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# A LOGIC FOR THE FUTURE:

## International Relations in the Age of Turbulence

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STEPHEN HEINTZ, PRESIDENT AND CEO OF THE ROCKEFELLER BROTHERS FUND



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“Heintz has provided a timely and indispensable guide to how to rethink international relations as the foundation for a new world order. This is a must-read for scholars and policy-makers and all those concerned with the direction of the world order.”

VALI NASR, MAJID KHADDURI PROFESSOR OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS  
AND MIDDLE EAST STUDIES AT JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

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## International Relations in the Age of Turbulence

STEPHEN HEINTZ, PRESIDENT & CEO, ROCKEFELLER BROTHERS FUND | JUNE 2024

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COVER: THE MARSHALL ISLANDS COPING WITH THE EFFECTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND RISING SEA LEVELS

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**“We are free to change  
the world and start  
something new in it.”**

HANNAH ARENDT, GERMAN-AMERICAN HISTORIAN AND PHILOSOPHER

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# INTRODUCTION

UNITED NATIONS PEACE BELL  
CEREMONY IN OBSERVANCE OF  
INTERNATIONAL PEACE DAY

Recent years have provided definitive evidence that we are living in an age of exceptional complexity and turbulence. The war of aggression raging in Ukraine has already taken as many as 500,000 lives, and prospects for a near-term resolution to the fighting are dim. The Middle East is once again convulsed by war. Another 182 significant violent conflicts are destroying lives and livelihoods across the globe—the highest number in more than three decades.<sup>1</sup> Escalating great power competition threatens to trigger violent great power confrontation. Environmentally, heat waves, wildfires, and floods have also taken thousands of lives while causing enormous economic losses, disrupting food supplies across the world,<sup>2</sup> and “turbocharging what is already the worst period of forced

displacement and migration in history.”<sup>3</sup> 2023, the hottest year on record, was surpassed by 2024, the first year in which temperatures exceeded the Paris Agreement target of 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels. The rapid loss of glacial and sea ice augurs a tipping point in sea-level rise. Political polarization is crippling many of the world’s advanced democracies, and authoritarianism is on the rise. In a time of growing demand for public sector services and investments, debt levels in both developing and developed economies have reached record highs. Environmental, economic, and political forecasts suggest that these challenges, as well as human and ecological suffering, will only become more difficult to surmount in the years ahead.

History is often told as a story of turbulence, and there have been periods, even in recent memory, of wider and more brutal warfare, genocide, violent revolution, and political repression. But what distinguishes this period in human history is the confluence of forces—political, geo-strategic, economic, social, technological, and environmental, as well as interactions among them—that fuel the turbulence that we see today. Many of the causes and consequences of present-day turmoil are transnational or even global in nature. These conflicts have no regard for borders and are not responsive to solutions devised and implemented by

individual nation-states or the existing ecosystem of multilateral institutions. Furthermore, humankind is facing the possibility of three interrelated risks that may prove to be existential threats: (1) the accelerating climate crisis; (2) a new nuclear arms race between China, the United States, and Russia (along with the associated proliferation risks<sup>4</sup>); and (3) the advent of potentially hyper-disruptive technologies such as generative artificial intelligence (and the prospect of general artificial intelligence<sup>5</sup>), neuro-technology, and biomedical or biomanufacturing technologies “whose abuse and misuse could lead to catastrophe.”<sup>6</sup>

**What distinguishes this period in human history is the confluence of forces—political, geo-strategic, economic, social, technological, and environmental, as well as interactions among them—that fuel the turbulence that we see today.**



VISTULA RIVER, POLAND



The institutions that have guided international relations and global problem solving since the mid-20th century are clearly no longer capable of addressing the challenges of the new millennium. They are inefficient, ineffective, anachronistic, and, in some cases, simply obsolete. As Roger Cohen of *The New York Times* noted, “With inequality worsening, food security worsening, energy security worsening, and climate change accelerating, more countries are asking what answers the post-1945 Western-dominated order can provide.”<sup>7</sup>

Over millions of years, humankind has proven remarkably resilient, capable of innovating its way through periods of grave existential threat while simultaneously developing cultural, societal, and technological means of improving the human condition. Human advancements have given rise to nearly 31,000 languages, significantly prolonged life expectancy, lifted hundreds of millions out of abject poverty, and extended human rights to populations across the world. Human ingenuity landed a man on the moon and invented the internet. Through vision, creativity, and diligence, humankind can—and must—develop an international framework that can guide us toward a more peaceful, more humane, and more equitable global society, as well as a thriving planetary ecosystem, all by the end of this century.

**The challenge of designing a better international system is a difficult one, but choosing to ignore the necessity of reform is a far greater failure than striving and falling short.**

Readers of this paper may find some of the ideas presented to be idealistic or even utopian. But this essay is intended to address the question of what *might* be, not merely what *can* be. As proven throughout history, human consciousness endows us all with the ability to make changes that contribute to longer and better lives. The challenge of designing a better international system is a difficult one, but choosing to ignore the necessity of reform is a far greater failure than striving and falling short.

History is replete with examples of hinge moments when change once thought improbable or even impossible occurs. Recent examples include Lyndon Johnson’s invocation of “We Shall Overcome” in his speech to Congress urging passage of the Civil Rights Bill, the transformation of South Korea into a vibrant democracy and competitive market economy, the fall of the Berlin Wall and collapse of Soviet communism, and Nelson Mandela’s “long walk to freedom.”

Even in very dark moments, visionary leaders can pierce the darkness and imagine a brighter future. Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill drafted the Atlantic Charter in August 1941 when most of the European continent had been conquered by Hitler, the United States was not yet at war, and the United Kingdom was fighting for its survival. The charter boldly articulated a vision for a post-war world in which all people could live in freedom from fear and want, and the nations of the world would eschew the use of force and work collectively to advance peace and economic prosperity. This vision, written on a destroyer off the coast of Newfoundland, served as a foundational step toward the creation of the United Nations in 1945.

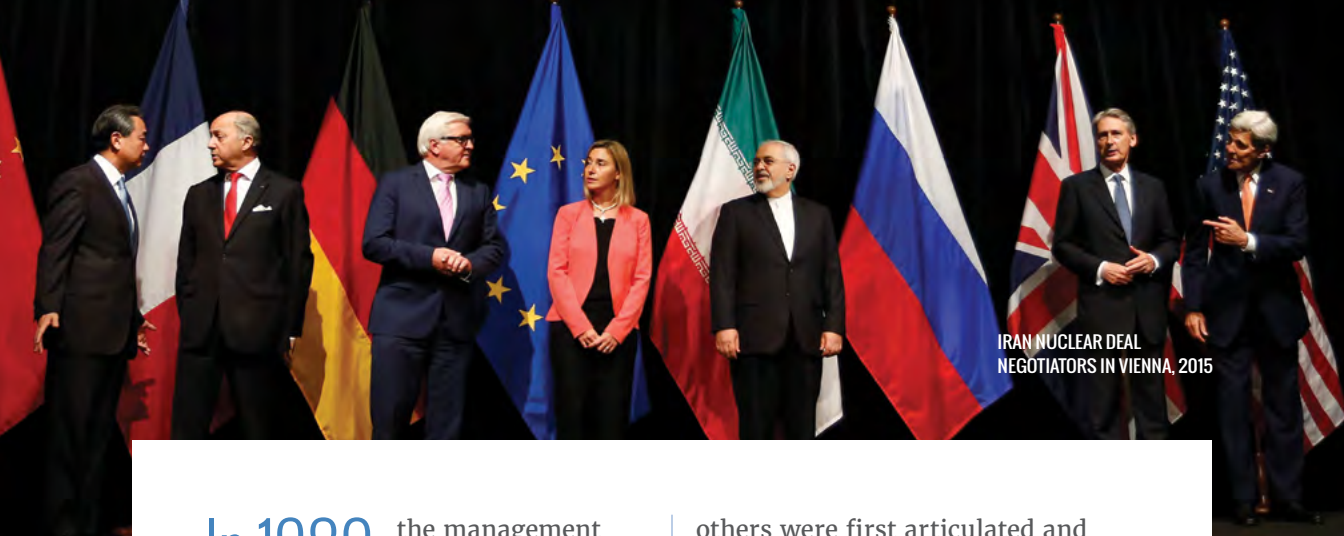
Moments of profound challenge offer opportunity to convert today's idealism into tomorrow's realism. Writing in 1972, German historian and philosopher Hannah Arendt reminded us that we are not consigned to live with things as they are: "We are free to change the world and start something new in it."<sup>8</sup> This paper is offered in that spirit.

Part I examines the origins and evolution of the logic that underlies today's system of international relations and offers a revised logic for the future. Part II applies this new logic to the global political landscape and proposes alterations to the institutions and mechanisms of the current international system to better meet the global challenges of this century.

**This essay is intended to address the question of what *might* be, not merely what *can* be.**



# PART I. THE LOGIC OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



In 1980, the management theorist and consultant Peter Drucker authored a book called *Managing in Turbulent Times*. Drucker's central thesis was that the greatest danger in times of turbulence is not turbulence itself; rather, it is "acting with yesterday's logic." This fairly describes our current predicament. Though we are faced with multiple, diverse, complex, and possibly even existential challenges, we stubbornly continue to respond with yesterday's logic and the institutional framework it inspired.

The logic of the present remains rooted in the logic of the past, with many of its core elements originating from the first known international treaties in Mesopotamia or those between warring Greek city-states. Many

others were first articulated and codified in 17–19th century Europe; for example, the 1648 Peace of Westphalia is widely regarded as the international legal framework that birthed the enduring concept of nation-state sovereignty which, three centuries later, was enshrined in the United Nations Charter. Over time, our legacy systems have grown from these and other roots to become the international institutions of the present day.

**The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not turbulence itself; rather, it is "acting with yesterday's logic."**



**Any future system will almost certainly be an amalgam of the ancient, modern, and new—the combination of these elements will be the foundation of its effectiveness and resilience.**



As we work to devise a global framework fit to purpose for the extraordinary challenges of this century, it is essential to examine the most important elements of the logic of the past to determine which of these should be retained, which should be revised, which should be retired, and what new concepts will be required. Any future system will almost certainly be an amalgam of the ancient, modern, and new—the combination of these elements will be the foundation of its effectiveness and resilience: resonating with human experience while also inspiring the future. A deeper understanding of the roots and evolution of the existing international system will allow us to develop ideas for a new global framework that will enable us to manage this age of turbulence.

## LOGIC INVENTORY

When seeking to understand a complex system, it can be useful to take an inventory of its most important elements. An examination of the roots and evolution of the existing “rules-based international order” reveals 12 concepts that together can be understood as the core elements of the “logic of the past.” These concepts continue to guide contemporary international relations and global problem solving. The following logic inventory itemizes these concepts and suggests revisions for a logic of the future that can help us better manage the challenges of this century.

# 12 CORE ELEMENTS OF THE LOGIC OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

## Logic of the Past

## Logic of the Future

**ANTHROPOCENTRISM**

**RESPECT FOR THE FULL  
COMMUNITY OF LIFE**

**NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY**

**COLLABORATIVE SOVEREIGNTY  
AND HUMAN SOVEREIGNTY**

**PRIMACY OF NATIONAL INTEREST**

**FOCUS ON THE GLOBAL COMMONS**

**GREAT POWER DOMINANCE**

**EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION OF POWER**

**INTERNATIONALISM**

**INTERNATIONALISM CONSISTENTLY UPHELD**

**RELIANCE ON MULTILATERAL INSTITUTIONS  
AND LARGE BUREAUCRACIES**

**A DIVERSE ECOSYSTEM OF INSTITUTIONS,  
NETWORKS, AND PROCESSES**

**NEGATIVE PEACE THROUGH  
MILITARY STRENGTH**

**POSITIVE PEACE THROUGH INCLUSIVE  
DIPLOMACY, EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT,  
AND MILITARY CAPACITY**

**ZERO-SUM THINKING, BLOCS,  
AND ALIGNMENT**

**POSITIVE-SUM SOLUTIONS AND  
VARIABLE ALIGNMENT**

**STRATEGIC NARCISSISM**

**STRATEGIC EMPATHY**

**IMPERIALISM, RACISM, AND PATRIARCHY**

**EQUITY AND COSMOPOLITANISM**

**NEO-LIBERAL ECONOMICS**

**ECONOMICS OF HUMAN AND  
PLANETARY WELLBEING**

**EMBRACE OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES  
WITHOUT RESTRAINT**

**SELECTIVITY, GLOBAL NORMS,  
AND REGULATION**



## ANTHROPOCENTRISM

It is no surprise that humans have assumed a position of dominance in the hierarchy of life. We have yet to encounter another species with a comparable combination of physical and intellectual capacities. We have employed the advantages of humankind to birth spectacular discoveries and inventions, leading to the organization of society and the building of the modern world, all the while assuming that the rest of nature is ours to harness with the goal of sustaining and improving the human condition. However, human activity, most notably the burning of fossil fuels, threatens the very viability of life on our planet. We are approaching multiple climate-related tipping points, and Earth's biosystem is experiencing a profound crisis encapsulated by a

## RESPECT FOR THE FULL COMMUNITY OF LIFE

magnitude of biodiversity loss often referred to as the Sixth Mass Extinction. Global biodiversity is being lost more rapidly than at any other time in recorded human history.<sup>9</sup>

The logic of the future must see human beings as *a part of nature* rather than apart from it. We must see our existence within the extraordinary web of the entire community of life<sup>10</sup> on our planet, which includes some eight million other species. Our lives and livelihoods are dependent on this vibrant biodiversity, and we endanger the survival of our species when we despoil or deplete it. Biodiversity conservation is both a moral imperative as well as a material requirement to ensure a sustainable planetary ecosystem and a thriving human society.

**The logic of the future must see human beings as *a part of nature* rather than apart from it.**



ECOTOURISM IN YASUNI  
NATIONAL PARK, ECUADOR

The concept of sovereignty has been central to international relations ever since the Peace of Westphalia sought to resolve the territorial and religious disputes of the Thirty Years' War (the most savage war in European history at the time). Paired with the principle of non-interference in states' internal affairs, the concept of sovereignty was refined and reinforced by the great 19th-century diplomats who, in the Congress of Vienna and the Concert of Europe (1814–1815), brought an end to the Napoleonic Wars and laid the foundation for a remarkably durable peace that heralded rapid technological and economic progress. As Henry Kissinger noted, “The period after 1815 was the first attempt in peacetime to organize the international order through a system of conferences, and the first explicit effort by the great powers to assert a right of control.”<sup>11</sup> Thus was also born the modern practice of diplomacy and the organization of multilateral structures of sovereign states. Sovereignty, coupled with the right of self-determination, was central to the Treaty of Versailles at the end of World War I as well as Woodrow Wilson's League of Nations, and was codified in the United Nations Charter of 1945.

The principles of sovereignty have also been invoked to define the relationship between the state and private entities—in particular, corporations and businesses. The notion of corporate sovereignty is used to argue for limited government

intervention in the market. Consequently, the concept of sovereignty is core to the logic of both international relations and political economy.

Critics of the primacy of national sovereignty, such as German feminist foreign policy advocate Kristina Lunz, argue that the concept of national sovereignty rests on the “notion of a homogeneous ethnic community (the ‘people’ or ‘nation’), which coincides with the territorial-legal government (the ‘state’). This leads to claims of absoluteness towards other states and intolerance of minorities.”<sup>12</sup>

In the latter decades of the 20th century, important innovations in what can be termed “pooled sovereignty,” or “collaborative sovereignty” were devised to overcome some of the inherent limitations of individual states, especially with regard to their ability to influence economic, geopolitical, and environmental affairs. These include the European Union, comprising 27 member states who collectively manage a vast agenda of economic, social, and foreign policy matters; NATO, a collective security organization currently composed of 31 countries; and other regional organizations like the African Union (AU), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Organization of American States (OAS), and the Pacific Island Forum (PIF).



## The EU is perhaps the greatest single political achievement of the second half of the 20th century.

All of these are important venues for collaboration and collective decision making by nation-states, but the EU stands out as the most fully developed, most democratic, and most effective framework for the collective governance of key transnational domains. The EU was invented as a peace project following two devastating European wars, and it has successfully kept the peace among its members for 70 years. The goal of creating a wider European zone of peace, stability, and prosperity, as well as the appeal of EU membership, resulted in multiple waves of EU expansion, most notably the accession of 2004 when 10 countries, including seven former members of the Warsaw Pact, joined the EU. Today, the EU is a dynamic and productive single market and the second-largest economy (in nominal terms) after the United States. It is the world's largest trader of manufactured goods and

services and ranks first in both inbound and outbound foreign direct investment. In today's multipolar world, the EU is a powerful node, often aligned with the United States but not unwilling to steer its own course, with China, for example. European politics are complex, but the structures and processes of the EU have proven to be remarkably effective at managing contentious issues and taking on difficult regulatory challenges, such as data protection and privacy and the establishment of an initial regime for the regulation of artificial intelligence (AI). The EU is perhaps the greatest single political achievement of the second half of the 20th century—as one French cabinet minister remarked, “We must recall that the EU is a daily miracle.”<sup>13</sup>

With the adoption of “The Responsibility to Protect” (R2P) doctrine at the 2005 World Summit, global leaders advanced the new norm of tasking sovereign states with the responsibility of protecting their populations from “genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against



humanity.”<sup>14</sup> When national governments are incapable or unwilling to do so, R2P authorizes collective action by the Security Council to protect populations under threat. This can include the use of force in cooperation—as appropriate—with relevant regional organizations. The adoption of R2P was a significant shift in conceptual thinking about sovereignty and non-interference. However, its application proved controversial in the case of Libya when the Security Council authorized action against dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi’s forces to prevent attacks on Libya’s civilian population in 2011.

National sovereignty, with further revisions, remains an important concept for the logic of the future. States will continue to be an essential nexus of governance and accountability to their citizens. Many states in Africa, Latin America, and Asia only recently achieved their sovereign independence from colonial rule—having fought for it for decades, they are not eager to give it up. Nevertheless, it is increasingly clear that individual states, as well as the multilateral institutions and processes in which they participate, are incapable of effectively addressing the urgent transnational and planetary challenges of our age.

Pooled or collaborative sovereignty shows significant promise, but effective management of the age of turbulence will require institutions of shared sovereignty to adopt expanded democratic norms and processes (e.g., legitimacy, transparency, inclusive participation, and efficient decision making through qualified majorities) that achieve sufficient consensus among

the participating states. However, it should be noted that collective approaches will expand only to the extent that the benefits of sharing sovereignty can be shown to clearly outweigh the reduction in national prerogatives and powers. In addition to sharing sovereignty, states will need to devolve power and authority to sub-national levels of governance (cities, regions, and communities) to address the consequences of global turbulence (whether from climate change, conflict, or migration) on local populations. Furthermore, the equitable distribution of critical resources—financial and otherwise—must accompany the delegation of authority to sub-national governments.

Given the persistence of human rights violations and the loss of innocent lives caught in conflict zones, it may also be time to consider advancing the concept of *human sovereignty* to more fully achieve the aspirations of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, such that “the inherent dignity and equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family... [are understood to be]...the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world.”<sup>15</sup>



Unsurprisingly, the longstanding reliance on national sovereignty has also reinforced the importance of national interest in the conduct of international relations. For many international relations theorists and practitioners, the logic of national interest is unassailable—legitimate governments are expected to respond to the needs of their citizens. Yet there are three fundamental challenges to a singular focus on national interest: The first challenge, of course, is when the self-defined national interests of one state or collection of states conflict with the interests of one or more other states. Interstate conflicts catalyzed the development of the precepts and practice of international law in the service of peaceful dispute resolution. However, as we have seen time and again, states (and non-state actors) all too frequently bypass dispute resolution mechanisms and resort to the use of force. The second challenge involves national leaders pursuing their interpretation of national interest without the democratic engagement of the public. Autocrats and dictators launch wars with little to no public debate or democratic oversight. A third—and growing—challenge to the primacy of national interest is the problem of the global commons: the global resources that sustain human civilization, such as the air we breathe, the water we drink, the sources of energy that power the global economy, and the international sea lanes that ensure the free transit of goods. A focus on national interests can impair equitable access to global public goods.

Like the related concept of sovereignty, national interest will continue to be an element of the logic of the future. In this century, however, the *primacy* of national interest must be diluted and greater attention focused on the global commons. The concept of “common but differentiated responsibilities,”<sup>16</sup> formalized in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1992, provides an important model that can be applied in the broader context of international

### Attending to the global commons must be a collective responsibility and priority.

political, security, and economic relations. Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye reminds us of a theory promulgated by Charles Kindleberger, an architect of the 1948 Marshall Plan. Kindleberger argued that the international chaos of the 1930s resulted from the failure of the United States to provide global public goods after it replaced Great Britain as the largest global power.<sup>17</sup> In the more diffused power realities of the 21st century, attending to the global commons must be a collective responsibility and priority. The realities of global interdependence and the singularity of Earth’s biosystem demand that states see their self-interest as inextricably linked to global interests.



Ever since the Concert of Europe, international relations have been dominated by various configurations of great powers. The United Kingdom, France, Austro-Hungary, Germany, and Russia were the dominant powers from 1814 to 1914. America's entry into WWI and Woodrow Wilson's quest to "make the world safe for democracy" heralded the United States' entry into the ranks of the great powers, while Japan and China gained greater recognition and influence in the inter-war period. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the United Nations Charter assigned global leadership responsibility to the five permanent members (P5) of the U.N. Security Council: the United States, the United Kingdom, France, the Soviet Union/Russia, and China. Both the League of Nations and the United Nations attempted to offset the concentration of power through the League Council and the United Nations General Assembly, respectively—bodies in which all member states were given equal voice and vote. Nevertheless, critical decisions of international relations, most importantly the authority for the use of force, continue to be the province of major powers.

Today, the concentration of power in the hands of a few states is being seriously challenged by much of the global community. "The uninhibited middle powers"<sup>18</sup> like India, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, South Africa, and Indonesia are less willing to follow the lead of the dominant powers and seek a greater voice in and increasing influence over global

affairs. The age of turbulence and the challenges of the 21st century demand a new, more equitable distribution of power. Six and a half billion people,<sup>19</sup> the "global majority,"<sup>20</sup> must be more equitably incorporated into the management of global affairs in terms of both participation and outcomes. This will require revisions to the governance of key international institutions, starting with the U.N. Security Council as well as the international financial institutions (e.g., the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and regional development banks).<sup>21</sup> The goal must be to create an inclusive community of stakeholders who actively participate in and uphold the institutions and processes of global governance. In addition, power must be redistributed in both directions; it must be delegated to levels of governance closer to the people who are most directly impacted by particular conditions or issues (like climate change), while (new) international or "planetary" bodies must be given the responsibility of managing planetary challenges.<sup>22</sup>

**Six and a half billion people, the "global majority," must be more equitably incorporated into the management of global affairs in terms of both participation and outcomes.**

## INTERNATIONALISM

The tenets of internationalism arose from the inter-state system of the 17th century. As historian Stephen Wertheim writes, this includes the belief “that the circulation of goods, ideas, and people would give expression to the harmony latent among civilized nations, preventing intense disputes from arising.”<sup>23</sup> Drawing on the philosophical legacy of Hugo Grotius and others, this view has been codified in international law and is embedded in the institutions established to adjudicate and resolve political and economic disputes through arbitration, legal rulings, and other peaceful means.

## INTERNATIONALISM CONSISTENTLY UPHELD

Internationalism has been central to efforts designed to prevent outbreaks of armed conflict and the management of warfare when conflict prevention fails. The Concert of Europe (1814), the League of Nations (1920), the Kellogg–Briand Pact (1928), and numerous other international treaties and conventions were designed with the sole aim of maintaining the peace. The mission of the U.N. Security Council (1945) is to maintain international peace and security through the identification of “the existence of any threat to peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression” and by making recommendations or determining

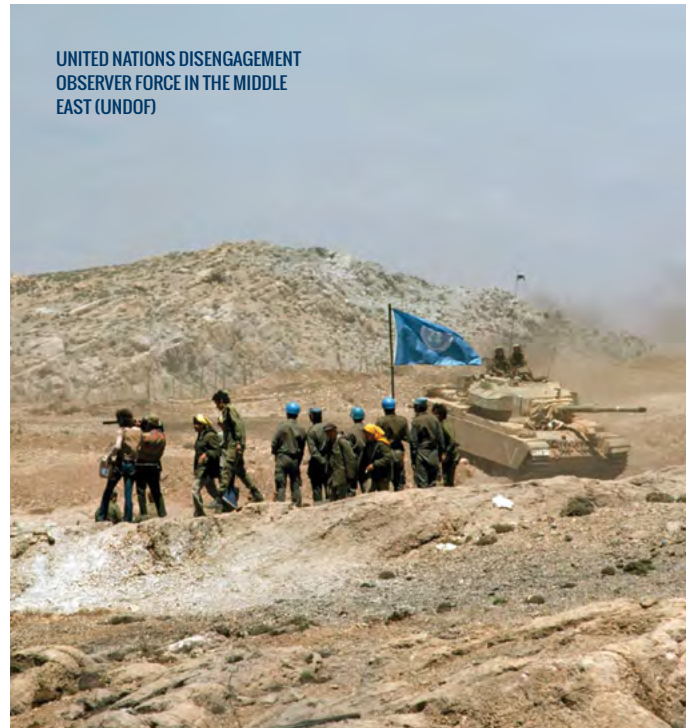


CARGO SHIP APPROACHES AN  
INTERNATIONAL PORT IN TURKEY

“what measures shall be taken...to maintain or restore international peace and security.”<sup>24</sup> The Geneva Conventions (1949)<sup>25</sup> established the main elements of international humanitarian law to “limit the barbarity of war.”<sup>26</sup> Despite the web of treaties, laws, and institutions, armed conflict and its barbarity persist, in part because state and non-state actors interpret international law in support of their own objectives or simply ignore it altogether. Structural constraints, like the veto power of the P5, also inhibit the efficacy of international law.

The precepts of internationalism have also been central to global economics and trade. Montesquieu’s notion that “peace is the natural effect of trade”<sup>27</sup> has been at the heart of international economics for nearly 300 years. It is embedded in the mission of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the robust web of bilateral and multilateral trade agreements that have accelerated globalization. However, with the potential return of great power confrontation, faith in Montesquieu’s optimistic view of the relationship between trade and peace has faded. As historian Adam Tooze writes, “Economic growth thus breeds not peace but the means to rivalry. Meanwhile, economic weakness generates vulnerability.”<sup>28</sup>

Twenty-first century internationalism will require new, innovative forms of dispute resolution and the consistent application of international law to all international actors. Reform of the U.N. Security Council is essential—even though it is unlikely given the provisions of the U.N. Charter. The victims of conflict must be given a greater voice in the quest for peace. Existing accountability mechanisms such as the International



Court of Justice must be strengthened, and new enforcement powers should be considered.

The free movement of goods, services, people, and information should be expanded. However, we have learned that we cannot rely on economic relations alone to produce and sustain peace. As free trade arrangements are negotiated, greater emphasis must be focused on the concept of “equitable trade” that offers the benefits of economic intercourse while also protecting workers from abusive employment practices and safeguarding our fragile planetary ecosystem. Rules must be applied consistently to all parties. A new approach to global trade should help manage both the positive and negative effects of globalization in order to help bring greater economic benefits to developing economies while also ensuring equitable and efficient supply chains.

## RELIANCE ON MULTILATERAL INSTITUTIONS AND LARGE BUREAUCRACIES

In the 80 years since the ratification of the United Nations Charter, the institutional framework of the international system has grown in scale and complexity. The five main bodies of the United Nations work closely with 15 “specialized agencies,”<sup>29</sup> drawing more than 125,000 employees from 193 member states. Complementary institutions have been established outside the U.N. system to focus on specific issues, such as the International Water Management Institute, or in specific regions, such as the Arctic Council or the Organization of American States. This expansive but patchwork collection of international and multilateral institutions and organizations brings enormous benefits to global society—and yet, as is often true of bureaucratic systems, many of the institutions have grown unwieldy,

## A DIVERSE ECOSYSTEM OF INSTITUTIONS, NETWORKS, AND PROCESSES

inefficient, costly to maintain, and encumbered by political constraints.

In the logic of the future, an ecosystem that complements institutions with networks, “mini-lateral” arrangements in which nations form coalitions to address common concerns or undertake time-limited missions, and perhaps most importantly, polylateral arrangements in which states, sub-national levels of government, private sector actors, and civil society join forces will prove to be more agile and effective at global problem solving. Indeed, the success of the 2015 Paris Climate Conference (COP 21) can be attributed to such a polylateral process, producing important commitments from all three major sectors: governments, businesses, and NGOs. Of particular note was the influence asserted by the “High Ambition Coalition,” a polylateral coalition organized by the Republic of the Marshall Islands (population approx. 43,000), one of the small states facing an existential threat from rising sea levels.

In the future, agile and resilient decision making will be necessary for institutions to adapt to the variability and complexity in relations among nations. Many of the large organizations require governance and management reforms, and although the international system currently includes some number of non-institutional forms, they remain modest in scope compared to large bureaucratic structures.

U.N. INTERNATIONAL  
DAY OF THE WORLD'S  
INDIGENOUS PEOPLES,  
2014





## NEGATIVE PEACE THROUGH MILITARY STRENGTH

So-called international relations “realists” have argued that peace can be achieved and sustained only if it is fortified by the threat of military intervention. Henry Kissinger, a leading proponent of this view, outlined it as follows: “How is one to carry out diplomacy without the threat of force? Without this threat, there is no basis for negotiations.”<sup>30</sup> It was this logic that led to the massive build-up of military forces and nuclear arsenals during the Cold War, at great economic and social cost, under the doctrine of “mutually assured destruction.” It also led to the growth of a “military-industrial complex”: The intertwining of industry, economic policy,

## POSITIVE PEACE THROUGH INCLUSIVE DIPLOMACY, EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT, AND MILITARY CAPACITY

and military expenditure in the United States (and elsewhere) that President Dwight Eisenhower warned against in 1961, with global military expenditures reaching \$2.2 trillion in 2022.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, 20 nations have shown that another path is possible: Costa Rica, Iceland, and the Solomon Islands, among others, do not have any standing armed forces or arms industry. Despite this, worldwide military expenditures continue to grow while investments in education (particularly for girls and women), skills training, infrastructure, clean energy, climate resilience, poverty alleviation, and a number of other social needs remain inadequate.<sup>32</sup>

CHILD PLAYS ON CAPTURED  
RUSSIAN TANK IN KYIV, 2022





## The logic of the future requires a shift from defining peace as the absence of war to embracing the concept of “positive peace”: the elimination of violence resulting from systemic conditions like hunger, poverty, inequality, racism, patriarchy, and other forms of social injustice.

The logic of the future requires a shift from defining peace as the absence of war to embracing the concept of “positive peace”: the elimination of violence resulting from systemic conditions like hunger, poverty, inequality, racism, patriarchy, and other forms of social injustice. Research has shown that higher levels of positive peace are achieved when states have a well-functioning government, manage an equitable distribution of resources, create a strong business environment, develop high levels of human capital, facilitate the free flow of information, and have low levels of corruption.<sup>33</sup>

History has shown us that there will always be bad actors, and military force will be required to confront armed aggression, genocide, and other mass violations of human rights. There is no response to Russia’s brutal war of aggression against Ukraine except for a short-term boost in military capacity. However, the logic of the future demands that we vastly strengthen diplomatic capacity, support equitable development, and invest in critical human needs as well as planetary sustainability. We must seek a future in which defense investments do not deter increased domestic social spending or international development aid that can build greater global social cohesion. As the United Nations High-

Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism (HLAB) so eloquently stated, “We must shift from focusing on mutually assured destruction to *mutually assured survival*.”<sup>34</sup> As we seek to overcome drivers of conflict, we may devise new forms of alliance based on shared values instead of exclusively focusing on military defense. For example, alliances that support health equity, economic development, and girls’ education might help deter the eruption of violent conflict.

AFGHAN GIRL ATTENDS  
SCHOOL IN CANADA



## ZERO-SUM THINKING, BLOCS, AND ALIGNMENT

Zero-sum logic has pervaded international relations in many periods of human history, most notably during the Cold War. The world was divided into two competing blocs led by the Soviet Union and the United States. Gains made by one bloc were seen as losses for the other, and countries in the developing world were pressured to take sides.

The Nonaligned Movement (NAM) emerged following the first-ever Asia-Africa conference, which took place in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955. Twenty-nine countries (home to 54 percent of the world's population) participated in this conference in an effort to counterbalance and challenge the deepening East-West polarization in international affairs. The founders of the NAM—Yugoslavia's Josip Broz Tito, India's Jawaharlal Nehru, Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah, and President Sukarno of Indonesia—offered the developing world an alternative to the “us-versus-them” logic of the Cold War. Nevertheless, both the United States and the USSR attempted to pull the countries of the NAM into their orbits through enticement, coercion, or a combination of both.

Today, the war in Ukraine has revived the notion of nonalignment; some global majority countries (i.e., non-OECD countries with 80 percent of the world's population) have refrained from joining the coalition supporting Ukraine. In January 2024, China successfully led an effort to expand membership

## POSITIVE-SUM SOLUTIONS AND VARIABLE ALIGNMENT

of the BRICS—a loose organization of major developing countries that seek to expand their economic cooperation and political standing, in part as an effort to counterbalance perceived U.S.-led Western dominance.<sup>35</sup>

The logic of the future will seek to accommodate variable alignments and maximize positive-sum solutions to global problems. Questions of alignment will be viewed as dynamic rather than static. Countries that join together for one purpose may not collaborate on others, choosing from a menu of “limited-liability partnerships.”<sup>36</sup> Writing in 2020, then-Afghan President Ashraf Ghani described a future of “multi-alignment.” Writing in *The Financial Times* three years later, Alec Russell termed this “the à la carte world.” Managing this dynamic environment will require an agile mindset and a greater tolerance for ambiguity from major powers like the United States.

India is an important case study. Speaking at the United Nations in 1948, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru told the assembled world leaders: “The world is something bigger than Europe, and you will not solve your problems by thinking that the problems of the world are mainly European problems. There are vast tracts of the world which may not in the past, for a few generations, have taken much part in world affairs. But they are awake; their people are moving, and they have no intention whatever of being ignored or of being passed by.” Nehru later helped form the



NAM amidst the polarization of the Cold War. Today, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Minister for External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, India has embraced dynamic alignment—working ambitiously to maintain close ties with Europe and the United States, while also continuing a fundamentally transactional relationship with Russia and avoiding conflict with China. This is a difficult balancing act with profound but potentially constructive implications for geopolitics in an age of turbulence. As Jaishankar explained to the Munich Security Conference in February 2024, “pulls and pressures make a unidimensional approach impossible.”

In 1963, just months before his assassination, U.S. President John F. Kennedy gave a speech on world peace in which he urged Americans and Soviets to

work together to “make the world safe for diversity”<sup>37</sup> by accepting fundamental differences in ideologies and political systems, speaking out on points of principle and in defense of values, slowing the nuclear arms race, and engaging with each other through diplomacy to prevent war. Now, 60 years later, countries should accept the pluralism within the community of nations and forswear active efforts toward regime change as long as borders are respected and governments do not engage in gross violations of the human rights of their own citizens, as expressed in the R2P doctrine laid out in the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document. In a time of growing great power competition and an increased risk of conflict, Europe and the United States should work toward a détente with China, and even with a post-war Russia, if it renounces the use of force for territorial gain.

## STRATEGIC NARCISSISM

Closely related to the primacy of national interest, “strategic narcissism,” as described in 1978 by international relations theorist Hans Morgenthau, is the inability to see the world beyond the narrow viewpoint of one’s own national experience, perceptions, and self-interest.

“Strategic empathy,” a concept advanced by former U.S. National Security Advisor and retired General H. R. McMaster,

## STRATEGIC EMPATHY

proposes a fundamental shift in the attitude and practice of diplomacy. It encourages deep listening in relations with others, seeking greater understanding of their views and needs, and investing less effort in persuasion. Consistent with strategic empathy, the logic of the future calls on great powers such as the United States to eschew hubris and conduct international relations with greater honesty and humility.

## IMPERIALISM, RACISM, AND PATRIARCHY

Tragically, the modern international system evolved in large part through imperialism, colonial rule, and systems of racism and patriarchy that led to the brutal exploitation of non-White and female populations across the globe. Britain abolished the slave trade throughout its empire in 1807, yet slavery survived in the United States until the end of the U.S. Civil War and the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution (1865). Patriarchy is deeply rooted in the history of human civilization—supported, in part, by the world’s major religious traditions.

Although World War I brought an end to the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires as well as the Romanov dynasty, colonial rule continued in numerous Latin

## EQUITY AND COSMOPOLITANISM

American, Caribbean, African, and Asian territories throughout the 20th century.<sup>38</sup> Today, structural racism persists in many forms. Furthermore, the rights of women remain contested worldwide, and their general economic status and wellbeing continue to trail behind that of men—even in the most advanced economies. It is clear that the legacies of colonialism, racism, and patriarchy continue to shape the international system.

**The logic of the future must be based on universal human dignity, equality, pluralism, cosmopolitanism, tolerance, and justice.**



The logic of the future must be based on universal human dignity, equality, pluralism, cosmopolitanism, tolerance, and justice. The legacies of discrimination and exploitation continue to breed conflict, and genuine peace will not be achieved or sustained for as long as these legacies remain. The aspirations expressed in the Universal Declaration

of Human Rights must be fully realized, and discrimination based on race, gender, sexual identity, religion, and physical ability must be eradicated. Advancing the concept of human sovereignty, which advocates for the recognition of the inherent worth of every human being, may help establish such new norms and eliminate colonial attitudes.



PROTEST AGAINST GENDER  
VIOLENCE IN QUITO,  
ECUADOR, 2017



Starting in the 1970s, the neo-liberal school of economics gained widespread popularity among scholars, business leaders, politicians, and policymakers. The core tenets of neo-liberalism include minimal government intervention in the market, a singular focus on GDP growth as the de facto measure of progress, unfettered trade, and the exploitation of labor and natural resources. Neo-liberal economic policies in the United States, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere have also guided the management of the international economic system (i.e., the Bretton Woods institutions) over the last half-century.<sup>39</sup> Although it can be argued that these policies have generated significant wealth, lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty, and spurred important innovations, it is clear that this approach has also contributed to widening economic inequality in many countries—and perhaps most importantly, its reliance on fossil fuels threatens the very viability of the planetary ecosystem. More bluntly, in the pursuit of neo-liberal economic policies, greed is rewarded, and the accumulation of material possessions is celebrated.

The economic logic of the future should focus, first and foremost, on the wellbeing of both humans and the planet. Important theoretical and practical work is underway to advance the notion of the “wellbeing economy,”<sup>40</sup> in which measurements of success are expanded to include social and environmental

factors, the relationship between the state and the market is recalibrated, and attention is focused on an ethos of caring and sharing—caring for one another and the planet we share. Other important concepts such as the “circular economy,” “doughnut economics,”<sup>41</sup> “productivism,”<sup>42</sup> or “degrowth”<sup>43</sup> are stepping stones in the path toward regenerative and genuinely sustainable development. A new mix of public and private institutions will be required to ensure accountability for the sustainable use and equitable distribution of resources consistent with a wellbeing economic paradigm.



FLOODING IN HAITI FROM  
HURRICANE SANDY

## EMBRACE OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES WITHOUT RESTRAINT

The history of human progress is entwined with the history of technological advancement, starting with the creation of stone tools 3.4 million years ago, followed by myriad other major technological milestones such as the invention of the wheel, the steam engine, the silicon chip, and so much more. With the notable exception of nuclear technology, technological advances have been embraced and employed with little or no restraint. Recent breakthroughs in machine learning and the accelerated development of AI, the profound advances in biotechnology and biomanufacturing, and the debate over the geo-engineering of Earth's atmosphere to slow global

## SELECTIVITY, GLOBAL NORMS, AND REGULATION

warming all raise profound ethical questions and may even pose existential risks.

In the logic of the future, we will need to negotiate global norms and regulatory regimes to advantageously but safely employ new technologies that have the power to greatly benefit planetary society but could also lead to great harm. AI technology will likely evolve faster than our ability to establish adequate regulatory regimes; consequently, restraint and self-regulation will also be necessary to ensure the safe deployment of this powerful technology.



# PART II. BUILDING BLOCKS OF A NEW GLOBAL FRAMEWORK

The logic of the future demands significant modifications and additions to the existing international system. From a review of many suggestions and recommendations that have been offered by numerous analysts, commissions, and advisory panels, 10 “building blocks” emerge. Under each of the 10 points that follow, some illustrative examples of specific steps that might be taken are highlighted, although these are neither comprehensive nor fully developed here.

## 1. Cocreate the International System of the Future

As the world’s most powerful country, the United States should work with the U.N. secretary-general, Europe, and other important global major powers to launch an inclusive process to design a more equitable and effective distribution of power and a new global system. Most of the peoples of the world still count on the United States for global leadership, recalling its role in the creation of the existing international order: Franklin Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” of January 1941; the Atlantic Charter principles that Roosevelt and Winston Churchill articulated later that same year; and the 1944 international conference held at Dumbarton Oaks, which advanced the vision of a post-war international organization to maintain global peace and security and formed the basis for the United Nations Charter adopted in San Francisco in 1945. Creation of the United Nations was an act of both imagination

and political will, and U.S. presidential leadership was essential to the success of these efforts.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in 1991 brought echoes of post-WWII 1945 and an opportunity to create a new, more inclusive international order—but this opportunity was missed through a “failure of creativity.”<sup>44</sup> The world had changed dramatically and yet the impulse was to affirm the prevailing international relations logic and expand the existing institutional framework rather than devise new norms and structures suited to new circumstances.

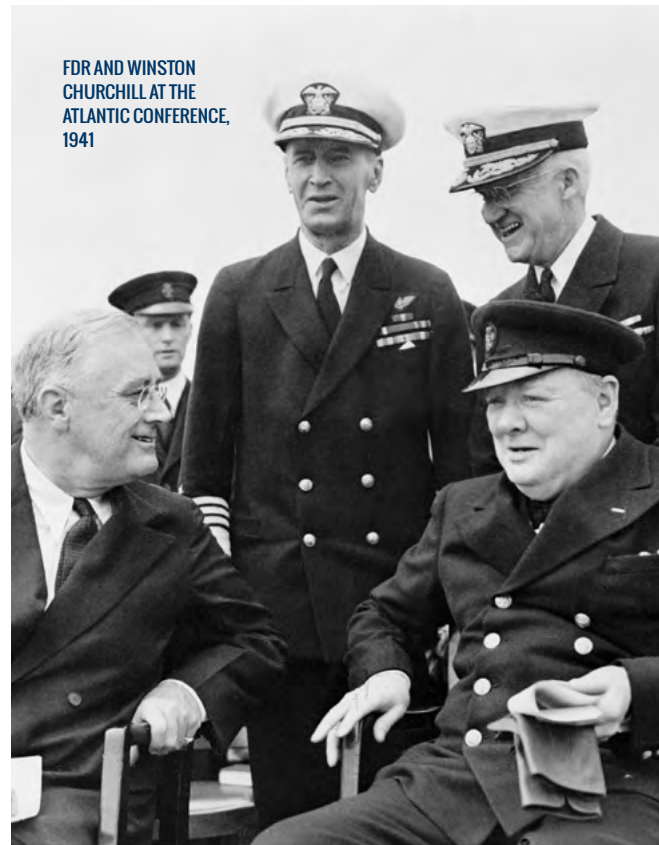
In some ways, we are now experiencing another 1945-like moment. The existing international order has broken down amidst significant global turbulence and multiple existential threats. As in 1945, there is once more an evident need for the community of nations to work collectively to build the international system of the future.



There are, however, significant differences between 1945 and the present day. After the war much of the world was in ruins, economies were devastated, and the United States was the undisputed hegemon. The United Nations was founded in the aftermath to *prevent* the outbreak of another catastrophic world war; the challenge today is to construct a new international system that can *preempt* the existential threats we will face in the decades ahead. The United States retains its capacity for vitally important leadership, but it is no longer a hegemon in today's multipolar world. The realignment of global power, heralded by the rise of the global majority, mandates that any future system must incorporate their perspectives, needs, and aspirations far more equitably than before. Consequently, the legacy major powers must invite the countries of the global majority to cocreate the international framework of the future.

## 2. Remake the United Nations

The United Nations remains the essential institutional framework for cooperation among sovereign states, and it contributes enormously to the global common good. But like a magnificent old house, the United Nations needs major renovations. Most of the needed renovations are well known. These include making the U.N. more democratic by expanding the number of permanent Security Council members and amending the veto privilege (perhaps requiring three members to jointly exercise vetoes) or by empowering the General Assembly to override vetoes with the support of two-thirds or three-quarters of the member states. To amplify the voices of the world's peoples,<sup>45</sup>



FDR AND WINSTON  
CHURCHILL AT THE  
ATLANTIC CONFERENCE,  
1941

there should be a U.N. Under-Secretary for Civil Society to facilitate deeper engagement by global civil society in the work of the U.N. system. To expand the United Nations' capacity for anticipating future developments and protecting the rights of future generations, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has announced his intention to appoint an Envoy for the Future, an important step toward incorporating long-term thinking into present decision making.

Article 99 of the U.N. Charter empowers the secretary-general to "bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security," yet this authority has been invoked only four times since 1946.



Secretary-General Guterres was right to invoke Article 99 in his letter to the Security Council on December 6, 2023, responding to the war in Gaza and urging the international community to “use all its influence to prevent further escalation and end this crisis.” In the future, this powerful yet rarely used tool should be employed judiciously—but without hesitation—when threats to peace and security demand international action.

It is also time to redesign other U.N. bodies and mechanisms, starting with the UNFCCC and the annual Conferences of the Parties (COPs), which have brought together the nations of the world to address the climate crisis since the first COP in Berlin in 1995. At the very least, the requirement for unanimous decision making should be replaced with qualified majority voting so that individual states

or small blocs can no longer block progress.<sup>46</sup> In addition, enforcement mechanisms should be established to hold countries accountable for meeting their emissions reduction pledges. In the absence of formal accountability mechanisms, civil society should be adequately funded to monitor progress and publicize failures to meet obligations.

It may also be time to replace the anachronistic Trusteeship Council, one of the six principal bodies of the United Nations, which was established to manage transitions to self-government or statehood for territories detached from other countries as a result of war. The last territory to achieve statehood through the Trusteeship Council process was Palau in December 1994—three decades ago. Given the critical importance of avoiding climate catastrophe, it may be



U.N. OFFICER PLAYS  
WITH A CHILD AT  
A SOUTH SUDAN  
PROTECTION SITE

prudent for the Trusteeship Council to be replaced by a Climate Council that would incorporate, elevate, and strengthen the UNFCCC and its COPs and serve as a forum for implementation of agreed climate policies and actions. Alternatively, the Trusteeship Council could be replaced by a body representing subnational levels of government (see section 3 below).

Some renovations of the U.N. system can be achieved through General Assembly resolutions, but many of the most important reforms (namely, the expansion of the permanent members of the Security

Council or amendments to the veto provision) require Charter amendments that can be accomplished only with a two-thirds vote of the General Assembly and ratification by two-thirds of member state parliaments, after which they must avoid a veto by any of the P5. Given such structural limitations on any attempt to truly remake the United Nations, it is necessary to build an effective ecosystem of institutions, networks, and polylateral alliances that complements the United Nations and compensates for its structural limitations.

**It is necessary to build an effective ecosystem of institutions, networks, and polylateral alliances that complements the United Nations and compensates for its structural limitations.**

ADOPTION OF THE PARIS  
AGREEMENT, 2015



### 3. Supplement the United Nations

The international system of the future will continue to have the United Nations at its core, but the complexity and hazards of these turbulent times demand that we establish a more robust, flexible, and nimble ecosystem of networks, organizations, and modalities that work in concert with the United Nations, but with fewer bureaucratic constraints and procedural impediments to action. The High-Level Advisory Board (HLAB), appointed by the U.N. secretary-general, has declared that “global governance must evolve into a less hierarchical, more networked system wherein decision-making is distributed, and where the efforts of a large number of different actors are harnessed towards a collective mission.”<sup>47</sup> A few examples of ways to supplement the United Nations and create a more dynamic and effective international ecosystem follow.

First, it is important to recognize and strengthen regional intergovernmental organizations that have achieved sufficient democratic legitimacy as well as efficacy in one or more of the following domains: conflict prevention and peacebuilding, economic cooperation, and environmental management. Capacity-building support can enhance the effectiveness of regional organizations, and formal relationships with relevant U.N. bodies can strengthen the coordination of regional efforts. Special attention should be focused on regions where intergovernmental bodies are underdeveloped or non-existent.

In the domain of international peace and security, it is critical to start planning a new European security architecture for the political landscape following the Russia-Ukraine War. Because Russia will remain a major European power—regardless of the outcome of that conflict—NATO, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the EU should coordinate their plans for a collective security structure that can enhance security across the European continent, including Russia (if and when it permanently renounces the use of force against its neighbors).

The G20, a body that brings together leaders of 19 of the largest economies, plus the heads of the EU and the African Union—together representing 80 percent of the world’s population and almost 85 percent of global GDP—is an important venue for discussions among the world’s most powerful leaders and could be an even more important asset. Could it focus more specifically on a few key topics requiring collective management, such as climate change, pandemic response, debt, and development finance? Could a formal relationship with the U.N. Security Council help bring additional voices to the peace and security agenda?

Subnational units of government (e.g., cities, states, and provinces) are increasingly important in the age of turbulence; the United Nations estimates that by 2030, one-third of the world’s people will live in cities with populations of 500,000 or more. Subnational units of government are increasingly finding themselves responsible for managing the consequences of global turbulence, be they the impacts of accelerating climate change, the spread of infectious disease,





PEOPLE RECEIVE THE  
COVID-19 VACCINE IN NEW  
YORK IN APRIL 2021

or the mass movement of people. Citizens often turn to local leaders for solutions to the consequences of these global phenomena in their daily lives. Although there are numerous international fora where subnational leaders meet, it is time to formalize the connections between subnational governments and the international system. As noted in section 2, one possibility would be to replace the U.N. Trusteeship Council with an Intergovernmental Council that offers rotating membership to subnational units of government (e.g., cities, states, provinces) and that, like the Trusteeship Council, answers to the General Assembly.

Two related 21st-century challenges demand new polylateral mechanisms for establishing norms and developing global regulatory regimes: (1) the decentralized

information ecosystem enabled by social media and (2) the advent of generative AI. Efforts are already underway to create an Intergovernmental Panel on the Information Environment (IPIE) modeled on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Like the IPCC, the IPIE would be “an international scientific body entrusted with the stewardship of our global information environment for the good of mankind.”<sup>48</sup> The IPIE would gather and analyze data, monitor trends, and issue recommendations to combat disinformation and misinformation, hate speech, and algorithmic manipulation that undermine trust, fuel conflict, and impede progress in managing social problems. After all, access to reliable information is essential for healthy democracies.



Continued advances in AI will only exacerbate the societal risks of misinformation and disinformation, but the power and implications of AI extend well beyond the information ecosystem and can affect every domain of human activity. These new technologies can help alleviate human suffering, increase workplace productivity, support invention and scientific breakthroughs, and more; however, as many technologists are warning, AI also has the potential to threaten the primacy of human intelligence, to become “God-like” (in the words of tech investor Ian Hogarth), and possibly “usher in the obsolescence or destruction of the human race.”<sup>49</sup>

Although the proposed IPIE organization would help with gathering and reporting reliable scientific information about the advancements in AI, a more powerful global regulatory body is needed.

The international response to the advent of nuclear energy offers valuable lessons that can inform our management of high-value, high-risk future technologies. The very first resolution adopted by the U.N. General Assembly in 1946 established the U.N. Atomic Energy Commission, which was followed a decade later by the establishment of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Furthermore, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) came into force in 1968, giving the IAEA authority to conduct on-site inspections to ensure that nuclear materials are used for peaceful purposes. The NPT regime and the diligent oversight provided by the IAEA have allowed for significant advances in the peaceful use of nuclear energy—including the operation of some 450 nuclear reactors worldwide—while limiting nuclear weapons to only eight declared states.<sup>50</sup>

The future international system must include robust mechanisms to enforce international law and combat the current culture of impunity. In a few areas, new institutions are needed; for example, there is a campaign to establish an International Anti-Corruption Court (IACC) that would prosecute alleged corruption by a state’s leaders when national judiciaries are unable or unwilling to act due to political interference or lack of judicial capacity. Thus far, 190 countries have ratified the U.N. Convention Against Corruption, but many cases still go unprosecuted. The proposed IACC would help fill this critical enforcement gap.



NEW YORK CITY CAR-FREE STREETS EARTH DAY CELEBRATION

## 4. Improve, Supersede, and Devolve the Nation-state

Nation-states will remain important in the international system of the future, but the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis have highlighted the inadequacies of nation-states regarding governance at both the local and planetary levels.<sup>51</sup> Managing the myriad of 21st-century challenges will require the devolution of greater authority (as well as the distribution of necessary resources) to subnational and local levels of government, allowing them to respond to the impacts of global phenomena on their populations.

At the same time, some issues require planetary action, such as global decarbonization, vaccine manufacturing and distribution, and the regulation of certain high-risk technologies like AI or biotechnology. The principle of *subsidiarity*, which posits that social and political issues should be addressed at the most immediate level of governance consistent with their effective resolution, offers increasingly relevant guidance when addressing the challenges of the 21st century.

It will be extremely challenging to reduce the primacy of the nation-state in international affairs. There must be a fundamental shift in our mindset and ways of understanding the world that have shaped international relations for centuries, as well as new legal and institutional arrangements. A great deal of ideation, discussion, and debate will also be necessary. However, surviving the existential threats inherent in

our turbulent age necessitates the undertaking of these efforts. In this regard, the EU, as a structure of collaborative sovereignty that shifted European thinking and governance away from an exclusive reliance on the nation-state, provides an important model.

## 5. Train, Recruit, and Deploy a New Generation of Diplomats

In the remaining decades of the 21st century, diplomacy must be the core operating system employed to lead the global community toward enduring peace, more equitably shared prosperity, and a sustainable planet. This requires substantial investments in a global diplomatic surge—recruiting, training, and deploying a new generation of diplomats who can advance the logic of the future and the practice of cooperative global problem-solving. The “millennial” and “Gen Z” populations across the world can provide the field of diplomacy with a talented cohort of highly educated, cosmopolitan, and culturally sophisticated women and men.

To build this new corps of national and international diplomats, a distinguished multinational panel of scholars and practitioners should be tasked with developing a global diplomacy curriculum consistent with the logic of the future. This could then be taught at the United Nations University and adopted by other diplomacy and international relations graduate programs worldwide. A virtual diplomacy institute could offer this curriculum in multiple languages through an online platform.



## 6. Trade and Investment to Provide Global Public Goods

Consistent with the goals of a more equitable distribution of power in global affairs, the World Trade Organization and Bretton Woods Institutions require significant reforms in terms of their mission, governance, and capitalization. Although many credible reform ideas have been discussed, with some progress made in recent years, debate still swirls around the most fundamental reforms. The institutions of international economics must be focused on promoting equity across developing economies and providing incentives, financing, and technical assistance in the delivery of global public goods such as clean air and water, food, and health care.

One particular reform in the global trade regime merits special attention: the elimination of the Investor-State Dispute Settlement Process (ISDS), which

is a common provision in free-trade agreements. The ISDS allows foreign companies to sue governments for relief from national policies that they claim impair their ability to make reasonable profits—including climate regulations, financial stability measures, and labor and public health policies.

The Biden administration took some constructive steps toward a more equitable global trade system, describing it as a “post-colonial trade system.” In an important speech at the Brookings Institution in April 2023, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan described the Biden administration’s approach: “...working with so many other WTO members to reform the multilateral trading system so that it benefits workers, accommodates legitimate national security interests, and confronts pressing issues that aren’t fully embedded in the current WTO framework, like sustainable development and the clean-energy transition.”



## 7. Strengthen Democracy

Effective democratic governance must be the cornerstone of the international system of the future. Democratic norms, processes, and institutions give voice to “the peoples of the United Nations,” as expressed in the first lines of the U.N. Charter. Democracy facilitates the identification of common ground and requires compromise; it recognizes differences, promotes fairness and equity, and improves transparency and accountability—qualities that are essential to peaceful international relations. Democratic states are less likely to go to war with one another and, compared to states under autocratic rule, are also less likely to suffer violent internal conflicts.<sup>52</sup>

Nonetheless, democracy requires substantial reinvention and expanded application if humanity hopes to create a more peaceful, equitable, and sustainable world in this century. Democracy

must be made more inclusive, more fully representative, more participatory, and more effective. This mission may be more urgent now than ever before: As faith in democratic governance weakens, neo-authoritarians and demagogues around the globe are rushing to consolidate their power.

Political scientist Larry Diamond coined the term “democratic recession” in 2015 to describe the global decline in the quality and efficacy of democratic governance over the previous decade. Drawing on data reported by Freedom House, the Economist Intelligence Unit, and V-Dem,<sup>53</sup> Diamond (and many others) have documented democratic backsliding and the rise of authoritarianism in all four corners of the globe. At this very moment, electoral authoritarians—Nayib Bukele in El Salvador, Victor Orban in Hungary, and Yoweri Museweni in Uganda, to name a few—are eroding the rule of law, restricting the freedom of speech and media, curbing civil society, and trampling on citizens’ rights.



CROWD CELEBRATES AFTER LULA WINS  
PRESIDENCY OF BRAZIL, 2022



That said, the news is not all bad. In Poland, after years of deepening authoritarian rule under the Law and Justice Party, voters turned out in overwhelming numbers to elect Donald Tusk's Civic Platform coalition in October 2023. Tusk has since set out to restore the rule of law, media independence, and civil rights—but the task of restoring democracy is proving formidable after eight years in which both norms and institutions were seriously eroded. As the German Marshall Fund's Michal Baranowski observes, "There will be lessons for other countries to draw from Poland—both on what to do and not to do—but Tusk has the disadvantage of being the first, trying to clean up without a detox handbook."<sup>54</sup>

Fundamental reforms are needed even in well-established democratic nation-states, the United States being first and foremost among them. In June 2020, a national commission organized by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences offered a comprehensive blueprint of proposed reforms in a report titled *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century*.<sup>55</sup> The report's 31 recommendations address significant reforms to political institutions and processes, as well as the need for reliable, widely shared civic information and a healthy political culture. The years ahead may test the resilience of America's democratic institutions and the rule of law. Political leaders, civil society organizations, and citizens must be prepared to defend democratic norms and constitutional arrangements.

Reforms are needed in democracies around the globe to address similar weaknesses while respecting distinct cultural and historical contexts. One size most certainly does not fit all, but central to all these efforts is the need to fortify the role of citizens as the primary stakeholders in self-government. The will of the citizenry is the ultimate accountability mechanism in democracies; to defend against the rise of autocracy, we must concurrently strengthen the institutional and procedural checks and balances that safeguard the rule of law and protect independent journalism.

Democracy must also be strengthened and extended in the institutions and mechanisms of global governance. Increasingly, decisions of material significance are being made by international bodies far removed from the citizens those decisions will affect. The international system of the future must incorporate more robust democratic norms, characteristics, and processes to make it more participatory, inclusive, transparent, accountable, and effective. Surviving the existential threats of the age of turbulence will require difficult decisions with monumental consequences. The OECD has documented an encouraging "deliberative wave" of "representative deliberative processes," such as citizens' assemblies, juries, and panels that has been steadily gaining momentum since 2010.<sup>56</sup> As former U.K. diplomat Carne Ross has argued, we must build on this wave and establish "consent mechanisms for profound change" in global policy for conflict resolution, development finance, economics, trade, and energy to meet the global challenges ahead.



VICE PRESIDENT BIDEN  
AND CHINESE PRESIDENT XI  
SHARE A TOAST, 2015

## 8. Establish a U.S.-China Secretariat

As many experts have observed, the U.S.-China relationship is the most important bilateral relationship of the 21st century. This relationship must be managed with clear-eyed, consistent, and continuous care, as well as effective communication and creativity. As Harvard professor and former Pentagon official Joseph Nye observed, “For better or worse, the U.S. is locked in a ‘cooperative rivalry with China.’”<sup>57</sup> Our economies are closely intertwined; we are the two largest greenhouse gas emitters; we both have strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific; and the island of Taiwan is a potential flashpoint for a great power confrontation. Analogies to the U.S.-USSR Cold War rivalry are commonly invoked, but these comparisons overlook critical differences and lead to misguided policy prescriptions. The best approach to avoiding conflict necessitates the combination and effective management of competition and cooperation. It is not an exaggeration to say that as U.S.-China relations go, so goes the 21st century.

U.S.-China relations ebbed in the first half of 2023, with the year beginning with the Chinese surveillance balloon incident followed by military provocations in the South China Sea. High-level contact between the two governments was revived when Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Beijing in June. This was followed by several other high-profile visits, including Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen traveling to China in July; Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo following suit in August; and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi meeting President Biden in the White House, setting the stage for Biden and Xi Jinping to meet during the APEC Summit in California on November 15, 2023.

Episodic meetings of high-level officials, including presidential summits, are essential but insufficient for managing this complex, high-risk relationship; more intensive and continuous joint engagement is required. One idea worth exploring is the establishment of a U.S.-China Joint Secretariat<sup>58</sup> in a neutral location, perhaps Singapore or Geneva, to which senior civil servants from key ministries in both countries

are seconded to work side-by-side on a daily basis. These officials would be tasked with exploring key issues in the bilateral relationship; developing a deeper understanding of each other's views, needs, and redlines; and devising creative solutions that could then be shared with Beijing and Washington.

This idea will no doubt be unpopular with other countries in the Indo-Pacific, most notably India. Nevertheless, through careful diplomacy, it should be possible to help the Indians and others to see that non-confrontational and constructive U.S.-China relations are in their best interests.

## 9. Codify Rights of Nature and Rights of Future Generations

There is fascinating and important work being done in think tanks, academic institutions, and movements to develop eco-jurisprudence that expands the protection of rights beyond those accorded to human life and establishes human responsibility to other forms of life on our planet. Through pathbreaking leadership, Ecuador became the first country to enshrine the rights of nature in its constitution in 2008, and the first legal suit filed on behalf of nature was a case involving threats to the Vilcambaba River: The court found for the river.

Significant progress has been made to establish the rights of future generations, with climate-related lawsuits being brought before courts across the globe on behalf of children. One suit filed in 2015, *Juliana v. United States*, asserted that “through the government’s affirmative actions that cause climate change, it



has violated the youngest generation’s constitutional rights to life, liberty, and property, as well as failed to protect essential public trust resources.”<sup>59</sup> In June 2023, U.S. District Court Judge Ann Aiken ruled that the case, brought by 21 young plaintiffs, could proceed to trial. In August 2023, a group of young people in Montana won a landmark ruling that the state’s failure to consider climate change when approving fossil fuel projects was unconstitutional. Similar suits are pending in several other U.S. states, and in September 2023, a suit brought by six young Portuguese citizens was heard before the European Court of Human Rights. Active cases filed on behalf of children and youth are pending in Canada, Mexico, Pakistan, and Uganda.

Establishing the rights of nature and future generations offers a promising avenue for implementing the logic of the future. Secretary-General Guterres’s pledge to name a Special Envoy for the Future also marks an important recognition that the international system must address long-term challenges and focus on prevention along with mitigation and crisis response.

## 10. Transformed U.S. Global Leadership<sup>60</sup>

Given its vast wealth, hard and soft power, presumption of moral leadership, and disproportionate consumption of finite global resources, the United States must play a leading role in shaping the global response to the age of turbulence. Without U.S. leadership, it would be impossible to embrace the logic of the future and build the international system needed to address the challenges of the 21st century. But the realities of this interdependent world require fundamental changes in the style and content of U.S. global leadership. We need a bold and fundamentally different vision of America's role in the world.

A new vision of America's global role must rest on a set of core principles for constructive, collaborative, results-oriented, and ethical leadership:

*First, the United States must recognize that efforts to maintain its global primacy will prove fruitless and not in its national interest.* If there was a “unipolar moment” at the end of the Cold War, it was both fleeting and deluding. Given the rapidly redistribution of political, economic, and military power already underway when the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, we should have seen past the triumphant glow and come to grips with a more sober view of a world with multiple nodes and diverse forms of power. Basking in that temporary surge of American supremacy, we failed to adopt a vision of collaborative global leadership in which the United States plays an essential, but not dominant, leadership role. It is imperative that we do so now.

On a relative basis, U.S. military and economic power, though still vast, is shrinking. Perhaps more importantly, our “soft power” (the power of our values, cultural vitality, capacity for scientific and technological innovation, and our leadership by example) has declined. Even among our allies, the United States is often seen as arrogant, greedy, too quick to use military force, and hypocritical. We are seen to support the “rules-based liberal international order” as long as we get to make the rules and enforce the order. Such efforts to assert global primacy breed particular resentment among the very diverse countries that compose the global majority.

Although our priority will be the security and prosperity of the United States, Americans must pursue our national interests with an understanding that, in an interdependent world, our wellbeing is directly tied to peaceful and prosperous conditions elsewhere and to the fate of the planet. Our national goals can be achieved only in concert with others and by forging common ground to generate collective benefits. Rather than striving to preserve our status as the world's only superpower, the United States should use its great-power status to lead the community of nations in an urgent process of developing a new global system that relies on the coordination and collaboration of multiple centers of power and authority. Humility and honesty are essential: We must engage with “strategic empathy.” I do not underestimate how challenging it will be to transform the role of the United States in the world, especially given the deep divisions in U.S. domestic politics and their influence on our foreign policy. And yet, it is of critical importance that we do so.



*Second, the United States must build strength through teamwork.* The freer and faster global movement of people, information, goods, money, disease, pollution, and conflict breeds a host of challenges that no single country—not even a superpower—can surmount alone: Only persistent teamwork can deal effectively with the agenda of pressing global issues. The United States must become the indispensable *partner* in global affairs.

*Third, the United States must develop and use a full range of tools.* We must be ready to use military force when absolutely necessary to protect the homeland, to confront other urgent threats to peace and security, or to prevent genocide or other overt abuses of human rights. However, we must give priority to other tools—diplomacy chief among them—that can offer effective alternatives to military action. Larger investments in development assistance, designed with foresight and in partnership with credible local leadership, are also essential, both in post-conflict reconstruction and to ameliorate conditions that can breed conflict in the first place.

*Fourth, when circumstances warrant consideration of military action, the United States must comply with our obligations under the U.N. Charter, deploy forces only when we are confident that we are unlikely to do harm and, conversely, assess that we are well positioned to contribute to positive outcomes.* Americans must finally learn from the lessons of Vietnam, the Balkans, Iraq, and Afghanistan: The use of military force without a deep understanding of the specific political, cultural, regional, and geo-strategic context and a plan for creating conditions for durable peace leads to miscalculation,



prolonged engagements, excessive costs in lives and resources, and unmet objectives.

*Fifth, the United States should promote fair play.* America earns credibility and respect when it bases its actions on its core values. The combination of esteem and tangible support is essential to keeping old friends, winning new ones, forming effective coalitions, and averting resentment and misunderstanding. Furthermore, to advance shared norms, human rights, and the rule of law as the basis for global stability and progress, America itself must play by the rules—whether in the design of trade policies, the judicious deployment of our military, the incarceration and interrogation of prisoners of war, or the use of global environmental resources.

We are living in a complex and dangerous world. The new test for a superpower is how well it cares for global interests. It is time for a new vision of America's role in the world based on an understanding that what is good for the world is good for us.

# CONCLUSION

The decades ahead will bring change, uncertainty, and peril in global affairs, especially if humanity and its leaders fail to adapt. Populations around the globe are suffering from the increasingly destructive and deadly effects of climate change, which in turn fuel unprecedented levels of mass migration, social upheaval, and competition for resources. Once again, wars rage in Europe and the Middle East, while China acts on its increasingly expansive power aspirations, triggering new global tensions. Early signs suggest that AI could either save humanity or doom it. Norms of social trust are in decline, the truth is elusive, and political polarization impedes dialogue, compromise, and progress toward solutions.

All of these trends—environmental, demographic, geostrategic, technological, political, and institutional—represent grave challenges for old assumptions and existing frameworks. The international system is under stress and in flux. The old order is dying, and a new order is demanding to be born. Indeed, this inescapable need for renewal creates an opportunity for inspiration and invention. We are in a period of elasticity, a time when there is greater capacity for stretch in our conceptions of global relations and thinking about the international system. We must act now to guide the global community toward a more peaceful, equitable, and sustainable future.

Our legacy must not be one of inattention to the rising tides of crisis. Our children deserve to inherit a world structured with a logic that is relevant to their futures. The world itself deserves a logical framework that builds on the history of human

progress yet recognizes and eliminates inherent flaws and anachronisms so that we may effectively confront the challenges ahead. We and our planet deserve a sustainable future.

No one can approach this task without understanding why our world has clung to the old order. Beneficiaries of the status quo have every immediate incentive to undermine progress. Competing national interests and aspirations impede transformative thinking, and domestic politics constrain even those states that see the need for, and wish to participate in, the renewal efforts. Economic competition overrides political cooperation. And structural flaws, like those embedded in the U.N. Charter, pose formidable barriers to reform.

In spite of such hurdles, the Pact for the Future adopted at the U.N. Summit of the Future in September 2024 represents an important milestone. The Pact commits the international community to a series of actions that, if fully realized, would meaningfully contribute to a new logic of multipolar pluralism, a more equitable distribution of power, and planetary sustainability. Global civil society must now mobilize to hold the U.N. member states to their commitments and to increase the ambition of implementation and follow-up actions. The Summit of the Future must be the starting point of an ongoing process, not a one-off event with limited impact. We must follow a new logic, advance a new ethos of caring and sharing, and construct a new institutional ecosystem to ensure that the age of turbulence does not become the age of catastrophe.

# ENDNOTES

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- 20 I offer the term “global majority” as an alternative to “Global South” to acknowledge the peoples of the countries commonly identified in the Global South make up approximately 82 percent of the world’s population and the majority of them live north of the equator, not in the “south.”
- 21 Climate change is a stark example. Countries representing the global majority are disproportionately experiencing the devastating consequences of a rapidly heating planet while having contributed very little to the emission of climate-altering greenhouse gases. They are also in desperate need of debt relief and equitable financing for investments in sustainable development and climate resilience. At the Paris Climate Conference (COP 21), wealthy countries affirmed a commitment to provide \$100 billion per year by 2025 for climate action in developing countries. In 2020, the amount of funds mobilized totaled approximately \$83 billion—and given the acceleration of the climate crisis, funding needs are significantly outpacing the financial support provided.
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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Stephen B. Heintz is president and CEO of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, a philanthropic foundation that advances social change for a more just, sustainable, and peaceful world. In 2002, he led the RBF's joint initiative with the UN Association of the USA to open a Track II dialogue that helped lay the groundwork for the Iran nuclear deal. In 2014, he set the Fund on a course to divest from fossil fuels, establishing the RBF as a leader in the Divest-Invest movement.



PHOTO BY ANITA BACK

Before joining the RBF in 2001, Heintz served as executive vice president and chief operating officer for the EastWest Institute during the 1990s. He later cofounded Dēmos, an organization that works to reduce political and economic inequality. As cochair of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship in the 21st Century, he coauthored the 2020 report *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century*.

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The Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF) advances social change that contributes to a more just, sustainable, and peaceful world. Through our grantmaking, convening, mission-aligned investing, and leadership, the RBF supports the people and organizations building lasting solutions to the challenges facing today's increasingly interdependent world.



Robert Bosch Academy

The Robert Bosch Academy is an institution of the Robert Bosch Stiftung and it offers international decision-makers, opinion leaders, and experts the space for confidential exchanges and solution oriented cooperation on global affairs. Research for this paper was undertaken in Berlin as a Richard von Weizsaecker Fellow at the Robert Bosch Academy.



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