

Multilateralism Speech - As Delivered

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“The Future of Multilateralism: keeping international co-operation alive in the new age of unilateralism”.

1. The Challenge

It is a pleasure to be here at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies. For over 40 years, the Centre has acted as a vital meeting point between the Western and Islamic worlds, providing mutual understanding and deepening interfaith dialogues. In this new age of renewed geopolitical competition, such work will be more important than ever. Only through mutual respect and understanding can countries come together and cooperate on issues of global importance. This is what I am going to talk to you about today: how to keep international co-operation alive in the new age of unilateralism.

All of us here today know that the world has entered an era of geopolitical disruption, more turbulent than at any time since the end of the Second World War. Many Islamic countries and communities have been on the front line of renewed conflicts, from Gaza to Sudan, and of human rights atrocities, such as the Rohingya of Burma and the Uighurs of Xinjiang.

The way that I have come to think of this change in world events is by imagining the kind of book on world history since the Second World War that a future historian might write decades from now. The first chapter of this book would be the Cold War, during which the US and USSR competed, but also cooperated on global challenges. The title of that chapter would be “danger, with equilibrium”. The fall of the Iron Curtain took us into the second chapter, entitled “excitement, with new equilibrium” as the world entered a golden age of relative peace and prosperity. This lasted until the mid-2010s, we entered a new era of strife.

The title of this third chapter would be “danger and excitement, but with no equilibrium”. Today’s world is a dangerous one with great geopolitical rivalries, between the US and China, Russia and Europe. It is also an exciting one, with accelerating technological advances in areas like AI and biotech, which can turbocharge growth and advances in healthcare. Yet the speed and scale of many of these technological advances also create unprecedented global challenges. Unlike in the Cold War, so far there has been little progress made on rival powers cooperating with each other to solve these challenges.

Quite the opposite is happening, with geopolitical competition accelerating and seeping into more domains. There has been an increase in conflicts, from Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine to the US-Israeli attack on Iran. Economic policy is increasingly being wielded as a weapon of statecraft, such as Trump’s tariffs, China’s export controls, and the scramble for critical minerals. And we are witnessing a desperate race between the US and China to gain the upper hand in the technologies of tomorrow, from biotechnology to artificial intelligence, which are fast becoming the foundations of geopolitical power in the 21st Century.

In this climate of frenzied competition, global cooperation is breaking down. Pillars that have long sustained the architecture of the international order are crumbling. For example, the United States has withdrawn from the World Health Organisation and the Paris Agreement.

Meanwhile, Russia is suspected of breaching key agreements like the Chemical Weapons Convention, and China is refusing to negotiate on nuclear arms controls.

These pillars, already crumbling under existing pressures, now face an impending earthquake from emerging technology. In the next few years, AI could - depending on who you believe - render whole swathes of the world population unemployed, or design bioweapons to kill tens of millions of people. Anthropic has already warned that its new model Mythos broke out of its testing sandbox and can work autonomously to exploit tens of thousands of cybersecurity weaknesses.¹ There is a danger that AI could one day attain superintelligence and decide, in all of its wisdom and munificence, that it would prefer a world without humanity. However, the biggest danger is its misuse by humans with bad intentions.

Despite the pace of technological change and the growing risk of misuse, international cooperation on these issues and the imposition of meaningful guardrails is sorely lacking.

This is why multilateralism and the international rules-based order matter so much. As tempting as principles like “America First” - or indeed anywhere “first” - might sound, the challenges that impact people’s lives are increasingly global in nature, and cannot be resolved solely by national governments. The Iran war and the consequences of the blocking of the strait of Hormuz for the global economy are a reminder of that. Only by working together can the world address existential challenges in areas like AI and bioweapons.

While it is easy to despair at the decline of multilateral cooperation in the world today, we need not be defeatist. During the Cold War, America and the USSR worked together to build much of the architecture from the post-war period, from the United Nations to guardrail treaties on nuclear and biological weapons. So we know that geopolitical rivals locked in relentless competition can still find ways to cooperate.

Furthermore, multilateralism has always waxed and waned over time. The interwar League of Nations was replaced by the more effective United Nations. So we know that even when the torch of international cooperation flickers for a time, it can eventually burn all the brighter – if the flame can be kept alive.

With America, Russia, and China all currently acting as revisionist powers, responsibility for keeping the flame of international cooperation and the rules-based system alive will fall to the middle-powers. Western nations, Islamic countries, and states from the rest of the world will need to work together to buttress the crumbling pillars that hold up the architecture of multilateral cooperation, and help them withstand both the pressures of existing challenges and the shocks of technological disruption. As Mark Carney articulated in his “middle powers” speech earlier this year, countries must focus on “building coalitions that work – issues by issue, with partners who share enough common ground to act together.”²

¹ <https://www.axios.com/2026/04/07/anthropic-mythos-preview-cybersecurity-risks>

² <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/>

To survive this new era of turbulence and keep the flame of multilateralism alive, middle powers will need to take action in four key areas. First, reinforce existing international institutions through reinventing them. Second, build multilateral agreements and shared norms around new global threats. Third, create new networks of cooperation, which we might call 'plurilateral'. And fourth, cultivate sovereign power. Let's consider each of these in greater detail.

2. Reinforcing existing international institutions through reinvention

First, we need to reinforce key existing international institutions by reinventing them for the modern age.

In the aftermath of the horrors of the Second World War, America and its allies were the architects of a sophisticated network of international institutions. We created the United Nations, an organisation to help international states to cooperate and to promote peace and stability. We set up the Bretton Woods institutions to create a stronger framework for global trade and finance, including the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. And we wrote a series of conventions and treaties designed to uphold international human rights, from the Refugee Convention to the European Convention on Human Rights.

But in the last few years, America has gone from architect to arsonist. In the last year, President Trump has pulled the United States out of the Paris Agreement on climate change, the World Health Organisation, UNESCO, and more than 60 other international organisations.^{3 4 5} America owes the UN more than \$4 billion in contributions to its regular budget and peacekeeping operations.⁶ This has contributed to funding pressures which have led to investigations into war crimes in the DRC and human rights abuses in Afghanistan being paused, and which leave the organisation facing financial collapse.⁷

The Trump Administration is also seeking to recast multilateral institutions in its own image. In his speech to the UN last September, President Trump accused the organisation of using only "empty words" to try and resolve conflicts, holding a bias against Western countries,

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn9zznx8qdno>

⁴ <https://www.axios.com/2025/07/22/trump-unesco-withdrawal>

⁵ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2026/01/withdrawing-the-united-states-from-international-organizations-conventions-and-treaties-that-are-contrary-to-the-interests-of-the-united-states/>

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2026/01/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-withdraws-the-united-states-from-international-organizations-that-are-contrary-to-the-interests-of-the-united-states/>

⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/world/trump-says-us-will-give-un-money-make-it-stronger-more-viable-2026-02-19/>

⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/world/human-rights-are-under-assault-says-un-secretary-general-2026-02-23/>
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cr579mdv4m7o>

and supporting illegal migration.⁸ He has since created a new Board of Peace, designed to support the Gaza peace process, but which Trump has said “might” one day replace the UN.⁹ Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent has also criticised the IMF and World Bank for their “mission creep” towards “climate change, gender, and social issues”.¹⁰

While there have been a myriad of losers from Trump’s assault on multilateralism, most acutely across the developing world, there has been one winner: China. Beijing is stepping up its presence in strategic multilateral organisations like the International Telecommunication Union which sets standards for communications, an area in which China is seeking to establish itself as a world leader.¹¹ China is also increasing its engagement with the World Health Organisation, making it easier to shield itself from scrutiny over the origins of the Covid pandemic.¹² While China has not significantly increased its aid budget, US cuts have made it easier for Beijing to portray themselves as a more reliable partner for developing countries than America.¹³

One way to respond to America’s attacks on multilateralism and China’s growing influence, would be for middle power countries to step up their support for international institutions, including greater funding contributions. However, this will be very difficult given Europe’s pivot towards higher defence spending. In the UK’s latest international aid allocations, the Foreign Office wisely committed to increasing the share of its aid that goes to multilateral organisations.¹⁴ That said, this will not fill the gap in funding for multilateral finance and pales in comparison to the \$500 million extra contribution that China has made to the WHO budget.¹⁵

Instead, middle powers must lean further into reforming institutions and agreements, to ensure a focus on the most important issues. In many areas, President Trump’s diagnosis that multilateral organisations are in dire reform is correct. Rather than quit these institutions though, middle powers should show that with hard work it is possible to change them from within.

To a certain extent some progress here is already being made. The UN80 initiative is seeking to streamline the work of the United Nations by driving efficiency in the secretariat

⁸ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/2025/09/at-un-president-trump-champions-sovereignty-rejects-globalism/>

⁹ <https://www.ft.com/content/0ee79faa-86d3-4c01-a180-add6e164ac28?syn-25a6b1a6=1>
<https://edition.cnn.com/2026/01/20/politics/trump-gaza-board-of-peace-united-nations>

¹⁰ <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sb0094>

¹¹ <https://www.ft.com/content/e289023c-a7ac-4b6d-ab45-908ce4163b12>

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/dec/20/who-traditional-medicine-alternative-remedies-mainstream-healthcare-evidence>

¹³ <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3342614/un-grapples-cash-crisis-dont-expect-china-fill-gap-experts-say>
<https://www.npr.org/2026/02/16/nx-s1-5702364/as-us-presence-wanes-china-works-to-increase-its-influence-through-foreign-aid>

¹⁴ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2026-03-19/hcws1425>

¹⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/china-give-500-million-who-next-5-years-official-says-2025-05-20/#:~:text=By%20Reuters,by%20the%20Trump%20administration's%20decision.>

and reducing fragmentation between different programmes.¹⁶ The EU, UK and other key middle powers like Japan have joined the World Trade Organisation's Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement, to help arbitrate trade disputes.¹⁷ The Sevilla Commitment last June agreed measures to alleviate sovereign debt burdens in developing countries.¹⁸ In December, 27 countries called for reforms to the European Convention on Human Rights to ensure states can expel foreigners convicted of serious crimes and to clarify how its Articles are applied in deportation cases.¹⁹

Alongside these institutional reforms, middle powers should support fundamental changes to reinvent how our multilateral organisations work. The EU has recently called for a rethink of "most favoured nation" at the WTO, to make it easier for members to change tariff levels to respond to China's use of state intervention and subsidies to distort global markets.²⁰ The World Health Organisation must be reformed to refocus on preventing the spread of diseases and ensure its lethargic responses to Covid and the West African Ebola outbreak are never repeated.²¹ The Refugees Convention could be reformed with a new Protocol establishing a set of rules around onward movement from first safe countries of asylum, as the Migration Policy Institute has advocated.²² Finally, countries must continue to push for reform of the United Nations Security Council to give more middle powers greater influence and enhance the legitimacy of the organisation. The G4 proposal by Germany, Japan, India, and Brazil to add a mix of new permanent and non-permanent members, drawn from different regions of the world would be an important step in the right direction.²³

Even if the prospect of some of these wide-ranging reforms seems bleak for the foreseeable future, pressing for them nonetheless can help keep the flame of multilateralism alive.

3. Build multilateral agreements and shared norms around new global threats

Even as our existing multilateral institutions are under strain, there are a whole host of new global threats on the horizon that they are even less equipped to deal with. That brings us to the second point in any plan to shore up international cooperation - build multilateral agreements and shared norms around new global threats. Many of the new threats facing the world come from advances in technology, which creates as many risks as opportunities.

Take the example of space and Earth's orbit, now home to thousands of satellites. These beam internet and communications around the world, provide positioning data through

¹⁶ <https://www.un.org/un80-initiative/en/news/what-un80-initiative>

¹⁷ https://wtoplurilaterals.info/plural_initiative/the-mpia/

¹⁸ <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/07/sevilla-development-finance-conference-multilateralism>

¹⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-to-the-conference-of-ministers-of-justice-of-the-council-of-europe>

²⁰ <https://www.ft.com/content/2f5e1b1c-07f8-4316-ab40-fd4e1482df9f?syn-25a6b1a6=1>

²¹ <https://undark.org/2025/05/07/who-trump-reform/>

²² <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/mending-not-ending-refugee-convention>

²³ <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/internationale-organisationen/vereintenationen/reformsr-fragen-231618>

services like GPS, and take high quality images of the Earth below, helping assess risks related to issues like climate change and conservation. In the last decade there has been a twentyfold increase in the number of objects launched into space each year.²⁴

However, the more objects we put into space, the more debris is created from satellite malfunctions and collisions, littering the Earth's orbit. Already NASA has to track thousands of pieces of debris to prevent collisions with spacecraft. There is a risk that when the amount of debris reaches a critical mass, there could be a chain reaction of cascading collisions making low Earth orbit hard to access and prevent spacecraft leaving the Earth - a scenario known as the "Kessler syndrome".²⁵

Military activities are also increasing in space. The Outer Space Treaty prohibits placing weapons of mass destruction into space and harmful interference with the peaceful use of outer space.²⁶ However, satellites are making increasingly tempting military targets. It is unclear whether the "harmful interference" principle for peaceful use of space would prevent countries shooting down military or dual-use satellites. Russia attacked the dual-use telecommunications satellite network KA-SAT at the beginning of their invasion of Ukraine, as well as interfering with civilian GPS signals around the Baltic Sea.²⁷

The same risks apply to environmental technologies. The world's collective failure to decarbonise is leading more scientists to consider nascent geoengineering technologies like solar radiation modification, which would involve pumping millions of tonnes of reflective particles into the atmosphere to deflect some of the sun's energy back into space. While research into the idea is in its early stages, scientists believe this could help cool the planet, but with the risk of serious side effects such as creating extreme weather conditions in certain regions.²⁸

Above all, though, the risks of artificial intelligence are the greatest novel challenge facing the world. Alongside its undoubted benefits for delivering greater economic productivity, more responsive public services, and discovering new drugs, AI creates a great many dangers.

AI is being used to significantly enhance cyber attacks, putting governments and public service providers at greater risk. The recent announcement by Anthropic was that its new model Mythos has found bugs in "every major operating system and web browser," and created proof-of-concepts to exploit them on the first attempt in 83% of cases. They have warned that other AI companies could release similar models within the next 6 to 18 months.²⁹

²⁴ 2025 there were 4,510 objects launched into space around the world, up from 222 in 2015.

<https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/yearly-number-of-objects-launched-into-outer-space>

²⁵ <https://iq.ft.com/space-debris/>

<https://svs.gsfc.nasa.gov/5258/>

²⁶ <https://www.unoosa.org/oosa/en/ourwork/spacelaw/treaties/outerspacetreaty.html>

²⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/clyx3ly54veq;>

<https://gfsis.org/en/the-militarization-of-space-china-and-russia-vs-the-united-states/>

²⁸ <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/science/article/royal-society-says-dimming-the-sun-risky-but-may-cool-the-planet-9m7j5qsjc>

²⁹ <https://www.axios.com/2026/04/07/anthropic-mythos-preview-cybersecurity-risks>

AI is being used to speed up military decision-making, helping the US military strike more than 1,000 targets in Iran within the first 24 hours of the war.³⁰ But adversaries competing to shorten the “kill chain” - the time between identifying a target and striking it - in order to gain a military advantage could cede more decisions over life and death in conflict to AI.³¹

AI-powered biological design tools, created to help discover new drugs and treatments, could be misused to design more deadly or transmissible viruses. Many of these tools are open source and have already widely proliferated.³² Even research by well-intentioned scientists creates significant risks through the potential for lab leaks. Some scientists have discussed the potential within a decade to create “mirror life” synthetic organisms - ones created with reversed forms of molecules. These “mirrored” molecules would allow organisms to evade the immune systems of natural life forms, and create an “unprecedented risk” to life on earth.³³

And alongside these specific harms there are very serious questions about whether humanity could lose control over advanced AI in the future. The AI Security Institute has warned that while research into preventing loss of control is advancing with new methods to detect and prevent AI misaligning with human values early in training, managing these risks will “require substantial advance preparation.”³⁴ There is little sign that governments around the world are heeding this advice.

We need to see a great deal more international cooperation on the risks associated with technology. On some of these issues this could potentially be within reach because the US, China, and most of the rest of the world would benefit from stronger guardrails. Space management is one such area. NASA and China already warn each other about potential space collisions.³⁵ Earlier this year a new UN expert group on space situational awareness was launched. Chaired by the UAE, this will seek to agree new data sharing measures to reduce the risk of space collisions.³⁶ Banning research into “mirror life” organisms is another area where there is broad international support for action. Last year, a conference of industry experts agreed that “researchers should refrain from pursuing the creation of mirror organisms”. The group is continuing to develop policy ideas to achieve this.³⁷

However, on many of these technological risks, multilateral agreements may not be in every country’s best interests. When it comes to technologies that have military applications, only agreements that have tough and clear inspection and verification mechanisms should be

³⁰ <https://www.thetimes.com/world/middle-east/article/ai-war-us-israel-iran-school-drone-sttg7jqt0>

³¹ <https://www.thetimes.com/world/russia-ukraine-war/article/kill-chains-future-warfare-human-ai-wwntgxbtr>

³² https://www.williamhague.com/files/ugd/067357_9402b5e9c95142848e5c4adda5ec967f.pdf

³³ <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2024/dec/12/unprecedented-risk-to-life-on-earth-scientists-call-for-halt-on-mirror-life-microbe-research>

³⁴ <https://internationalaisafetyreport.org/publication/international-ai-safety-report-2026>

³⁵ <https://www.space.com/space-exploration/satellites/china-reached-out-to-nasa-to-avoid-a-potential-satellite-collision-in-1st-of-its-kind-space-cooperation>

³⁶ <https://breakingdefense.com/2026/02/new-un-forum-seeks-busting-space-traffic-cooperation-barriers/>

³⁷ <https://www.parismirrorlife.org/>
<https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2025/10/mirror-life-bacteria-risks-prevention>

considered. Without such mechanisms, arms control agreements are not only worthless but actively harmful to well-meaning states who bind their hands while allowing adversaries to ignore the provisions of their agreement.

For example, Russia and China have proposed a Treaty on the Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in Outer Space with no verification methods, designed to hamstring Western defensive capabilities in space.³⁸ There is credible evidence that Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea have all broken the terms of the Biological Weapons Convention, which has no enforcement mechanisms.³⁹

Artificial intelligence is an area in which it would be virtually impossible to introduce enforcement measures, even if countries around the world agreed they were necessary. Unlike arms control agreements about issues like nuclear weapons, where numbers of warheads can be counted and levels of uranium enrichment can be measured, there would be no way of knowing if a state government was working on an AI programme in breach of a treaty's obligations. Well-intended calls for binding prohibitions on the development and use of autonomous weapons systems are misplaced.⁴⁰ Such agreements would only bind the hands of Western countries while being ignored by countries like Russia and China.

In areas where multilateral agreements are either not politically or technically feasible, the emphasis should instead be on building shared international norms about what responsible behaviour looks like. This would allow countries that believe in the international-rules based order to set and meet some ground rules, but without tying their hands behind their backs in the event that other countries do not respect these norms. Some progress here is already being made, with a UN group putting forward useful ideas on responsible military behaviour in space. A coalition of countries also recently agreed broad principles on the responsible use of AI in the military domain.⁴¹ These kinds of efforts will be all the more vital as technological advances accelerate.

4. Create new plurilateral networks of cooperation

Reinforcing existing multilateral institutions through reinvention and building agreements and shared norms around new global threats will not be enough to set the world back on the right track on many of these issues.

That brings us to point three in our agenda for saving international cooperation - the creation of new plurilateral networks of cooperation: smaller groups of likeminded countries. For

³⁸ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/31/russia-china-space-war-treaty-demilitarization-satellites/>

³⁹ https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/2025-Arms-Control-Treaty-Compliance-Report_Final-Accessible.pdf

⁴⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/society-equity/nations-meet-un-killer-robot-talks-regulation-lags-2025-05-12/>
<https://red-lines.ai/>

⁴¹ <https://www.espi.eu/reports/whats-next-for-europe-in-multilateral-engagement-on-space-security/>
<https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/us-china-opt-out-joint-declaration-ai-use-military-2026-02-05/>

many of the challenges facing the world, well-drafted agreements between a small group of key countries can deliver a great deal of progress.

Take nuclear weapons for example. For decades, the US was able to negotiate agreements with the USSR, and later Russia, on limiting the number of deployed nuclear weapons.⁴² Initiatives between the two countries, from the SALT agreement to New START complemented more global multilateral agreements like the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, reducing nuclear risks.

We need to see a renewed plurilateral effort on nuclear weapons controls today. President Trump has rightly called for trilateral nuclear talks with Russia and China, but Beijing is unwilling to enter into negotiations at least until its arsenal is roughly the same size as America's. Similarly, Russia wants to involve France and Britain in nuclear arms talks, but Europe needs to expand its sovereign nuclear capabilities due to concerns about dependence on the United States.⁴³

Even if an agreement on nuclear arms control feels far off, the model of capability-focused coalitions can be applied to other areas. For example, DNA synthesis is currently concentrated in a small number of leading biotech powers. There are about 1,000 companies around the world providing DNA synthesis services, but roughly two-thirds of these companies are located in just nine countries, including the US, China, India, and the UK.⁴⁴ An agreement could potentially be reached between these countries on tightening guardrails through interventions like mandatory screening requirements for benchtop synthesisers.⁴⁵ This would reduce the risk of companies accidentally catering to terrorists whether at home or abroad, and help set international norms as DNA synthesis services spread more widely across other countries.

The same approach could work for tackling space debris. The US accounted for 82% of objects launched into space last year, with China in second place with 8%. A deal between the two countries on ways to reduce the creation of space debris would therefore cover 90% of objects currently being put into space.⁴⁶ Alternatively, the Tony Blair Institute has argued that spacefaring middle powers like the EU or Japan could help broker a binding multilateral agreement on mitigating space debris to help build international norms.⁴⁷

Regardless of specific capabilities, there are other areas where a general "coalition of the willing" approach between like-minded countries can galvanise action in the rest of the world. The most prominent example is international trade. While the WTO was designed to help

⁴² <https://www.cfr.org/timelines/us-russia-nuclear-arms-control>

⁴³ <https://www.reuters.com/world/kremlin-says-british-french-arsenals-must-ultimately-be-part-nuclear-disarmament-2025-09-29/>

⁴⁴ 1,023 companies that provide DNA synthesis services, with top countries for these companies the US (255), China (135), India (59), the UK (49), Germany (36), Turkey (35), Spain (33), France (31), Italy (27), together accounting for 660 companies (~ 64.5% of global total). Figures from Dec 2025 report.

<https://www.globalsynthesismap.bio/map3d?country=TWN>

<https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/471726/where-lab-made-dna-is-created-and-barely-policed>

⁴⁵ https://www.williamhague.com/files/ugd/067357_9402b5e9c95142848e5c4adda5ec967f.pdf

⁴⁶ <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/yearly-number-of-objects-launched-into-outer-space>

⁴⁷ <https://institute.global/insights/climate-and-energy/space-full-rubbish-its-everyones-job-clean-it>

facilitate new global trade standards, little progress has been made since the collapse of the Doha negotiations in 2008. Global WTO rules are even going backwards in some respects.

Increasingly, countries are relying on plurilateral agreements, at the WTO and beyond, to help set international norms on trade. The main achievement at last month's conference was the agreement by 66 WTO members to adopt a new agreement on e-commerce.⁴⁸ The EU and the members of the regional trade agreement CPTPP are also in talks about a new digital trade deal. Ursula von der Leyen has spoken about how "structured cooperation" between the two blocs could be thought about "as a beginning of redesigning the WTO".⁴⁹

Greater cooperation between allies will be vital in order to better collectively compete against rivals. This is true of trade, where President Trump has gone against the grain of his "America First" approach to create the Pax Silica initiative. This seeks to strengthen America's supply chains for key technologies like AI through partnerships with allies, including a new critical minerals buyers club designed to loosen Beijing's stranglehold.⁵⁰ The EU and UK are also both pushing for a new Western steel alliance to counter China's industrial overcapacity.⁵¹ Meanwhile, some European politicians have called for a NATO-style trade pact with Canada and other countries. They want to create mutual response clauses to deter China - or indeed President Trump - from attacking their country with trade measures like tariffs.⁵²

Beyond trade, defence and security is another area where cooperation between allies is increasing. This is particularly true for European countries, which are seeking to diversify their defence partnerships and reduce their dependence on America. For example, President Macron has offered to redeploy parts of France's nuclear weapons umbrella to other European countries as part of a new "forward deterrence" initiative.⁵³ The new SAFE loan system devised by Brussels will help European countries rearm, and the decision to allow Canadian companies to participate will help boost NATO interoperability.⁵⁴ Meanwhile Britain - blocked from SAFE by French intransigence - is working with the Netherlands and Finland to create a new multilateral fund to joint defence procurement.⁵⁵ Ukraine is also delivering innovative new partnerships, including through the Test in Ukraine programme, which allows European defence companies to test arms on the frontline.⁵⁶

⁴⁸ https://www.wto.org/english/news_e/news26_e/mc14_28mar26_341_e.htm

⁴⁹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-and-indo-pacific-alliance-eyes-digital-trade-deal/>

⁵⁰ <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2026/01/us-critical-minerals-diplomacy-from-america-first-deals-to-pax-silica/>

<https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-flails-as-us-launches-critical-minerals-spree/>

⁵¹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/eus-sefcovic-confirms-push-for-western-steel-club-with-u-s-and-u-k/>

⁵² <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-liberals-pitch-nato-style-trade-pact-canada-japan-south-korea/>

⁵³ <https://www.ft.com/content/45d90eeb-5084-4c22-8d4a-9fdb223759fb?syn-25a6b1a6=1>

⁵⁴ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/02/11/safe-council-clears-path-for-financial-assistance-to-eight-member-states-and-concluding-the-canada-agreement/>

⁵⁵ <https://www.ft.com/content/3dcd8445-019a-4b4d-b951-6ac314b1ff18?syn-25a6b1a6=1>

⁵⁶ <https://www.euronews.com/next/2025/07/17/foreign-defense-companies-can-now-test-weapons-in-ukraine>

<https://www.euronews.com/2026/03/30/what-are-ukraines-new-gulf-defence-deals-here-is-what-zelenskyy-signed>

In future, European allies will also need greater coordination around Russian “grey zone” attacks - those falling short of armed attack, but designed to damage defence. For example, the Centre for Strategic and International Studies has called for a new European Cyber Operations Group which could provide willing NATO allies with a single united front to engage in cyber counter-measures against Russian aggression.⁵⁷

While many of these initiatives focus on enhancing the ability of allies to work together on defence and be more than the sum of their parts, they are also designed to enhance participating countries’ sovereign defence capabilities. This brings us to the fourth principle in our framework for multilateralism - cultivating sovereign power.

5. Cultivate sovereign power

Sovereign power is critical for countries that want to keep the flame of multilateral cooperation alive. It provides greater heft in international affairs and negotiations. Take how Europe's defence dependence on America has made it harder to push back on tariffs. This is particularly true when it comes to technology regulation. The states that lead on the creation of novel technologies will inevitably have a greater say over how they are regulated internationally. The United States' dominance of social media is one of the key reasons there has been no international rules put in place to regulate how these technologies prey on the vulnerable.

Even when multilateral agreements are reached, they are only worth the paper upon which they are written when states have the power and will to ensure the agreements are upheld. The best example of this is the United Kingdom. After the Second World War, Britain helped write many of the international agreements that governed the post-war period. But since the Cold War, our hard power has atrophied, and Iraq and Afghanistan robbed us of our will power to intervene overseas. Our failure to take action in Syria and hold Assad to account for his use of chemical weapons demonstrated to the world that while we say we believe in international law, we no longer have the power or will to defend it when our red lines are crossed.

So how should middle powers go about cultivating sovereign power? There are three key areas to focus on.

First, hard power. As President Teddy Roosevelt once said the art of diplomacy is to “speak softly and carry a big stick”. Europe is at long last waking up to the fact it has been stickless for decades. Data from the International Institute for Strategic Studies shows that last year Europe accounted for 21% of global defence spending, up from just 17% in 2022.⁵⁸ However, much of this is due to the action taken by Germany, Poland and the Baltic and Nordic states. France and Britain are still taking insufficient action to significantly increase their defence capabilities.

⁵⁷ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/enter-europes-cyber-deterrence>

⁵⁸ <https://www.ft.com/content/9593e226-25de-4108-b604-8c413675cd75?syn-25a6b1a6=1>

This pivot towards defence is not just happening in Europe. Japan is in the process of rearming for the first time since 1945, and has new defence agreements with the Philippines and the Republic of Korea, two other countries threatened by Chinese brinkmanship in the Indo-Pacific.⁵⁹ In the Gulf, Saudi Arabia has signed an ambitious new defence agreement with Pakistan in which they state that aggression against either country will be considered as aggression against both.⁶⁰ The Saudis are also one of three Gulf states to sign a 10-year defence partnership with Ukraine, through which Kyiv will support the countries to develop new counter-drone measures to protect them from Iran.⁶¹

Second, tech power. Digital technology holds an extraordinarily important position in delivering growth, defence, security, and resilience and this role will only grow with artificial intelligence and developments in engineering biology and quantum. This means that technological prowess is essential for middle powers seeking to influence geopolitics and support multilateralism.

Here Western powers can learn a lot from middle powers in the Gulf, where both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have positioned themselves well to help lead the AI revolution. Abu Dhabi has released its own sovereign open AI model, K2 Think, to compete with China's DeepSeek. Saudi Arabia's state-owned company Humain is building AI infrastructure powered by hundreds of thousands of advanced Nvidia chips.⁶² Riyadh is working to exploit the critical mineral deposits within the Kingdom, worth \$2 and a half trillion, while the UAE has established itself as a hub for testing electric vertical take-off and landing aircraft⁶³

When it comes to securing tech power, middle powers should bear in mind that many key technologies are in fact bundles of a myriad of smaller technologies. This is known as a tech "stack" in Silicon Valley. For example, AI technology is not just the models themselves, but the data they are trained on, the datacentres this sits in, the chips used to train the models, the critical minerals extracted and refined to be used in the chips. All of this contributes to the AI "stack".

Growing awareness of how critical a country's tech stack is to its security and power in the world has led Europe to explore whether it can replace American technology within its stack. Some leaders in Brussels are keen to see European providers replace US companies in everything from AI models to cloud infrastructure. However, businesses have warned this would take far too long and cost far too much, to be a feasible proposal.⁶⁴ Rather than chase fantasies about full tech stack independence, middle powers should do more to diversify their technology partners, to reduce dependence on any one country. One interesting idea

⁵⁹ <https://www.cnn.com/2026/01/15/asia/japan-philippines-pact-intl-hnk>
<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-korea-japan-defence-ministers-agree-upgrade-cooperation-2026-01-30/>

⁶⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/sep/18/saudi-arabia-pakistan-mutual-defence-pact>

⁶¹ <https://www.euronews.com/next/2025/07/17/foreign-defense-companies-can-now-test-weapons-in-ukraine>
<https://www.euronews.com/2026/03/30/what-are-ukraines-new-gulf-defence-deals-here-is-what-zelenskyy-signed>

⁶² <https://www.ft.com/content/465c717b-af26-48c1-a530-e9e6d313f96a>
<https://www.ft.com/content/5302d5d2-d375-4327-905c-7b1ad5173105>

⁶³ <https://edition.cnn.com/2026/01/23/middleeast/saudi-arabia-minerals-investment-spc>

⁶⁴ <https://www.ft.com/content/95fe93ef-2439-4519-834e-eb1ac7dd0a04?syn-25a6b1a6=1>

would be for a group of middle power countries to jointly back a specific open source AI company like France's Mistral or Canada's Cohere, to help hedge against American and Chinese AI dominance.

At the same time, middle powers should explore the extent to which they can seize a strategic stranglehold over one niche aspect of a tech stack. For example, Taiwan's specialisation in advanced chips makes America more protective of the island. Beijing's hold over critical minerals supply chains helped them force Trump to the table over his tariffs last year. The Dutch company ASML, which provides unique lithography machines for producing advanced microchips - has given the country a greater influence over AI and semiconductors. This shows that not only do middle powers need a big stick, but also a strong stack.

A strong tech stack can be used not only to project geopolitical power, but fill gaps in multilateral architecture. A good example of this is the AI Security Institute. While no progress is being made to create international agreements on regulating AI, the Institute is exploring technical interventions that could be made to make AI more secure. For example, they are exploring areas like 'jail break' protections to stop terrorists designing biological weapons as well as considering ways to address the "alignment problem" and ensure that any future artificial super intelligence has human values baked into it. Other similar initiatives that tech powers should consider include metagenomic surveillance systems that can spot when novel pathogens enter a country through airports, and technology to help remove space debris safely.⁶⁵

Finally, there is the power of resilience. The last few years have shown that countries must be able to withstand shocks. The Covid pandemic demonstrated how important it is to be able to produce your own therapeutics and have secure, diversified supply chains. Likewise, the wars in Ukraine and Iran have shown the importance of having reliable sources of energy, fertiliser, and food. The relative ease with which Iran has forced the United States to the negotiating table by threatening oil shipments through the Strait of Hormuz shows that even superpowers, equipped with the best defence and technological prowess on earth, are not immune from the risks of weak resilience. Middle powers need deep stocks of energy, food, and therapeutics as well as big sticks and strong stacks.

6. Conclusion

Drawing this argument together, each of us knows that international cooperation is essential for responding to the increasingly global challenges that impact people's lives, and severe risks on the horizon, from artificial intelligence to bioweapons.

Each of us knows that international cooperation is in dire straits. Multilateralism and the structures that have upheld it are now creaking under greater pressure than at any time since the end of the Second World War. But even if we are pessimistic about the future of international cooperation, we need not be fatalistic.

⁶⁵ <https://institute.global/insights/climate-and-energy/space-full-rubbish-its-everyones-job-clean-it>
https://www.williamhague.com/files/ugd/067357_9402b5e9c95142848e5c4adda5ec967f.pdf

Middle powers can help keep the flame of multilateralism alive by taking action in the four key areas outlined: by reinforcing existing international institutions through reinvention; by building multilateral agreements and shared norms around new global threats; by creating new plurilateral networks of cooperation; and by cultivating sovereign power through big sticks, strong stacks, and deep stocks. In the words of Mark Carney again, middle powers must cultivate the ability to “build our strength at home and to act together”.⁶⁶

In many of these areas, Western middle powers can learn a lot from the Islamic world. Many Gulf States are world leaders when it comes to establishing new networks of cooperation and cultivating sovereign power, particularly in AI and technology.

For those of us anxious to see a more peaceful and cooperative world and who despair at the state of multilateralism today, one final piece of wisdom we should hold in our heads is the Persian proverb “īn nīz bogzarad”. Allegedly inscribed onto a ring long ago for an Islamic ruler to help them appreciate the perpetual change of human affairs, in English it reads “This too shall pass away”. This period will pass away but it needs our efforts, our activism, and our wisdom to help it do so.

Thank you.

⁶⁶ <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/>