain possible even with seemingly irreconcilable positions. Recent transatlantic talks show that negotiations remain possible even with seemingly irreconcilable positions. He recounted recent statements by the EU's political leadership, emphasizing the core principles that guide the bloc's approach: complete solidarity with Greenland and Denmark, respect for the Greenlandic people's right to self-determination, stronger European

investment in Greenland's security, promoting wider Arctic security, and integrating Arctic security into the EU's wider security strategy. He stressed that the international community is at a crossroads between reinforcing the existing international legal order, or sliding towards a multipolar world with growing disregard for the international rule of law. The latter will likely create great political instability. He argued the objective must be a resilient legal order, and urged States to defend its norms robustly; international law erodes not just when rules are violated, but when we are silent in the face of such breaches.



## Closing Remarks

**Professor Tommy Koh** brought the session to a close by thanking the speakers for their insights, and noting with appreciation that the United States ruled out the use of force against Greenland. He expressed his hope that the negotiations on the matter will reach a successful conclusion, which respects Danish sovereignty over Greenland, as well as the rights of the people of Greenland to self-determination. He congratulated NUS-CIL and Dr. Oral for the large turnout at this year's conference (344 attendees), after he had challenged them to reach 300 participants last year.

**Dr. Nilüfer Oral** closed by thanking the ambassadors for bringing the day's reflections to life through the "International Law in Action" panel, and the speakers and moderators

for their insightful discussions. Noting how today's global conflicts underscore the theme of "conflict, disruption and paradox", she suggested this may be another Bandung Moment, calling on a coalition of the willing to defend international law and not remain silent in the face of disregard. At the same time, she stressed that the conference was not meant to portray international law as purely in decline. The sessions, beginning with Judge Yusuf's keynote address, highlighted both grave violations and significant achievements. She urged participants to challenge pessimistic narratives and amplify the continuing vitality of international law and multilateralism, reflected in the growing use of international dispute settlement mechanisms.

