

Four Contending U.S. Approaches to Multilateralism

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Summary: Washington has four options for multilateralism: a charter, a club, a concert, or a coalition model. The task is choosing the right approach for the right situation.

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. 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."

Biden has turned the page on Trump's "America First" foreign policy, but the debate over alternative approaches to intergovernmental cooperation has just begun. 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.

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 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.

TABLE 1: FOUR MODELS OF MULTILATERAL COOPERATION

	Charter	Club	Concert	Coalition
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	The future of an open, rules-based international system depends above all on collective action among like-	A stable world order requires major-power agreement on basic rules of state conduct and a commitment to	Managing a complex global agenda requires an à la carte approach, with the constellation of players shifting

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	cooperation and world order.	minded liberal states.	collective crisis management.	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 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.”

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.

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. [...]

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. 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. 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.

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. 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 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." 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."

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 among major players on baseline norms of international behavior. 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."¹

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

¹ Dani Rodrik and Stephen M. Walt, "How to Build a Better Order," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/build-better-order-great-power-rivalry-dani-rodrik-stephen-walt>

with the vision of a liberal, rules-based international system. The Artemis Accords² and the FATF standards³ 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 regional organizations, multistakeholder arrangements, and transnational networks of cities and states/provinces. 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.

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<https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/01/23/four-contending-u.s.-approaches-to-multilateralism-pub-88852>

² The [Artemis Accords](#) / 'ɑr t̬ə mɪs / is a non-binding multilateral arrangement between the United States government and other world governments participating in the [Artemis program](#), an American-led effort to return humans to the [Moon](#) by 2025, with the ultimate goal of expanding space exploration to Mars and beyond.²⁴ As of December 2022, 23 countries and one territory have signed the accords, including eight in [Europe](#), seven in [Asia](#), three in [North America](#), two in [Oceania](#), two in [Africa](#), and two in [South America](#). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artemis_Accords

³ The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) is the global money laundering and terrorist financing watchdog.