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# Four Contending U.S. Approaches to Multilateralism

Stewart Patrick



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## Introduction

The era of U.S. president Donald Trump exposed the shortcomings of a unilateralist and hypernationalist approach to the pursuit of U.S. global objectives. Although that orientation still commands support in some Republican quarters, a more compelling foreign policy debate for the United States has emerged: What form of multilateralism is currently best suited to advance U.S. national interests and international stability?

This historical moment is defined by two countervailing trends, as described in the 2022 National Security Strategy issued by U.S. President Joe Biden's administration. The first is a profusion of transnational challenges that can only be addressed, mitigated, or resolved through collective action, such as climate change and pandemic disease. The second is a resurgence of geopolitical competition that hinders that very cooperation.<sup>1</sup> The imperative for collective action has never been greater, yet the world remains, as United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Antonio Guterres bemoans, "gridlocked in colossal global dysfunction."<sup>2</sup>

Biden has turned the page on Trump's "America First" foreign policy, but the debate over alternative approaches to intergovernmental cooperation has just begun.<sup>3</sup> Within the U.S. foreign policy establishment, four distinct models vie for primacy—and the administration's attention. The first is a *charter* conception of multilateralism, focused on the UN's model of universal membership. The second is a *club* approach, which seeks to rally established democracies as the foundation for world order. The third is a *concert* model, which seeks comity and joint action among the world's major powers. The fourth is a *coalition* approach, which would tailor ad hoc frameworks to each global contingency. Each of the so-called four Cs lays claim to a respective virtue: legitimacy, solidarity, capability, and flexibility.<sup>4</sup>

As the Biden administration begins its third year—and as internationalists continue to advocate for different modes of multilateralism to tackle a daunting global agenda—the time is ripe for the United States to take a more strategic and intentional approach to international cooperation. Each of the four Cs rests on specific assumptions, makes distinct

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## **The time is ripe for the United States to take a more strategic and intentional approach to international cooperation.**

causal and normative claims, and poses real-world trade-offs for the pursuit of U.S. preferences and prospects for effective collective action. To be able to weigh their relative merits in specific circumstances, policymakers first need to better understand their conceptual underpinnings and practical implications.<sup>5</sup>

The charter approach to multilateral cooperation gives pride of place to the UN and other encompassing, treaty-based organizations that reflect the principle of sovereign equality. For all its shortcomings, the UN continues to enjoy unequalled global legitimacy by virtue of its universal membership, binding charter, and sole authority—under the auspices of the Security Council—to authorize the use of force. As then deputy secretary of state Antony Blinken explained in 2016, “There remains no substitute for the work the UN does, the legitimacy it brings, the reach it allows.”<sup>6</sup>

The second approach, that of a club, aims to revive and reconsolidate the Western community of advanced market democracies as the core of an open, rules-based international system. Consistent with the tenets of liberal internationalism, such a strategy focuses above all on strengthening the existing multilateral institutions that unite the world’s free societies. The club model has recently elicited renewed interest thanks to the strategic challenges posed by a rising China seemingly bent on challenging existing norms and rules of state conduct and by a revisionist Russia intent on overturning the post–Cold War order in Europe.

A third approach would vest responsibility for world order in an updated, global version of the nineteenth-century Concert of Europe. The members of such a directorate would encompass both liberal and illiberal states. They would agree under this scheme to moderate their ideological competition and tolerate each other’s political differences in the interest of jointly managing global and regional crises and cooperating on shared threats such as climate change, pandemics, nuclear proliferation, and terrorism.

Finally, the coalition model envisions a flexible, à la carte approach to cooperation. In contrast to the charter, club, and concert, no set configuration of states takes center stage in collective action. Rather, the identity and number of parties at the multilateral table in any given instance depends on the nature of the global challenge, the degree of interest among potential participants, and the relevant competencies each actor can bring to bear in resolving it.

To be sure, these categories represent ideal types and can blur in practice. The UN, for instance, includes elements of both charter (the General Assembly) and concert (the Security Council). Still, it is possible to identify to all four orientations—UN universalism, democratic

solidarity, great power prerogative, and variable geometry—in the Biden administration’s foreign policy to date, including its policy responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

As in the past, actual U.S. foreign and national security policy in the remainder of the twenty-first century is likely to involve an ecumenical amalgam of all four approaches. Such heterodoxy makes sense, because the United States has a wide range of objectives and needs to operate on several chessboards at once: it has a simultaneous interest in promoting universal multilateralism within the United Nations; reinforcing the solidarity that exists among its closest democratic allies; negotiating basic rules of great power coexistence and conduct; and exploiting flexible coalitions as circumstances warrant (see table 1). The trick for the United States will be developing criteria to decide when it makes sense to incline more in one direction rather than another and to seek overall complementarity among these orientations, based on a full appreciation of their historical legacies, normative stakes, and practical implications.

**Table 1: Four Models of Multilateral Cooperation**

	 <b>Charter</b>	 <b>Club</b>	 <b>Concert</b>	 <b>Coalition</b>
Basic approach	Focus on UN and other encompassing treaty-based bodies	Rally established democracies as basis for cooperation	Seek comity and joint action among world’s major powers	Tailor ad hoc arrangements to each global contingency
Core virtue	Legitimacy	Solidarity	Capability	Flexibility
Assumptions	The United Nations and other formal, universal bodies grounded in treaty law offer the firmest foundation for international cooperation and world order.	The future of an open, rules-based international system depends above all on collective action among like-minded liberal states.	A stable world order requires major-power agreement on basic rules of state conduct and a commitment to collective crisis management.	Managing a complex global agenda requires an à la carte approach, with the constellation of players shifting with the specific challenge.
Advantages	Enhances cooperation through global membership, standing capabilities, legal foundations, and binding commitments	Allows democracies to define and defend principles and rules of an open world against their adversaries	Provides a pragmatic platform for managing strategic rivalry and for taking decisive joint action	Facilitates flexible, modular, and nimble, cooperation via an ad hoc, informal approach
Drawbacks	The UN and other large-membership bodies are vulnerable to sclerosis, principal-agent problems, regional bloc dynamics, lowest-common-denominator outcomes, and other pathologies.	Democracies don’t always agree on rules; developing country democracies may be skeptical of the club approach; global problems do not sort themselves according to regime type.	Great power interaction does not guarantee great power cooperation, lacks global legitimacy, entrenches power asymmetries, and generates a normatively shallow order.	Multilateralism à la carte can raise transaction costs, undermine formal bodies, encourage forum shopping, and lack enforcement, legitimacy, and accountability.



The charter conception of world order treats the United Nations, on account of its binding charter and universal membership, as the ultimate foundation for international peace and security and the first port of call for cooperation on global challenges. The UN Charter's most important function is establishing rules governing the use of force, which is prohibited in all but two cases: when it is conducted in self-defense or when it is authorized by the UN Security Council.

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## **The charter conception of world order treats the United Nations as first port of call for cooperation on global challenges.**

The UN is not a pure system of collective security, in which an attack on any state is automatically considered an attack on all. Rather, the framework balances egalitarianism and hierarchy. All member states participate in the UN General Assembly (UNGA), which makes decisions on a one-state, one-vote basis, but ultimate authority over peace and security, particularly enforcement action, is vested in a Security Council dominated by five veto-wielding

permanent members, which can pass resolutions creating legal obligations for all member states. This bargain recognizes that the world's major powers must inevitably play a custodial role in safeguarding world order—and that the price of their acquiescence to the UN is a guarantee that the council can never act against their perceived vital national interests.<sup>7</sup>

Beyond its fundamental purpose of “sav[ing] future generations from the scourge of war,”<sup>8</sup> the UN has an additional mandate to advance economic development and human rights as well other social purposes, including the activities of UNGA, the UN Secretariat, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and any subsidiary bodies it may create. In the nearly eight decades since they established the world body in 1945, member states have made full use of these authorities. New UN departments, programs, specialized agencies, and treaty bodies have been created to manage and govern an expanding array of global challenges, from humanitarian emergencies and peace operations to nuclear proliferation, terrorism, outer space activities, cyber conflict, pandemic disease, climate change, and more. Along the way, the definition of what constitutes “security” has continued to expand, even as the Security Council continues to debate how much to broaden its own remit.<sup>9</sup>

Following Biden's victory over Trump in November 2020, the incoming administration reaffirmed the charter's purposes and pledged to restore the UN as a cornerstone of U.S. foreign and national security policy. “America is back. Multilateralism is back. Diplomacy is back,” exulted Linda Thomas-Greenfield, Biden's pick for UN ambassador, when her nomination was announced.<sup>10</sup> Once inaugurated, Biden rescinded Trump's decisions to withdraw from both the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Paris Climate Agreement. The administration subsequently ran for, and won, a seat on the UN Human Rights Council, which Trump had left.

The Biden administration's generally positive stance toward the United Nations has reflected several convictions—grounded in reality—that its predecessor did not share.<sup>11</sup> First, the UN remains the world's premier multilateral body and foundational bedrock for international cooperation, by virtue of its universality, legal status, multidimensional mandate, and authority over the use of force. True, it is no longer the only game in town: since 1945, scores of regional and subregional organizations, alliances, and informal minilateral groupings like the Group of Seven (G7) and Group of Twenty (G20) have emerged to assist with international governance. Still, nothing comes close to the UN and its many affiliated agencies, including the Bretton Woods financial institutions, in terms of their technical capabilities and perceived legitimacy. It is fantasy to imagine that these competencies and authorities could be recreated on a purely ad hoc basis.

Second, broad-brush conservative critiques of the UN misleadingly clump together the distinct organs that comprise the United Nations system, each possessing unique strengths and weaknesses. The Security Council, dominated by five veto-wielding permanent members, is the most important. It can accomplish little without U.S. assent, but it is also vulnerable to paralysis. The General Assembly, for its part, serves as the putative (and often noisy) town hall of the world. It can engage in general debate and pass symbolic resolutions, but it has few prerogatives beyond budgetary authorities. The UN Secretariat, which exists to carry out the charter, provides a platform for the secretary general to shape the global agenda and provide good offices, subject to the constraints of member states, who typically prefer the chief executive to be more of a “secretary” and less of a “general.” Finally, much of the UN's substantive global impact reflects the activities of dozens of UN specialized and technical agencies, from the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), many though not all of which do indispensable work.

Third, the United States generally gains more from remaining inside the UN tent, where it can shape global rules and prevent strategic adversaries and ideological opponents from hijacking the organization, than it does carping from the outside. When the United States defects, as it did often under Trump, it undercuts its own long-term interests. The troubled Human Rights Council is a case in point.<sup>12</sup> By abandoning that admittedly flawed body instead of fighting the good fight, the United States guaranteed that the proverbial foxes would run the henhouse. More generally, the Trump administration created a vacuum at the UN that China was only too happy to fill in service of its authoritarian vision of world order.<sup>13</sup> While the administration railed against “globalism,” Beijing upped its multilateral game, securing key UN leadership positions and deploying financial incentives to win support from member states.<sup>14</sup> The Biden administration has since sought to regain the initiative, rallying support in New York and Geneva—as well as national capitals—to win important votes.

Fourth, the United Nations remains a relative bargain, allowing America to advance global goals it cannot accomplish on its own or only at prohibitive cost. In 2020, the United States provided some \$11.6 billion to the world body—more than any other nation, but only 1.5 percent of the \$776 billion that Washington spent on the U.S. military.<sup>15</sup> About two-thirds of this UN funding came as voluntary contributions, rather than assessed dues, to agencies

like the UNHCR. The remainder reflected internationally negotiated, legally binding U.S. contributions to the UN's regular and peacekeeping budgets, with Washington's assessed share pegged at 22 percent and (nearly) 28 percent, respectively.<sup>16</sup> Although the scale of U.S. peacekeeping dues exceeds its share of the world economy—23.4 percent—this \$2 billion annual expenditure is money well spent. For only about \$6 per American, the United States supports the life-saving work of roughly 75,000 military and police personnel in a dozen missions around the world—a fraction of the cost of sending U.S. soldiers to perform similar tasks.<sup>17</sup> Beyond the modest financial expense, evidence shows that UN peacekeeping can reduce local violence and death, thus advancing U.S. humanitarian and security interests.<sup>18</sup>

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## **Any self-imposed constraints on U.S. freedom of action are a small price to pay for upholding a rule-bound international system.**

Fifth, UN membership is fully consistent with American sovereignty.<sup>19</sup> Contrary to the claims of America First nationalists, the UN does not infringe on U.S. constitutional independence nor political authority, because it does not involve subordination to a supranational entity. The UN is a voluntary, horizontal arrangement among sovereign governments, a reality reinforced by the U.S. veto in the Security Council.<sup>20</sup> What UN membership does require is that each nation voluntarily accept modest limits on its notional array of policy choices. This is of course the very purpose of multilateral cooperation: to bind all parties to basic rules and responsibilities, so they can resolve shared challenges and advance common aims.<sup>21</sup> Any self-imposed constraints on U.S. freedom of action are a small price to pay for upholding a rule-bound international system.

Notwithstanding these advantages, the UN has obvious handicaps. First, it often seems built for frustration, not least for its most powerful member. Although U.S. negotiators in the World War II-era administration of president Franklin D. Roosevelt spearheaded the drafting of the UN Charter, the blueprint they created virtually guarantees occasional outcomes that are less than ideal from a U.S. perspective.<sup>22</sup> The veto provision lets other permanent Security Council members, notably China and Russia, thwart U.S. preferences. In the case of Ukraine, Moscow has blocked universal sanctions and other Chapter 7 enforcement actions against itself. From an ethical perspective, this is outrageous. “Where is this security that the Security Council needs to guarantee?” Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky demanded in April 2022. “It’s not there.”<sup>23</sup> Likewise, the General Assembly’s one-state, one-vote format allows ideological coalitions and regional blocs to engage in theater rather than exercise real responsibility. Finally, the UN’s budgetary processes and labyrinthine reporting structures, which empower the UNGA and ECOSOC rather than major donor states, is a constant aggravation to Washington. These are facts of life that U.S. administrations and diplomats can ameliorate but never eliminate.

Second, the UN and its agencies do not spring magically to life, even in crises, nor are they immune from geopolitics. There is a natural temptation to blame UN organs like the WHO for failures in international cooperation like the haphazard and uncoordinated response

to COVID-19. In reality, the performance of multilateral institutions tends to mirror the preferences of their main members. It is unrealistic to expect UN multilateralism to deliver when—as during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic—the world’s major powers treat it as a geopolitical football or abandon the field altogether. It was the decisions by China and the United States to prioritize strategic rivalry over practical problem-solving, above all else, that guaranteed the UN’s pandemic failures.<sup>24</sup> If a fully-fledged Sino-U.S. cold war erupts in the future, one should anticipate an enduring collapse of Security Council cooperation, akin to the period from 1947 to 1989 when it was marginal to many major security issues. Already, geopolitics has paralyzed much of the council’s work. We risk moving toward a world, as Guterres warned in September 2022, of “no cooperation, no dialogue, no collective problem solving.”<sup>25</sup>

Third, holding the UN accountable to member states and (ultimately) taxpayers remains difficult. All formal multilateral organizations create what academics call “principal-agent dilemmas,” because they require governments (in this case, the principals) to delegate authority to international secretariats (the agents) that may pursue their own agendas rather than respond to the principals’ desires. Compounding this oversight dilemma, member states typically pool their authority within the governing boards of UN agencies. Even when voting is weighted to account for relative financial contributions (as in the World Bank and International Monetary Fund), national influence is diluted. The dynamics of delegation and pooling mean that global bodies can easily go off track—and that the White House and U.S. Congress must remain vigilant to this possibility.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, Security Council reform is both imperative and unlikely. In a perfect world, its composition would adjust automatically to power shifts, such as India’s emergence as a major strategic player and imminently the world’s most-populous nation—much like football (soccer) clubs rise to and fall from the English Premier League. A Security Council whose permanent membership continues to overweight Europe while ignoring the developing world is courting a legitimacy crisis. In a nod to this reality, Biden, in his September 2022 UNGA address, not only reconfirmed U.S. support for expanding the council to include new permanent and elected members but also for the first time endorsed new permanent seats for Africa and Latin America.<sup>27</sup> While his audience was receptive, the odds of realizing such a reform are long. Absent a global catastrophe, it is unclear what can break the long-standing, three-way diplomatic logjam that pits the chief aspirants to permanent membership, their main regional competitors, and a united African bloc with ambitious demands of its own.<sup>28</sup>

In her January 2021 Senate confirmation hearings, UN ambassador-designate Thomas-Greenfield insisted, “When America shows up—when we are consistent and persistent—when we exert our influence in accordance with our values—the United Nations can be an indispensable institution for advancing peace, security, and our collective

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well-being.”<sup>29</sup> The subsequent war in Ukraine has demonstrated both the UN’s continued utility as a platform for advancing U.S. objectives and the frustrations inherent in collective security. Within the first week of Russia’s invasion, the Biden administration had used the Security Council to put Moscow, despite the latter’s veto, on the defensive. The United States also helped engineer resolutions in the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council condemning the Russian invasion, as well as suspending Russia’s membership in the latter body.<sup>30</sup> While these symbolic steps did not reverse Moscow’s aggression, they did contribute to its diplomatic isolation. In the ensuing months, dozens of UN organs—from UNHCR to the IAEA to the Food and Agriculture Organization—have worked to contain global fallout from the war. The secretary-general and other senior UN officials have repeatedly exercised their moral authority and good offices, including in negotiating a deal to permit Ukrainian grain exports from the Black Sea.<sup>31</sup>

More problematically from a U.S. and broader Western perspective, a disturbing number of UN member states, particularly from the developing world, remain reluctant to soundly condemn—much less cut ties with—Russia, despite its violation of the sovereignty and nonintervention principles that lie at the heart of the charter. Indeed, mobilizing global sentiment and action on behalf of Ukraine has, if anything, grown more difficult as the war has progressed.<sup>32</sup> The UN’s uneven performance helps explain why the Biden administration’s National Security Strategy balances the U.S. commitment to universalist multilateralism with a parallel intention to advance world order and U.S. security through cooperation among like-minded nations.<sup>33</sup>



The club approach to multilateralism posits that the most promising foundation for global order and cooperation is not UN universalism but a league of advanced market democracies committed to an open, liberal, and rules-based international system. It assumes that established democracies constitute a distinctive “security community” dedicated to shared political and economic principles—namely, support for representative and accountable governance, open markets, and the rule of law at home and abroad—and among whom armed conflict has become inconceivable.<sup>34</sup> Such collective identity commitments encourage these countries to define their national interests and policy preferences similarly, narrowing the range of potential disputes and increasing the prospect that any disagreements that do arise are resolved through diplomatic consultation and mutual adjustment. Grounded in liberal internationalism, the club approach promises to advance both the material ends and aspirational purposes of its democratic members.

The heyday of the club approach was during the Cold War, when the United States sought to consolidate an alliance of like-minded democracies as the core of its grand strategy to

contain the Soviet Union. This was not the orientation the Roosevelt administration had anticipated during World War II. Indeed, U.S. postwar planners laid the groundwork for a new structure of international peace and security based on the UN, complemented by new multilateral bodies to manage the world economy, including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and an envisioned international trade organization.<sup>35</sup> To be sure, Roosevelt did not envision a pure system of collective security; he understood that the victor powers must jointly guarantee the postwar order. Still, he expressed confidence that the creation of the UN would “spell an end to the system of unilateral action, the exclusive alliances, the spheres of influence, the balances of power and all the other expedients that have been tried for centuries—and have always failed.”<sup>36</sup>

## **The club approach to multilateralism posits that the most promising foundation for global order and cooperation is a league of advanced market democracies.**

Unfortunately, the Soviet Union found this universalist vision—and the priority it accorded self-determination over spheres of influence—deeply threatening. As Moscow tightened its grip over Eastern Europe, the United States deferred its “one world” dreams to build a narrower “free world” community capable of deterring Soviet aggression and subversion. Roosevelt’s successor, Harry S. Truman, signaled this dramatic reorientation in U.S. grand strategy seventy-six years ago, in response to perceived Soviet designs in the eastern Mediterranean, Moscow’s hardening of control in Eastern Europe, and communist efforts to seize power in war-ravaged European democracies. Enunciating the doctrine that would bear his name, Truman committed the United States to a sweeping new global mission: “to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.”<sup>37</sup> The United States bolstered Western Europe economically, politically, and, with the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949, militarily.

Of course, actual U.S. Cold War policy often fell far short of these high-minded ideals, particularly in the (post)colonial and developing worlds, where the United States repeatedly aligned with right-wing despots who proved their anticommunist bona fides.<sup>38</sup> As the Manichean logic of containment took hold, the so-called free world came to include many countries where actual freedom was in short supply. Despite this hypocrisy, successive U.S. administrations continued to treat solidarity among market democracies as the core of U.S. grand strategy.

When the bipolar confrontation suddenly ended, many in the U.S. foreign policy establishment dreamed that this community would expand gradually to encompass the entire world.<sup>39</sup> In 2000, then U.S. secretary of state Madeleine Albright and Polish foreign minister Bronisław Geremek cosponsored a ministerial conference in Warsaw where delegations from 106 nations signed the Warsaw Declaration, titled “Towards a Community of Democracies,” pledging cooperation in advancing democratic governance within their own countries and helping consolidate fragile transitions from authoritarian or totalitarian rule.<sup>40</sup>

These visions of a democratic renaissance have since been dashed by a combination of resurgent geopolitical rivalry pitting China and Russia against the West, the retreat of democracy in many other parts of the world, and the erosion of democratic norms within the United States itself.

For proponents of the club approach to international order, however, these trends merely warrant a doubling down on the ties that bind established democracies. In the July/August 2022 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, foreign policy experts Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay assert that unifying the world's community of advanced democracies is the only way to rebuild an international system based on "the rule of law rather than the law of the jungle."<sup>41</sup>

This is not a new argument—Daalder and Lindsay have been making it since at least 2004.<sup>42</sup> In 2008, the U.S. State Department policy planning staff proposed establishing a strategic dialogue among ten leading democracies.<sup>43</sup> The vision of a league of democracies goes even further back, however. It draws on the late eighteenth-century writings of Immanuel Kant, who saw a confederation of liberal republics as one precondition for "perpetual peace," as well as on the thinking of U.S. president Woodrow Wilson, who was convinced that enduring international stability after World War I would require a majority of nations (especially great powers) to be democracies.<sup>44</sup>

According to its current champions, a league of democracies offers open societies the best chance to defend themselves against authoritarian and totalitarian antagonists and to reinforce rules of international conduct conducive to an open world. In *A World Safe for Democracy: Liberal Internationalism and the Crises of Global Order*, Princeton political theorist G. John Ikenberry posits that the fate of the liberal international order depends on whether democracies stand together or apart in confronting their common security, political, and economic dilemmas.<sup>45</sup>

Among U.S. think tanks, the Atlantic Council houses the most vocal supporters of the club approach, expressed through the creation in 2018 of the Democratic Order Task Force. The next year, that body published the "Declaration of Principles for Freedom, Prosperity, and Peace." Its seven pillars included the right of all peoples to freedom and justice; democracy and self-determination; peace and security from aggression, terrorism, and weapons of mass destruction; free markets and equal opportunity; an open and healthy planet; external assistance against oppression; and collective action to safeguard these rights.<sup>46</sup>

Subsequently, two Atlantic Council scholars, Ash Jain and Matthew Kroenig, proposed creating "a formal Democracies Ten" (or D-10) by enlarging the current G7 (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States) to include Australia, South Korea, and the European Union (EU, which already participates in the G7 process). The resulting body would serve as a steering committee "aimed at fostering strategic alignment and coordinated action among a group of like-minded, influential democracies to advance a rules-based democratic order." The authors held out the possibility that this club could open its doors to other major democracies that are both "strategically

likeminded” and demonstrate a “capacity for global influence.”<sup>47</sup> Potential candidates could even include developing countries like Brazil, India, and South Africa, provided that “concerns over like-mindedness”—not least in their attitudes toward China and Russia—“can be overcome.”<sup>48</sup>

Well before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Biden had signaled his own affinity with the club approach. After just two months in office, he proclaimed the “battle between the utility of democracies . . . and autocracies” to be the defining struggle of the twenty-first century.<sup>49</sup> A key factor behind this stance was growing alarm in Washington over the perceived failure of the United States’ decades-long, bipartisan effort to persuade Beijing to behave as a “responsible stakeholder.”<sup>50</sup> Biden pledged to revive Western solidarity as a bulwark against Chinese and Russian efforts to subvert free societies and upend the rules-based international order. Indeed, this became a leitmotif of the G7, NATO, and U.S.-EU summits in June 2021.<sup>51</sup> The U.S. president and UK prime minister Boris Johnson underscored this message by releasing a so-called New Atlantic Charter, modeled after the original that Roosevelt and Winston Churchill had issued in August 1941 shortly before the U.S. entry into World War II.<sup>52</sup>

## **Well before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Biden had signaled his own affinity with the club approach.**

Biden warmed to this theme in his first UNGA speech in September 2021. “We stand . . . at an inflection point in history,” he declared. “The future will belong to those who give their people the ability to breathe free, not those who seek to suffocate their people with an iron hand.”<sup>53</sup> This same conviction informed the administration’s Summit for Democracy in December 2021, intended to rally and enhance the resilience of free societies confronting a slew of internal and external threats.<sup>54</sup>

Adversaries reinforced Biden’s gravitation to the club model. In early February 2022, Chinese Premier Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a bilateral partnership with “no limits”—a club of their own, in effect, intended to make the world safe for autocracy. Their global vision was deeply at odds with the U.S. notion of an open, liberal, rule-bound international system.<sup>55</sup> Not three weeks later, Russia invaded Ukraine. The conflict, pitting an authoritarian aggressor against an (admittedly imperfect) democracy, confirmed Biden’s conviction that the globe was splitting into two blocs, much as Soviet aggression and U.S. responses to it had done three quarters of a century before.<sup>56</sup> Speaking in Warsaw soon after, the president framed Ukraine as part of a larger “battle between democracy and autocracy, between liberty and repression, between a rules-based order and one governed by brute force.”<sup>57</sup>

The Russian invasion indeed galvanized the community of advanced market democracies, reinvigorating a transatlantic alliance that French President Emmanuel Macron had pronounced “brain dead” only three years earlier.<sup>58</sup> Putin’s brazen effort to subjugate Ukraine

reminded the citizens of free societies of the foundational values underpinning their security community—and how much they could lose if they allowed Russian aggression to go unchecked and unpunished. Over the ensuing year, the Biden administration has led a unified Western response to Russian aggression, coordinating the stances of other democracies, keeping NATO’s thirty members united in resisting Russian demands and intimidation, orchestrating punishing economic sanctions, supporting the forward deployment of allied troops, and engineering the alliance’s imminent enlargement to add Sweden and Finland.

To Daalder and Lindsay, the Ukraine war reaffirms the imperative of consolidating the free world’s democratic core. Like Jain and Kroenig, they propose expanding the G7, but with a couple of tweaks: tiny New Zealand (population 5 million) would also join and, of greater significance, NATO would gain “a seat at the table for all security-related discussions.” This notional “G-12”—encompassing nearly one billion people and accounting for more than 60 percent of global gross domestic product and military spending—would promote ongoing policy coordination across a range of foreign, security, economic, and global spheres, from resisting Russian and Chinese aggression to combating climate change, preparing for pandemics, halting nuclear proliferation, and harmonizing approaches to trade and investment. “Establishing a G-12,” the authors declare, “is the last best hope to reinvigorate the rules-based order.”<sup>59</sup>

For all its surface advantages, the club model of world order has drawbacks.<sup>60</sup> First, cooperation among democracies, even on matters of security, is hardly guaranteed.<sup>61</sup> The most obvious example is the transatlantic rift over the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, a decision that U.S. president George W. Bush’s administration took over the objection of close U.S. allies. It is hardly the only occasion when European and American leaders have not seen eye to eye. Over the past two decades, transatlantic solidarity has been repeatedly tested by disagreements over trade, digital privacy, climate policy, defense burden-sharing, and Iran’s nuclear program, among other matters. Even under the Atlanticist Biden administration,

U.S. industrial policy and protectionism have raised European hackles and charges of American hypocrisy regarding the “rules-based” international order.<sup>62</sup>

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**For all its surface advantages, the club model of world order has drawbacks. Cooperation among democracies, even on matters of security, is hardly guaranteed.**

Biden has pledged to restore America’s free world leadership, but U.S. partners are still reeling from his predecessor, who shook the foundations of Western solidarity by questioning the G7’s relevance, casting doubt on the United States’ commitment to collective defense within NATO, treating alliances generally as protection rackets, and expressing fawning admiration for despots.<sup>63</sup> Given the distinct

possibility that Trump or another so-called America First Republican could secure the presidency in November 2024, U.S. allies would be wise to hedge their bets against a mercurial superpower whose very commitment to democratic principles (much less to the concept of a so-called free world) is so tenuous.<sup>64</sup>

Second, in the eyes of countless foreign observers, the United States has frittered away its historical standing to speak as the leader of the democratic world, given both the selectivity of its support for freedom abroad and the fragility of its own democracy at home. Biden's "us-versus-them" rhetoric may be bracing for some Americans; it is less persuasive to potential U.S. partners in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East who are aware of democracy's subtle gradations and of the cold-blooded realism of actual U.S. policy, which often includes embracing (or at least fist-bumping) strongmen like Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.<sup>65</sup>

Most damningly, the Trump era exposed glaring weaknesses in the constitutional guardrails against tyranny in the United States itself. For four years, Trump sought to hollow out the institutions of U.S. democracy, including checks and balances on executive power, an independent judiciary and media, and free and fair elections.<sup>66</sup> These efforts culminated in his refusal to accept defeat and his encouragement of the January 6, 2021, insurrection to block the peaceful transfer of power to his legitimate successor. America's radiance as a global beacon of freedom has dimmed.<sup>67</sup>

Third, too great an emphasis on democratic solidarity as a foundation for world order risks being geopolitically divisive, splitting the world into democratic and nondemocratic camps while undermining prospects for pragmatic cooperation with authoritarian powers including on crucial issues of peace and security, climate change, and the global economy. In practice, global problems do not coincide with ideological boundaries, and managing them requires cooperation with adversaries as well as like-minded fellow travelers. The United States and its allies are deeply entwined economically with China, and they need to coordinate with Beijing and (over the medium and longer term) with Moscow to address a slew of transnational threats that pay little heed to regime type, such as the dangers posed by climate change, pandemic disease, and nuclear proliferation.<sup>68</sup>

In response to this critique, proponents of a democratic alliance retort that an East-West geopolitical competition is already well under way, and the culprits are authoritarian China and Russia, who are pursuing revisionist, aggressive, and subversive policies. Neither Beijing nor Moscow, they are quick to add, has allowed the objective need to collaborate with democracies on global challenges temper their own national efforts to overturn the existing rules-based order or interfere in the internal political systems of free societies.<sup>69</sup> In other words, if international cooperation is deteriorating, autocracies are the ones to blame.

Even if this is true, there is a fourth and more serious problem with the club approach: it oversimplifies the global landscape and does not resonate with pressing developing country concerns. To begin with, a strict distinction between democracies and nondemocracies ignores the world's messier realities, including the large and growing number of quasi- or flawed democracies, like India, whose independence and weight in world affairs is increasing.

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## **In practice, global problems do not coincide with ideological boundaries**

These dilemmas came to the fore in the guest list for Biden's 2021 Summit for Democracy, which included the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Pakistan, for example, but not Singapore or Turkey.<sup>70</sup> The effort to assign countries into one of two categories risks alienating important if problematic partners and, in the process, undermining other U.S. diplomatic goals. Compounding matters, when U.S. officials invoke the concept of democratic solidarity, many in the developing world understand this to imply a focus on wealthy, rather than poor, democracies.<sup>71</sup> The West's perceived inattention to development challenges in the Global South reinforces this sentiment.

The war in Ukraine has accentuated this conundrum. While Western nations have thus far maintained a united front in opposition to Moscow's aggression, many emerging economies and developing countries are leery of choosing sides in a new cold war or rallying to democracy's banner. This is true even for democracies like Argentina, Brazil, India, Indonesia, Mexico, and South Africa—all of which have chosen, for an amalgam of historical, ideological, nationalist, and pragmatic reasons, to pursue various degrees of nonalignment. (In India's case, the practical motivations include preserving Russia as a source of military materiel and low-cost energy and as a strategic counterweight to China.)<sup>72</sup> At the G20 foreign ministers meeting in July 2022, Secretary of State Antony Blinken failed to enlist these nations (as well as China, of course) in isolating and punishing Moscow.<sup>73</sup>

In recent months, the Biden administration has wisely adjusted to this diplomatic landscape, subtly reframing geopolitical competition with Russia and China less as a collision of irreconcilable regime types and more as a defense of a rules-based international order. The president signaled this evolution in his second UNGA speech, on September 21, 2022, which depicted the war in Ukraine less as a contest between autocracy and democracy, per se, than as an assault on the UN Charter's fundamental principles of sovereignty and nonintervention to which all UN member states, regardless of their domestic governance models, have committed themselves.<sup>74</sup>

The October 2022 U.S. National Security Strategy expanded on this theme, specifying that it was the aggressive and unsettling behavior of Russia and China, rather than their autocratic governance, per se, that made them a threat. In the words of that document, "The most pressing strategic challenge facing our vision is from powers that layer authoritarian governance with a *revisionist* foreign policy" (emphasis added).<sup>75</sup> This new wrinkle could encourage the Biden administration to loosen the eligibility requirements for admission to its "club." Rather than fixating on regime type, American strategists could focus on rallying any government (Vietnam, for instance) that remains committed to the foundational principles and rules of international order, regardless of its political system. Were the United States to adopt this posture, the vision of a club of democracies would increasingly yield to "a club against revisionism."



Given the imperative of great power cooperation, the shortcomings of universal collective security, and the pitfalls of an alliance of democracies, some self-identified realists in the U.S. foreign policy community argue that the United States should promote a global concert of major powers, modeled after the nineteenth-century Concert of Europe, as the foundation for world order. Two of the most prominent proponents are Richard Haass and Charles Kupchan of the Council on Foreign Relations.<sup>76</sup> Their argument is straightforward and, initially, beguiling.<sup>77</sup> The era of Western material dominance and ideological supremacy is over, they suggest, making it futile to defend the liberal international order. At the same time, a daunting array of transnational threats and challenges, from climate change to nuclear proliferation to cyber insecurity, demands great power cooperation, regardless of regime type. The shrewd and prudent response is to resurrect a modern, global version of the historical Concert of Europe, in which five nominal rivals—the United Kingdom, France, Russia, Prussia, and Austria—consulted and coordinated on a regular basis. Haass and Kupchan nominate six powers as their twenty-first-century heirs: the United States, China, the European Union, Russia, Japan, and India.

The Concert of Europe helped return stability to the continent after a turbulent quarter century that began with the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, encompassed the Napoleonic Wars, and ended at the Congress of Vienna in 1815. As Henry Kissinger explains in *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh, and the Problems of Peace, 1812–1822*, the peacemakers in Vienna succeeded in creating a new form of international order based on comity among, and collective crisis management by, the European great powers.<sup>78</sup>

This was not simply a return to the classical eighteenth-century balance of power. It also entailed a balance of rights and satisfactions among the five major players, with all agreeing to avoid steps that endangered the continent’s “equipoise”—Europe’s state of equilibrium.<sup>79</sup> Members were expected to manage major disputes jointly, which they did in a series of congresses and conferences. The Concert of Europe also rested on the tacit agreement between its liberal and conservative wings (comprising Britain and France on the one hand, and Austria, Russia, and Prussia on the other) not to interfere with each other’s political systems or, more generally, to devolve into armed ideological camps. The result was what Kissinger defines as a “legitimate” international order—that is, one whose members accept the identity and roles of the great powers and embrace basic conventions governing state conduct.<sup>80</sup> The concert succeeded in limiting the incidence of—though not entirely eliminating—great power war in Europe during the nineteenth century.

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## **Some self-identified realists in the U.S. foreign policy community argue that the United States should promote a global concert of major powers.**

Haass and Kupchan seek to revive such a permanent structure for the twenty-first century. Its purpose would be to reach consensus on basic norms of peaceful coexistence, negotiate new rules of state conduct on shared problems, and address regional security crises on an emergency basis. They concede that the resulting normative order would be shallower than what adherents of UN universalism or liberal internationalism might desire, but they insist this is inevitable. In a world of political pluralism, they say, liberal and authoritarian powers must simply agree to disagree on matters like democracy and human rights. A standing secretariat, with accredited representatives, would support this new global concert's work.

The logic behind this old-school vision is hard-nosed and clear. Transnational challenges do not sort themselves by regime type. They require concerted actions among all major powers—democracies and autocracies alike. A case in point is the Iran nuclear deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Any effort to negotiate and enforce a

successor to that agreement would need to involve not only the United States and its Western allies France, Germany, and the UK, but also Russia and China.<sup>81</sup> As a result of Western opposition to its invasion of Ukraine, Moscow has withheld any such cooperation. Without some accommodation for its interests, the Kremlin has essentially said there will be no successor deal. Climate change provides an even sharper dilemma, since China emits a third of the world's greenhouse gases.<sup>82</sup> In November

2021, Washington and Beijing negotiated the U.S.-China Joint Glasgow Declaration on Enhancing Climate Action in the 2020s. Unfortunately, as Sino-U.S. relations deteriorated in 2022, this initiative largely ground to a halt, with Chinese officials suggesting they would link climate cooperation to other sensitive items on the bilateral agenda, not least Taiwan.<sup>83</sup>

The notion of a concert of powers is an alluring prospect for anyone craving a return to simpler times, when a handful of foreign ministers could meet in gilded palaces to determine the fate of the world consistent with the pitiless calculus of realpolitik. Such an anachronistic vision, however, is out of step with the current moment and unrealistic in its assumptions. It would not cure what ails global governance and could well create more problems than it resolves.<sup>84</sup>

The biggest problem with resurrecting a formal concert is that it would lack political legitimacy in the current global context. Over the past two centuries, the international system has swollen to include nearly 200 independent sovereign nations and, under the auspices of the UN, has developed a dense array of multilateral bodies and treaties that regulate everything from the use of force to the allocation of orbital slots in outer space. This vast institutional architecture is imperfect, but its utility should not be ignored. As was already noted, the UN retains unmatched global authority by virtue of its universal membership and legally binding charter. It is hard to imagine that any new global concert would enjoy the same respect. A case in point is the body's envisioned crisis response function. Even if Russia were brought

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**The logic behind this old-school vision is hard-nosed and clear. Transnational challenges do not sort themselves by regime type.**

back into the fold after the Ukraine war, such a role would compete directly with the purpose of the UN Security Council—and without the latter’s grounding in international law.

Most UN member states already consider the G20 (let alone the G7) as unrepresentative and illegitimate. Creating a new, self-appointed global directorate of the United States, China, the EU, Russia, Japan, and India—effectively a G6—would elicit much louder howls from those left outside, not least from Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East.<sup>85</sup> Haass and Kupchan propose to mollify them by granting regional bodies like the African Union, Arab League, Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and Organization of American States periodic audiences before the new concert. But this would simply reinforce a global caste system pitting the dominance and privilege of great powers against the submission and supplication of weak ones—and, unlike the UN Security Council, it would do so outside of the UN Charter’s legal basis. The concert would also likely encourage the world’s fragmentation into at least tacit spheres of influence, as each great power asserts a right, and is even granted leeway, to police its respective neighborhood, a scenario likely to encourage even more unilateral intervention and the emergence of closed regional blocs. Haass and Kupchan suggest that the new concert “would promote regional integration and look to existing regional bodies to encourage restraint.”<sup>86</sup> But history provides few precedents for such self-control.

The scheme’s second shortcoming is its unwarranted optimism that a standing concert will somehow overcome the fundamental differences of interests and values that currently stymie great power cooperation in existing formal bodies like the UN, the World Trade Organization, or even informal ones like the G20. The expectation seems to be, essentially, build it and they will agree. That a mere change of venue will smooth things over sounds like wishful thinking. Haass and Kupchan posit a socialization process of sorts, whereby “genuine and sustained dialogue” will induce diplomatic flexibility. But it is unclear why this specific framework would be any more successful at bridging entrenched disagreements over, say, desirable norms of contingent sovereignty, new rules for cyberspace, or priorities for WHO reform. Haass and Kupchan note that the concert would be more likely than the UN Security Council to reach compromise, since participants in the new arrangement “would not wield vetoes.”<sup>87</sup> The absence of a formal veto, however, would do little to stop an aggrieved power from blocking consensus in practice.<sup>88</sup>

The concert scheme also raises questions of follow-through. Assuming that major powers can actually agree to something of global significance, they would still need to bring other countries onboard with their decisions, as well as ride herd on them to ensure implementation. It is unclear, in this regard, how a concert would leverage the expansive infrastructure of multilateral cooperation that already exists—or surmount the accountability dilemmas that already plague the G20.

The problem here is not the idea of a nominal G6, *per se*, but rather the aspiration to make this single arrangement, or some variation on it, the apex institution for international cooperation and coordination. Obviously, there is value in having powerful nations meet informally to explore new rules of global governance, which can then be negotiated and

ratified in more encompassing bodies. It also makes sense to have contact groups for specific regional challenges, such as the P5+1 talks on Iran's nuclear program, which include the five permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany. Instead of creating a new great power concert, a more pragmatic approach (discussed in more depth in the next section of this paper) would recognize that the precise identity and number of players who need to be around the multilateral table will often vary with the issue at stake. The United States and other great powers need flexibility to adjust such minilateral mechanisms to specific circumstances.

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## **The global concert proposal represents the premature surrender of liberal internationalism.**

Finally, there is a third limitation to the global concert proposal that advocates of the club approach to international order would be quick to point out: it represents the premature surrender of liberal internationalism.<sup>89</sup> Today, illiberal forces are on the march; democracies are on the defensive. This is arguably the very moment, however, to reinforce Western solidarity in defense of an open, rules-based order—a vision grounded in shared interests and values that has traditionally animated U.S. foreign policy since the days of the Atlantic Charter.<sup>90</sup> Haass and Kupchan imply that the United States, Europe, Japan, and other Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) partners should subordinate their principles for the sake of great power comity and practical cooperation in managing common challenges. There is little indication, however, that China and Russia share such qualms or are prepared to abandon their aggressive regional ambitions and interference in Western political systems so that a new concert can address the shared vulnerabilities of interdependence.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in late February 2022, and the grinding war that has since unfolded, expose the shortcomings of a concept of world order that depends on great power self-restraint and collective crisis management. Any new concert system would likely permit major powers great leeway in managing political order in buffer zones on their immediate borders, at potentially unacceptable moral costs. If taken to its logical extreme, the concert approach would also delegitimize U.S. and Western condemnation of authoritarian powers for violating human rights in contravention of the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and multiple international conventions.

While a great power directorate has undeniable appeal, its elegant simplicity is a mirage given the geopolitical and ideological conflicts that characterize our current era. The world certainly needs some baseline agreement among its most important actors on norms and rules of coexistence, but that should be the floor, not the ceiling, for global order and international cooperation.

A fourth approach to multilateralism places its faith not in universal treaty-based bodies, an alliance of democracies, or an apex global concert but in flexible coalitions whose focus, size, and membership can be tailored to specific contingencies. Indeed, this is already occurring. As Alan Alexandroff of the University of Toronto observes, we inhabit a “G-x” world, in which the number of parties (“x”) involved in collective action increasingly varies with the precise issue or dilemma at hand and the interests and competencies of relevant countries.<sup>91</sup> The future of global governance, in this view, lies with informal, nonbinding, minilateral arrangements.<sup>92</sup>

From a U.S. perspective, the coalitional impulse has obvious attractions. Still the world’s most powerful country according to most measures, the United States has fewer short-term incentives than weaker nations to invest in formal multilateral organizations—as well as greater opportunities to pick and choose among frameworks that promise to expand its freedom of action and policy autonomy in pursuing its preferences. Rather than accept the constraints of the UN or even formal alliances, the United States can sometimes enjoy greater maneuvering room and control over outcomes by working through issue-specific coalitions—adopting (as the old British idiom recommends) a “horses for courses” approach.

The George W. Bush administration took this strategic logic to the extreme after the September 11, 2001, attacks. As then secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld told radio host Larry King on December 5, 2001, the United States was cooperating with “dozens and dozens of countries” on different aspects of the “war against terrorism,” from cracking down on terrorist financing to mobilizing troop contributions in Afghanistan. Instead of a single coalition, Rumsfeld explained, “There are multiple coalitions. . . . And that’s the way it ought to work. I’ll tell you why. The worst thing that you can do is allow a coalition to determine what your mission is. . . . It’s the mission that determines the coalition.”<sup>93</sup> Rather than a true multilateral undertaking, the U.S. antiterrorism campaign by design was a hub-and-spoke arrangement based on bilateral deals with a heterogeneous group of countries, in which an American sheriff largely determined the actions of its posse.

The Bush administration repeated this pattern after the UN Security Council refused to authorize enforcement action against Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, launching Operation Iraqi Freedom in March 2003 with the diplomatic backing of forty-nine countries. Journalists noted the distinctiveness of this tactic. “You seem to be equating an ad hoc coalition that the United States has been able to form around one issue and one task with permanent bodies, like the UN and NATO, which have charters formed by treaties,” one reporter challenged White House spokesman Ari Fleischer. “Does the president believe

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### **A fourth approach to multilateralism places its faith in flexible coalitions whose focus, size, and membership can be tailored to specific contingencies.**

that international affairs can be conducted entirely through ad hoc bodies like the one he's putting [together]?" In response, Fleischer said, "The point I'm making here is that there are many ways to form international coalitions. The United Nations Security Council is but one of them."<sup>94</sup>

The Bush administration's preference for ad hoc arrangements was embodied most fully in the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). The brainchild of then undersecretary of state John Bolton, this innovative partnership was designed to intercept illicit air and maritime shipments of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, as well as ballistic missiles and related technologies. By Bush's second term, administration officials were touting PSI as a general model that might be extended to promote collective action in confronting other

global threats. Unlike the UN or other formal bodies that placed an American Gulliver at the mercy of Lilliputians, the United States could determine the agenda for collective action from the outset. Washington would issue invitations to a small, like-minded group; draft principles that narrowly circumscribed the coalition's mandate and scope of activities; and—once the core group had signed on—lead a global campaign to get others to join on its terms.<sup>95</sup>

## **The Bush administration's preference for ad hoc arrangements was embodied most fully in the Proliferation Security Initiative.**

Although president Barack Obama dispensed with Bush's unilateralist rhetoric and committed the United States to updating existing multilateral organizations, his administration also employed ad hoc arrangements. The most prominent was the Coalition to Defeat ISIS, which involved dozens of partner nations spanning all regions of the globe and levels of development.<sup>96</sup> It was hardly the sole example. To prevent nuclear weapons from falling into the hands of nonstate actors, for instance, Obama sponsored the Nuclear Security Summit, a biennial gathering of the fifty-odd countries possessing nuclear weapons and/or fissile material. To combat Somali piracy, it encouraged a multinational armada including vessels not only from traditional U.S. treaty allies but also from China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and other nations. To address climate change, it sponsored the Major Economies Forum (MEF), comprising the seventeen largest emitters of greenhouse gases.

Even the nationalist Trump administration, despite its avowed determination to pursue U.S. "dominance" in outer space, embraced a similar minilateral logic in May 2020 when it announced the Artemis Accords. These agreements commit each signatory to reaffirm established legal principles of outer space governance, including to pursue only peaceful purposes, provide emergency assistance, share scientific data, avoid activities that might interfere with each other's lunar operations, and respect UN guidelines on space debris. In effect, the Trump administration used a minilateral mechanism to try to consolidate an international legal foundation for the next phase of space exploration.<sup>97</sup> The Biden administration, upon taking office, endorsed this approach.

More recently, the Biden administration has pursued a similar course on the governance of cyberspace. In April 2022, it persuaded more than sixty nations to associate themselves with a Declaration for the Future of the Internet. The signatories adopted several common principles, including to defend human rights and fundamental freedoms, preserve an open and global internet, promote inclusive and affordable access, protect trust and privacy, and embrace a multistakeholder model of cyber governance.<sup>98</sup>

In sum, “G-x” arrangements are now well established on the global scene. A few are multipurpose groupings like the G20, which has served since 2008 as the premier forum for global economic coordination. Others are more specialized, such as the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People, which was created jointly by France and Costa Rica in late 2020 to advance global biodiversity conservation, including by permanently protecting 30 percent of Earth’s land and ocean by 2030. By October 2022, more than a hundred governments had publicly endorsed this target.<sup>99</sup>

In part, the rise of à la carte multilateralism reflects the frustrations of operating through outdated, formal intergovernmental bodies that have proven all-too-resistant to reform. In retrospect, the U.S. officials who helped lay the institutional foundations for the post-1945 multilateral order were fortunate, at least with respect to their self-appointed task. They operated in a time of extraordinary crisis that facilitated institutional change, faced a relatively blank institutional slate, negotiated with fewer foreign players, and operated at the height of U.S. primacy.

None of these factors apply today. There has been no major catastrophe on the order of the Great Depression nor World War II. Rather than a tabula rasa, policymakers face a world that is dense and encrusted with often-outdated international institutions, each with vested interests. Since the UN was established, the number of sovereign states has nearly quadrupled, in part as former colonized countries became independent. More people around the world achieved their self-determination, but multilateral diplomacy has also become more complicated. U.S. and Western dominance are not what they once were, and there is increasing global divergence on fundamental norms of world order, such as the appropriate boundaries of sovereignty, the criteria that justify intervention, the proper role of the state in the market, and where to strike the balance between political stability and human rights.<sup>100</sup> Compounding matters, many of today’s cross-border problems are even harder to manage than in the past, since they address behind-the-border matters (such as data privacy laws) or require (as in the case of arms control agreements) intrusive methods for monitoring and verification.

The implausibility of sweeping institutional reform makes coalitions attractive. Their main advantages include speed, flexibility, modularity, informality, opportunities for discrimination, and possibilities for experimentation.<sup>101</sup> Whereas negotiations in large- or universal-membership bodies tend to be protracted and inconclusive, ad hoc approaches can allow a limited number of parties—including at times nonstate actors—to move with dispatch. Unlike conventional intergovernmental organizations, which often seek to address issues

comprehensively, coalitions permit governments to bite off digestible chunks of the global agenda (a disaggregated form of multilateralism that can be described as “global governance in pieces”).<sup>102</sup> Such modularity is a driving force behind the emergence of so-called regime complexes, which arise when different institutions (such as, in global health, the WHO, the Global Fund, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, and GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance) share space in the same general policy sphere but focus on discrete problems.<sup>103</sup>

Informality is another appeal. Instead of spending years negotiating binding international conventions, coalition participants can rely on voluntary codes of conduct and pledge-and-review sessions, in which they commit to certain nationally determined actions. Given the hurdles to renegotiating the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, for instance, some established spacefaring nations have advocated for an International Code of Conduct for Outer Space Activities, specifying basic norms to address new challenges.<sup>104</sup>

Purpose-built frameworks can also help participants—including, in principle, great powers—compartmentalize different aspects of their bilateral relationships, so they can cooperate in some realms while competing in others. Finally, ad hoc coalitions can offer

opportunities for experimentation, including for networked, transnational cooperation among technical ministries of different sovereign governments. Given these advantages, coalitions seem destined to become even more prominent in international politics.

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## **Purpose-built frameworks can also help participants compartmentalize different aspects of their bilateral relationships.**

Nevertheless, there are real drawbacks and risks in creating a new arrangement for every challenge. First, it is unclear whether ad hoc mechanisms are more effective than formal intergovernmentalism

at delivering results, particularly when it is difficult to enforce compliance with voluntary commitments. Consider, for example, the multiple, flexible frameworks that constitute the regime complex for climate change. To date, the actual achievements of the MEF have been negligible, just as follow-through has been underwhelming on the nationally determined contributions pledged at the Paris climate conference in 2015. A similar problem has afflicted the G20’s mutual assessment process, which commits governments to submit to one another and the IMF a summary of their national economic plans, including potential negative impacts of those choices on other countries. Instead of a peer review mechanism that holds G20 governments’ feet to the fire, this framework has been impotent, particularly as G20 members have limited the IMF’s independent surveillance and monitoring role.

More generally, there is little evidence that flexible minilateralism can overcome tough cooperation problems, particularly in the context of intense geopolitical competition. In 2020, deepening Sino-U.S. frictions paralyzed a more robust G20 response to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. More recently, fallout from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine—and global debates over whether Russia should be ejected from the forum—have again hamstrung much of the G20’s work.<sup>105</sup> In his address to the UN General Assembly in September 2022,

Secretary-General Guterres poured cold water on the notion that à la carte multilateralism can replace the hard work of formal multilateral diplomacy or the standing capabilities of UN agencies. “No major global challenge can be solved by a coalition of the willing. We need a coalition of the world.”<sup>106</sup>

Second, the ad hoc approach to international cooperation risks undermining international organizations. At times, informal bodies can revitalize formal ones, including by encouraging them to adopt new standards. The creation of the G20, for instance, revived the IMF and World Bank and spurred the replacement of the Financial Stability Forum with a more robust Financial Stability Board. Likewise, the money-laundering standards of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) coalition were subsequently adopted by the IMF, as well as formalized in UN Security Council resolutions.

At other times, however, the emergence of alternative institutions has come at the expense of existing bodies, diluting the coherence of the multilateral system. This is particularly true when dissatisfied or revisionist powers seek to challenge the mandates, rules, and practices of established international institutions. Such “contested multilateralism” can take one of two forms.<sup>107</sup> The more moderate is when states unhappy with the status quo try to shift the setting for multilateral deliberation and policymaking to an alternative, existing institution whose mandate and decision rules they find more congenial. The more radical is when dissatisfied powers try to create an entirely new and competitive arrangement.

This brings us to the third potential downside of the coalition approach. It can contribute to rampant forum shopping—and not just by the United States—as governments flit among alternative institutional frameworks based on situational circumstances and exigencies. For decades, the United States seemed best positioned to play the game of contested multilateralism, picking and choosing among flexible frameworks as the situation demands. Although Washington retains a significant ability to pivot among institutions, the diffusion of global power and influence means that other countries can increasingly avail themselves of similar opportunities.<sup>108</sup>

Indeed, they are already doing so. China has sponsored or cosponsored a slew of new institutions, ranging from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership to the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank, the New Development Bank, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and (more recently) the Global Development Initiative and Global Security Initiative.<sup>109</sup> In short, other major players are “perfectly capable of playing the same game of ad hoc ‘minilateralism’ to their own advantage and America’s detriment.”<sup>110</sup> Over time, such dynamics could undermine the coherence of international cooperation and accelerate the world’s fragmentation into competing geopolitical blocs.

Fourth, overreliance on purely ad hoc approaches can be ethically and normatively problematic, raising concerns and dilemmas about legitimacy, equity, and accountability. To begin with, informal multilateralism risks undercutting public international institutions that have traditionally sought (or aspired) to provide global public goods, replacing them with new governing frameworks that may restrict access to those same benefits. Since it was created in

2008, the G20 has been criticized by other UN member states—the G175, if you will—for making decisions that affect the rest of humanity. Successive G20 chairs have tried to ameliorate these concerns through elaborate outreach efforts. But the inherent tensions between effectiveness, which implies modest size, and legitimacy, which implies broad representation, persist. Ultimately, this raises an ethical quandary that the UN’s founders had sought to address in 1945 by creating the UN General Assembly: namely, how to prevent poorer countries from being excluded from global decisionmaking processes that affect them directly.

A purely coalitional approach to world order risks accentuating the global inequity and injustice that already pervades world politics. Although power shapes the design and dynamics of all institutions, large-membership, treaty-based organizations typically possess some internal checks and balances. They also provide opportunities for weaker actors to have a voice, dampening the naked exercise of power and fostering bargaining and consensus building. Standing bodies also possess independent secretariats staffed by international civil servants and technocrats, creating an institutional identity distinct from member states. For all these reasons, formal multilateral organizations are better placed than narrower groupings to advance the agendas and interests of the otherwise powerless.<sup>111</sup>

Accountability is also a problem for coalitions. As hard as it can be to hold formal multilateral bodies to account, the task is even greater when it comes to minilateral ones. A comparison between the G20 and the World Bank is instructive. The lack of a robust G20 mutual accountability mechanism makes it hard to determine whether its members are fulfilling pledges made at successive summits. Meanwhile, the World Bank, which is under increased pressure from civil society groups to embrace transparency, has taken positive steps in the direction of accountability.

Finally, coalitions present financial and logistical challenges. The proliferation of ad hoc groupings, with their attendant summits, work streams, and reporting requirements, tests the bandwidth of all national governments with demands on scarce personnel, resources, and time. This is true even for an institution the size of the U.S. State Department. For smaller, poorer countries, the burden is even heavier.

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**It would be a mistake for the United States or any other nation to view coalitions as cost-free alternatives.**

Ad hoc cooperation is here to stay. The promises of flexibility and short-term gains are too good to pass up. Still, it would be a mistake for the United States or any other nation to view coalitions as cost-free alternatives. Unless employed judiciously and sparingly, they risk undermining the legitimacy and effectiveness of international organizations the world needs over the long term, as well as potentially accelerating the world’s coalescence into rival blocs. If the rule-bound international order is to persist, it must rest not only on transient coalitions of the moment but also on formal multilateral bodies grounded in international law and capable of delivering public goods and advancing common interests.<sup>112</sup>

## Navigating the Multilateral Landscape

The erosion of the rules-based international order and the rise of geopolitical competition have naturally stimulated debates within the U.S. foreign policy community on the most promising institutional framework for U.S. global engagement.<sup>113</sup> What should be clear from the preceding discussion is that no single multilateral structure can possibly serve as the sole foundation for world order or the only platform for international cooperation in the twenty-first century. Global challenges are simply too diverse and complex to be tackled by any single approach. Each of the four general orientations outlined above—the charter, club, concert, and coalition—has unique strengths as well as limitations. The task for U.S. policymakers is thus not to choose a single winner. Rather, it is to figure out how to balance and combine these approaches most effectively—and to develop criteria or rules of thumb to decide when to elevate one tactic over the others, based on a clear understanding of the inevitable trade-offs they entail.

As a point of departure, U.S. policymakers should resist envisioning or pursuing a unitary world order. Instead, they should acknowledge that multiple world orders now exist simultaneously, embodying different levels of agreement on norms and rules of state conduct, and they must recalibrate their expectations about the ease of and requirements for cooperation accordingly.<sup>114</sup> In historical terms, this is nothing new. After all, the Cold War—era world order featured two distinctive suborders: a U.S.-led “free world” and an antagonistic Soviet-led communist bloc, both nested within a more universal UN order—in which many postcolonial members sought with varying degrees of success to avoid aligning with either camp.<sup>115</sup>

While such stark East-West and North-South divisions do not (yet) exist today, the United States and its broadly like-minded club of partners in the OECD nonetheless constitute a distinctive security, economic, and political community largely committed to common purposes—not least the vision of a rule-bound world composed of open societies. Normative solidarity is necessarily shallower among the heterogeneous 193 member states (and two observer states) of the UN, and it is particularly elusive in U.S. relations with its principal authoritarian adversaries, including not only China and Russia but also medium-sized outlier states like Iran and North Korea.<sup>116</sup>

Given this reality, the United States should approach international cooperation in the first instance as a game of concentric (and sometimes overlapping) circles. All things being equal, the likelihood of intensive collective action, including harmonization on sensitive policy matters, will be greater among the OECD club of advanced market democracies that tend to

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share fundamental interests and values. Achieving similar agreement on norms and rules of state conduct will remain more difficult in more-encompassing charter frameworks. In such universal settings, the United States and its closest partners should aspire not to remake the world in the Western image but to advance fundamental principles embedded in the UN Charter and other commitments that the vast majority of UN member states have endorsed in numerous multilateral agreements.

The Biden administration's National Security Strategy endorses just such a two-pronged approach: "Our strategy to tackle the shared challenges that require global cooperation involves two simultaneous tracks." On the one hand, the United States "will fully engage all countries and institutions to cooperate on shared threats," including by pressing for reform of relevant UN bodies. At the same time, America will "redouble our efforts to deepen our cooperation with like-minded partners." Rather than allowing multilateralism to be held hostage by the lowest common denominator, the United States will "seek to harness the positive efforts of competition" between these club and charter efforts, "promoting a race to the top."<sup>117</sup> In short, Washington must play on both multilateral chessboards.

Of the four approaches to multilateral cooperation described in this paper, the concert model may appear the most unrealistic at the moment, particularly given the deterioration of Sino-U.S. relations and the geopolitical reverberations of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The National Security Strategy identifies China as "the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do so." It labels Russia, by virtue of its imperial ambitions, as "an immediate threat to the free and open international system."<sup>118</sup>

Despite this inauspicious context, one should not jettison the concert model entirely, because it rests on an important insight. Historically, all enduring international orders have depended not only on a stable configuration of power but also on some common understanding

**Historically, all enduring international orders have depended on some common understanding among major players on baseline norms of international behavior.**

among major players on baseline norms of international behavior.<sup>119</sup> It thus remains imperative for the United States, the EU, the UK, and Japan to continue seeking agreement with China and Russia, as well as India and other emerging powers like Brazil and Turkey, on foundational principles of coexistence and conduct.

Dani Rodrik and Stephen M. Walt, two Harvard scholars of international affairs, make a compelling argument along these lines. The rapid erosion of the Western-dominated global order and the rise of geopolitical competition, they contend, necessitates a back-to-basics approach to global governance. Rather than seek sweeping

accord on comprehensive standards of conduct, great powers should aim for "flexible rules of the road" that "[presuppose] only minimal agreement on core principles." The world's most important governments, they write, should commit to avoiding armed conflict

(including seizing territory by force), maintaining an open world economy, and, where possible, jointly addressing shared dilemmas and common aversions. Beyond that, they should tolerate independent policy actions that cause no harm to others, including, presumably, when it comes to their domestic political economy choices. Such a live-and-let-live ethos, Rodrik and Walt contend, would help ensure that “the deterioration in the rules-based order need not result in great-power conflict.”<sup>120</sup>

Rodrik and Walt make a persuasive case, with one important caveat. Negotiating basic principles of great power coexistence and restraint, particularly with China and Russia, could help ensure that détente prevails over a new, all-out cold war. At the same time, such a bare-bones framework should constitute a floor, rather than a ceiling, for the United States’ broader multilateral rulemaking efforts within both the UN and the club of advanced market democracies.

Finally, the United States will need to get even more creative with its forays into ad hoc multilateralism, building a rich array of coalitions tailored to specific contingencies and a shifting constellation of interested parties. Some of these coalitions will overlap with the logic of the club, starting with like-minded partners who are willing to commit to principles consistent with the vision of a liberal, rules-based international system. The Artemis Accords and the FATF standards provide examples of this approach, as does the Biden administration’s Indo-Pacific Economic Framework.

When the relevant challenge requires the participation of all great powers regardless of regime type, the U.S. coalition approach will necessarily shade into the logic of the concert and force the United States to seek cooperation among erstwhile adversaries (as well as allies), along the lines of the Iran nuclear deal. The challenge for the United States in these circumstances will be to try to compartmentalize its bilateral relations with strategic competitors. This will not always be easy, as the climate change example attests. Beijing has repeatedly conditioned its climate cooperation with the Biden administration on a softer U.S. stance toward sensitive geopolitical and domestic matters, from China’s ambitions to integrate Taiwan to its persecution of its Uighur minority.

Finally, the United States must continue to build broad coalitions spanning different regions and stages of development that can influence the work of the UN and other universal (or near-universal) institutions. The Biden administration’s Declaration for the Future of the Internet, for example, was conceived partly as a way to blunt the efforts by authoritarian states to impose their vision of heavy-handed sovereign control of cyberspace within large-membership multilateral bodies like the UN’s International Telecommunication Union.

Needless to say, the four models of intergovernmentalism identified in this paper do not exhaust the rich array of frameworks for contemporary global cooperation, which also include

## **The challenge for the United States will be to try to compartmentalize its bilateral relations with strategic competitors.**

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**As it navigates complex global challenges, the United States must pursue an all-of-the-above approach to world order and multilateral cooperation.**

regional organizations, multistakeholder arrangements, and transnational networks of cities and states/provinces.<sup>121</sup> Nevertheless, elements of all four have been visible in the Biden administration's foreign policy, each has champions within the U.S. foreign policy establishment, and each poses concrete trade-offs and dilemmas for the pursuit of a stable world order and collective action to advance U.S. and global purposes.

As it navigates complex global challenges, the United States must pursue an all-of-the-above approach to world order and multilateral cooperation. It needs simultaneously to promote universal principles and global collective security under the UN Charter; nurture solidarity among advanced democracies committed to the defense of an open world; reach basic understandings with other great powers on rules of peaceful coexistence; and retain the ability to form fleeting and issue-specific coalitions to complement, supplement, and encourage the reform of standing multilateral organizations. In sum, the United States needs to learn not only how to walk and chew gum but also how to juggle and whistle at the same time—without getting run over in the process.

## About the Author

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