

COMPETITIVE MULTILATERALISM

ADAPTING INSTITUTIONS TO MEET THE NEW GEOPOLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

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INTRODUCTION

As the world shifts into a period of renewed geopolitical competition, the multilateral order is straining to adapt. Both governments and the institutions that serve them recognize that circumstances are changing, and that multilateralism must change too — but so far, they have not agreed on a way forward. Anticipating the 75th anniversary of the forging of the United Nations, the Foreign Policy program at Brookings is examining the dynamics that increasingly define the future of multilateral order. Our objective is to help key governments chart a path both for themselves and for the major international institutions that balances adapting to the realities of great-power politics with preserving the current system’s capacity to mobilize collective action and protect (albeit imperfectly) vital core values.

NEW STRATEGIC THREAT LANDSCAPE

The irreducible purpose of the U.N. is to “maintain international peace and security.” The founders of the institution were clear-eyed: Maintaining the peace requires governments to “take effective measures to prevent and remove threats” but also to act toward the “suppression of acts of aggression or breaches of the peace.” The prevention agenda is more commonly acknowledged than the requirement to suppress breaches of the peace. Both will be salient in the period ahead as the world confronts an evolving threat landscape. That landscape is characterized by the following five major features:

1. The resurgence of great-power tensions

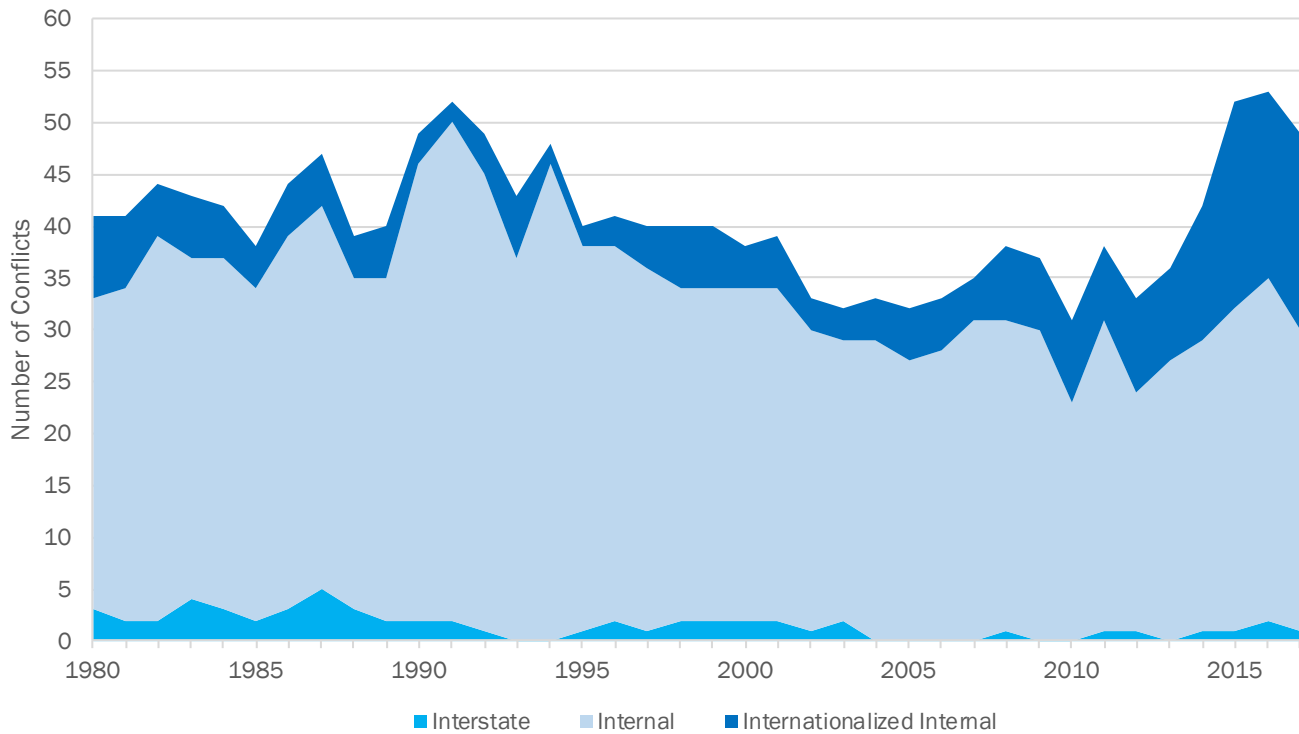
Renewed great-power competition is rapidly replacing post-Cold War cooperation as the dominant framework in international security affairs. This does not yet mean that we are locked into a new Cold War or systemic competition. However, the prospect of major-power conflict has returned, spurred by dangerous new escalation dynamics. Space for, and confidence in, diplomacy is eroding, with technological advancement and nuclear instability heightening tensions. Even without direct conflict, great powers are employing “all measures short of war” in pursuit of strategic ends. Leaders are reassessing globalization’s impact on national security, finding vulnerabilities in information networks, economic interdependence, financial integration, and even shared energy infrastructure — all of which are becoming sources of geopolitical tension.

2. The return of proxy warfare

Geopolitical frictions are likewise complicating efforts to manage and resolve civil wars. Tremendous innovation in the mandates and operations of peacekeeping and post-conflict stabilization missions marked the post-Cold War era. Today, competition threatens that progress. A conflict’s geostrategic significance defines states’ willingness to cooperate as civil wars revert to being zones of competition — at high human cost. Russia and key regional powers have turned Syria into a brutal killing ground, while the United States and the Western powers have eschewed a broader mitigation role, keeping their focus narrowly on counterterrorism. China and

Russia have used vetoes and the threat of vetoes in the U.N. Security Council (UNSC) to weaken international peacekeeping. Increased U.S. scrutiny of peacekeeping missions and unilateral decisions on assessments also risk politicizing peacekeeping decisions. Sub-Saharan Africa has so far been largely protected from these forces, but proxy dynamics already have infected conflicts such as in Venezuela and Ukraine, risking a quarter century of relative peace in critical regions.

FIGURE 1: THE GEOPOLITICAL NATURE OF CONFLICTS



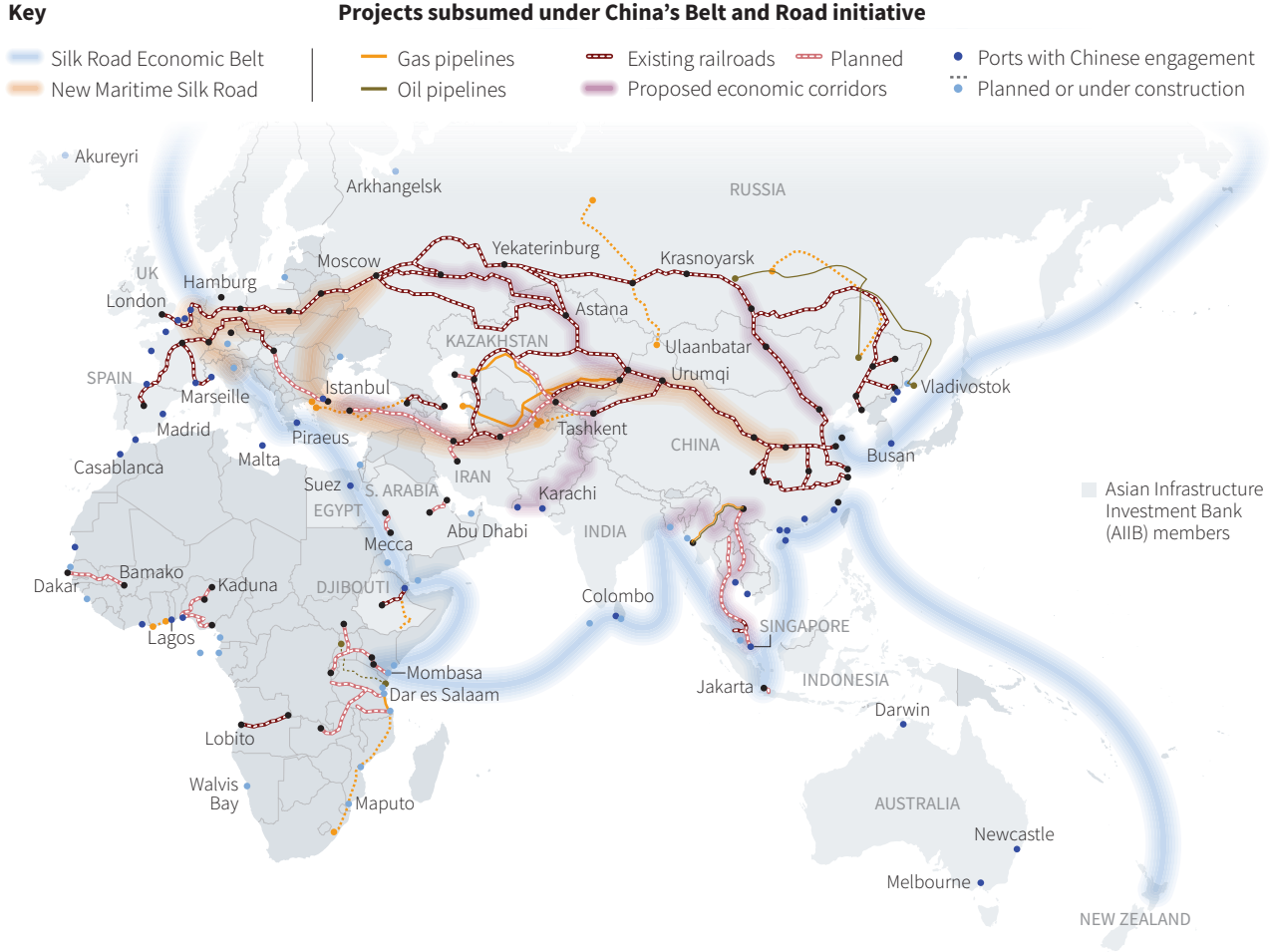
3. The fusion of civil wars and transnational terrorism

Despite peacekeeping’s tangible post-Cold War successes, the international environment has worsened as terrorism is increasingly interwoven with civil wars and failed states. Terrorism and conflict battle deaths are ever more interconnected. Between 2013 and 2017, 93 percent of all battle-related deaths occurred in countries in which UNSC-designated terrorist organizations operated. This violence is heavily concentrated in the Middle East – which accounted for 70 percent of all battle deaths during the same period. This is particularly challenging given that the region’s strategic resources make it historically resistant to great-power or multilateral conflict management.

4. Economic and development competition

Outside of violent conflict, broader competition has emerged over international development and economics. This is not a “cold war” struggle to export a universal ideology. However, as in the Cold War, development assistance is once again seen by the powers as a vehicle for geopolitical influence. Across Latin America, Africa, and Asia, investments in infrastructure, energy, and technology are beginning to turn from domains of relative G-20 cooperation into spaces for great-power competition. As U.S.-China tensions increase, perspectives on economic development and the advancement of human rights may diverge. Geo-economic contests surrounding infrastructure, energy, and technology, are increasingly felt even in the advanced industrialized economies.

FIGURE 2: REVIVING THE SILK ROAD



Source: Mercator Institute for China Studies.

C. Inton, 23/04/2018

REUTERS

5. Frontier threats, emerging technologies, and problematic future trends

Emerging technologies, instead of simply enhancing growth, are generating new threat frontiers. Cyberwarfare, biotechnology advances, and telecommunications technology all constitute competitive spaces among not only great powers, but also smaller states and non-state actors as barriers to entry decrease. Frontier threats pervade everyday life. Commerce, communications, individual privacy, intellectual property, and critical infrastructure all depend upon tools vulnerable to cyberattacks. Artificial intelligence compounds these concerns, as it reshapes global economics and accelerates the speed of conflict, particularly as regards to the development and deployment of lethal autonomous weapons systems, and the depth and scope of surveillance. Emerging technologies are broadening and connecting domains of competition, lessening reaction times for policymakers. They also appear to be widening, not narrowing, inequality and power gaps in both domestic and international terms.

IMPORTANT DYNAMICS IN MULTILATERALISM

All these threat dynamics pose major challenges to governments and institutions. While many governments want to preserve the multilateral order, that cannot be confused with failing to adapt its mechanisms and responses to dynamic new challenges. There are at least five major areas where the multilateral system is failing to keep pace with changing dynamics.

1. Contemporary peacekeeping: Ill-suited to the conflict-terrorism nexus

The conflict-terrorism fusion has overtaken peacekeeping efforts. Current mechanisms are not responding to the expansion of conflict in the Middle East and North Africa. Countries hosting U.N. deployments have accounted for only 7 percent of total global conflict deaths between 2013 and 2017, meaning that the vast bulk of conflict is not being met with a multilateral response. The presence of terrorism or external support for a proxy has hampered UNSC authorizations or willingness to engage. Even with authorization, U.N. forces lack the capacity to protect themselves and execute their mandates in these environments – as highlighted by the Dos Santos Cruz report. Attempts by others, such as the African Union, to field peacekeeping missions with U.N. political and financial support have floundered on questions of funding and adherence to standards, including on human rights. Without serious reforms, the U.N. will remain stymied from acting in critical cases.

FIGURE 3: PRESENCE OF TERROR GROUPS AND U.N. PEACEKEEPING OPERATIONS IN CONFLICT COUNTRIES (2013-17)



Notes: Countries with a UNSC-designated terror component but no U.N. peacekeeping presence denoted in black; terror-related conflicts with a U.N. peacekeeping presence denoted in dark blue; countries with non-terror-related conflicts and a U.N. peacekeeping presence denoted in light blue; and those without a U.N. peacekeeping presence are denoted in gray. Data represents the sum of battle-related, one-sided, and non-state violence deaths. ISIS deaths are consolidated for 2015-17, and attributed evenly to Iraq and Syria in 2013-14.

2. Blank space: Emerging technologies and frontier threats

Emerging technologies have outpaced political oversight. Policymakers lack the architectures to manage crisis situations in cyber, biotechnology, and artificial intelligence (AI), or to counter illiberal actors’ use of advanced technologies. Forums for discussing cyber norms are not oriented toward de-escalation. Further complicating governments’ control and coordination of responses, the private sector reflects the front lines of cyberwar and espionage. AI heightens these dynamics, empowering malicious actors to spread disinformation and disguise hacking attacks, as well as enables restrictive governments to further squelch dissent. Combined with biotechnology advances, the specter of tailored surveillance looms. Additionally, automation and acceleration of conflict push toward “hyperwar,” where first-strike advantages undercut strategic restraint.

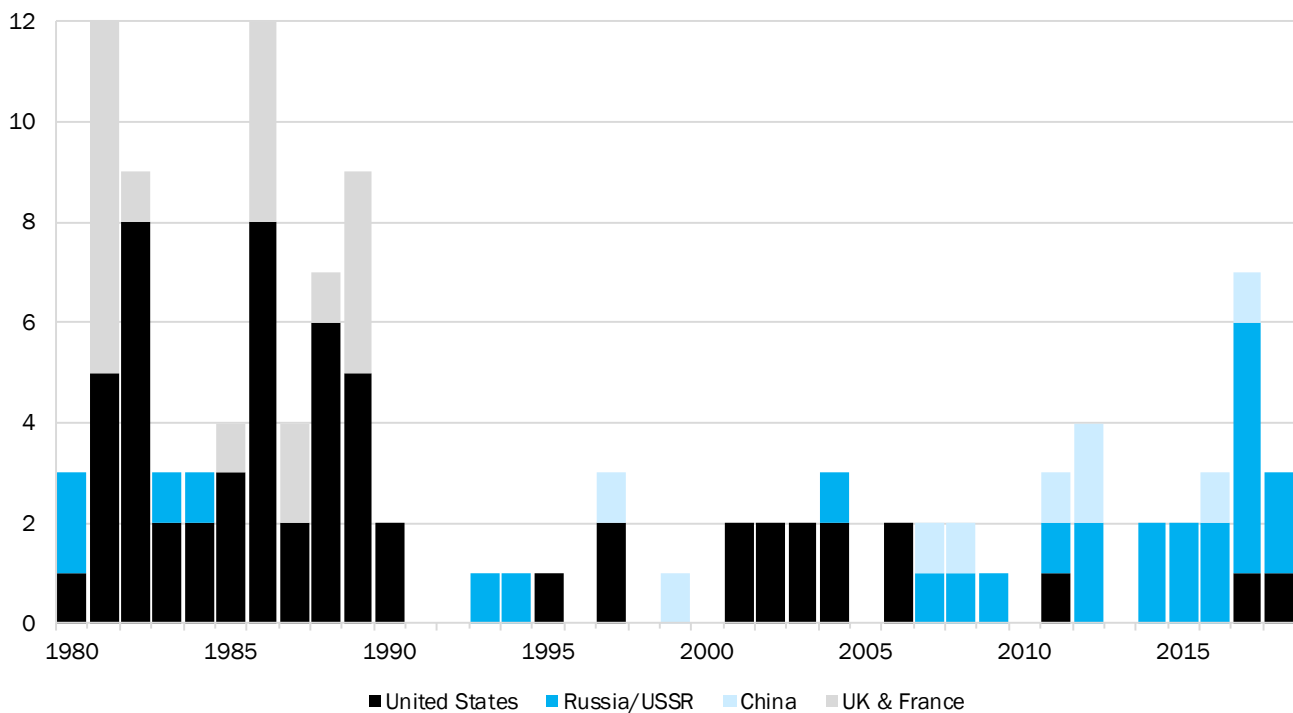
3. Rising inequality, rising distrust: Declining faith in economic institutions

The multilateral economic architecture helped to support emerging economies as they raised over one billion people out of extreme poverty between 1990 and 2015. However, skepticism of that architecture has grown. While G-20 coordination was vital during the global financial crisis, cooperation has not been sufficient to drive the reforms necessary to avert the next crisis from the beginning. Nor has growth been evenly distributed across societies; while a global middle class grew, the Western middle class was left behind. Simultaneously, this economic expansion lacked sufficient offsets for environmental consequences. Despite efforts from Kyoto to Paris, the system has yet to yield comprehensive sustainable development. Lastly, global growth carries real geopolitical implications — China’s economic expansion alleviated poverty, but also fueled U.S-China rivalry. It has also spurred large-scale migration, straining social compacts and fiscal resources in both the Global North and South.

4. The new Chinese and Russian assertiveness

A more forceful Russia and China are active across the multilateral order. Aspects of China’s larger global role should be welcomed. Beijing is U.N. peacekeeping’s second largest financial contributor. Economic investment helps fill a global \$15 trillion infrastructure gap. Yet this expanding engagement is also in friction with the multilateral order’s *de facto* operating system — Western-backed liberalism. The West does not always fulfill those values. Nonetheless, the existing multilateral order is based on and reflects those principles, and authoritarian governments are pushing back. China is promulgating its own norms to align geostrategic telecommunications more closely with its domestic governance or to promote an alternative vision within the U.N. human rights system. Simultaneously, Russia and China work within the U.N. to give each other cover on human rights issues, for example on China’s mass internment of Uighurs in Xinjiang. These dynamics challenge what had been core post-Cold War assumptions, including the alignment of peace and human rights.

FIGURE 5: EXERCISE OF U.N. SECURITY COUNCIL VETO



5. Nationalism, unilateralism, and skepticism from the two founders of postwar multilateralism

Economic factors have fed a new, deeper American and British skepticism of multilateralism. These builders of the postwar multilateral order have shifted toward more unilateral postures of “America First” and Brexit. Multilateralism always has been a voluntary self-constraint on U.S. power, making the commitment tenuous. Similarly, the United Kingdom has long been conflicted on European integration. Nevertheless, the combined present antipathy constitutes a serious challenge for the system. U.S. attacks on the World Trade Organization, the U.N., and allies weaken institutions and create space for external challenges. Brexit consumes significant political bandwidth, undercutting both British and EU capacities as global actors. Nor is this skepticism of the existing multilateral system confined to the United States and United Kingdom; amidst rising nationalism and populism around the world, fewer actors are available to step into the breach left by Washington and London.

FINDING A PATHWAY FORWARD

The U.N.’s mandate to maintain “peace and security” encompasses greater wisdom than is sometimes recognized. The U.N. Charter balances the desire for peace with the need for security, just as it balances the privileges wisely given to the great powers with the desire of other peoples for a voice in the management of their own affairs. These objectives are often in tension and only reconciled by the leading powers embracing a measure of meaningful restraint in their conduct of foreign affairs. That restraint is not necessarily an absolute adherence to international law narrowly defined, but a recognition that acting within the framework of the multilateral order creates opportunities for cooperation that pure unilateralism eschews. The United States, for example, has benefited significantly from using the existing multilateral order as a force multiplier for the pursuit of its values and interests.

Despite pressing challenges, reasons for hope have emerged. U.S. nongovernmental and subnational entities have stepped forward as cities, states, and the private sector have worked to bolster cooperation on climate change. Similarly, middle powers from Europe to East Asia have reinforced key pillars of the multilateral order, whether via the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for the Trans-Pacific Partnership in trade or the “Alliance for Multilateralism” in politics. Foundations and cross-sector forums are moving to protect key institutions and drive innovation. And so far, America’s bark is louder than its unilateral bite — for example, the United States continues to invest ever greater manpower and funding in NATO missions pertaining to European defense.

Twenty-first century multilateralism must be fit to its strategic environment.

All that, though, is barely enough to hold the line, when what’s needed is an advance. Twenty-first century multilateralism must be fit to its strategic environment. Multilateralism defined by the post-Cold War hallmarks — a focus on utilizing existing, universal institutions to spur cooperation on shared challenges — is insufficient for a world where great-power competition has returned as a driving, structural

force in global affairs. Multilateralism’s advocates must revive, and build on, lessons from the Cold War past in order to refurbish these tools for the current climate.

Our theme of *competitive multilateralism* harkens back to that original postwar era, when it became clear that layered and flexible institutions yield results in divided geopolitical environments. Multilateralism’s future must similarly balance cooperation, deconfliction, and competition within existing and new architectures. All three dimensions are necessary to navigate preventing war without sacrificing democratic values in a geopolitically competitive world.

Multilateralism cannot “solve” geopolitics. It cannot return us to an idealized post-Cold War moment. However, if refocused, a retooled multilateralism can be a powerful force to:

- Continue some collaboration on shared challenges;
- Create off-ramps to avoid conflict spirals; and
- Compete selectively within existing institutions and via new ones to defend human rights and liberal values.

In the lead-up to the 75th anniversary of the U.N., Foreign Policy at Brookings will be undertaking in-depth research and analysis along these dimensions. Drawing on the history of the U.N. and other, select multilateral architectures operating amid great-power rivalries, this project will combine an examination of the past’s key lessons with explorations of the future’s critical technological and societal trends. Our objective is to generate tangible recommendations for adapting and revitalizing multilateral approaches to maintaining the peace in this new, competitive era.

For the research on which this document is based, see:

- John R. Allen and Amir Husain, “On hyperwar,” *Proceedings* (July 2017)
- Bruce Jones and Torrey Taussig, “Democracy & disorder: The struggle for influence in the new geopolitics,” Brookings Institution (February 2019)
- Bruce Jones, Charles T. Call, Daniel Toubolets, and Jason Fritz, “Managing the new threat landscape: Adapting the tools of international peace and security,” Brookings Institution (September 2018)
- Robert Kagan, *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World* (2018)
- Will Moreland, “The purpose of multilateralism: A framework for democracies in a geopolitically competitive world,” Brookings Institution (September 2019)
- Ted Piccone, “China’s long game on human rights at the United Nations,” Brookings Institution (September 2018)
- Thomas Wright, *All measures short of war: The contest for the 21st century and the future of American power* (2017)

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Will Moreland is a research analyst with Foreign Policy at Brookings. His work focuses on American strategy in a geopolitically competitive world, particularly the future of U.S. alliances and multilateralism. Previously, he managed Brookings's debate series "America in the World," which convenes conversations in cities across the country on the United States' global role.

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