What is Anarchy and can we overcome it?

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In January 2026 the United States of America started "Operation Absolute Resolve" and captured the Venezuelan president Maduro and his wife. The abduction caused a wide range of critical reactions. If we imagine a comparable situation at the domestic level, for example, somebody kidnapping another person, there would be much harsher consequences. The fact that this is not happening is related to the concept of anarchy. It basically describes the lack of an authority capable of implementing decisions. In international relations, anarchy refers to the absence of a central authority above sovereign states.

Legal perspectives on Anarchy

Based on international treaties, all states are equal, and there is no higher authority that can compel a state to act. Nevertheless, institutions exist that mitigate those legal aspects of anarchy: the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court. The International Criminal

Court was established through an international treaty, the Rome Statute, to prosecute serious crimes of international significance when local courts are unable to do so. By comparison, the International Court of Justice, which is enshrined in the UN Charter, deals with legal disputes between states, provided that both parties consent to the Court's jurisdiction.

On the one hand, this can be seen as a partial overcoming of anarchy because there are treaty-based institutions with restricted authority over states. On the other hand, there are no independent mechanism to enforce their decisions because these institutions have no executive power and depend on the cooperation of member states and the international community.

What further ideas are there to overcome anarchy?

There are various perspectives and approaches that differ in their response to the question of how to deal with anarchy. Even the concepts of liberalism and realism, which are basic concepts in international relations, are based on the assumption of an anarchic system.

Self-help:

The concept of self-help, which is part of the theory of realism, advocates for acceptance of the anarchic state of affairs. The concept of self-help stipulates that each state pursues its own interests and is also responsible for safeguarding its own sovereignty. The consequence is that military security is essential for the protection of national territory.

Cooperation:

Another approach is to weaken the consequences of anarchy. This can be achieved by cooperation, an approach that is associated with the theory of liberalism. In liberal international relations theories, international institutions provide such opportunities to learn how to cooperate.

World State:

A further idea to overcome anarchy would be the foundation of a world state with executive, legislative and judicial functions. A prerequisite would be that states give up parts of their sovereignty and agree to structures and forms of government.

To sum up, there are different approaches regarding how to deal with anarchy, ranging from acceptance to transformation of the current state. The theories of liberalism and realism both assume anarchy, which exists on a legal level but is weakened by intervention in practice.

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