Purposeful Multilateral Engagement:
Preserving U.S. Leadership in the 21st Century

Institute for the Study of Diplomacy
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_Preserving U.S. Leadership in the 21st Century_

**Capstone Joint Report**
The Institute for the Study of Diplomacy
Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service
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All opinions contained in this report are the authors’ own.
Executive Summary

The election of Donald Trump in 2016 reflected a growing American dissatisfaction with a liberal international order many believed had not delivered. Since the end of World War II, the U.S. has been instrumental in establishing and maintaining the rules-based international system and the institutions that govern it. In recent decades, however, perceptions that the United Nations and other multilateral organizations were ineffective and, in some cases, threatened U.S. sovereignty have merged with disenchantment over the economic promises of globalization. This merger propelled a self-described “America First” candidate to the White House.

While many voters were reacting to real demographic and economic trends, notably increased racial diversity and stagnating wages for many segments of the population, the benefits of multilateralism and the risks of disengagement were given short shrift. The incoming administration should address the public’s concerns and push for tax and other economic reforms but must also put a spotlight on the value of multilateral institutions to address the critical transnational issues of the 21st century.

Key among these issues are human rights, climate change, international justice, and security. In withdrawing from the UN Human Rights Council and Paris Climate Accords, denigrating the International Criminal Court (ICC), and sidelining regional organizations, the Trump administration has relinquished opportunities to reinforce human rights norms and address emerging threats. In 2017, the United States withdrew from the Human Rights Council, delivering a significant blow to the promotion of human rights norms. By withdrawing, the country also lost its best opportunity to promote membership reform and tame the Council’s constant focus on Israel. That same year, President Trump announced that the United States would withdraw from the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change mitigation. That announcement may have prioritized American businesses over environmentalism, but it failed to recognize the economic, political, and security repercussions climate change is already having around the world. In 2018, the administration took an aggressive aim at the ICC when the National Security Adviser gave a speech threatening the Court’s existence and repudiating its value for the rule of law, despite robust evidence to the contrary. Finally, despite the current administration’s strong stances on transnational security threats, it has ignored many
regional organizations, eliminating a useful tool to help achieve greater stability in conflict-affected regions (the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is put forward as a case study in this context). While the current administration prefers the direct deal-making of a bilateral relationship, partnerships with regional collectives can offer more cost-effective approaches to security issues.

The incoming administration should purposefully re-engage with the multilateral system. It should rejoin abandoned institutions and agreements and examine how new tools like multistakeholderism and new approaches to existing tools like public diplomacy can create beneficial outcomes and convey the value of multilateralism to the American people. Multistakeholderism, the involvement of a wide array of state and non-state stakeholders, has been proven effective in Internet governance and other multilateral frameworks. The U.S. should embrace this approach, thereby leveraging the expertise of civil society and the private sector, while encouraging businesses to sign on to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and similar initiatives. Concurrently, the incoming administration should expand public diplomacy efforts to convey the value of multilateralism to a diverse swath of Americans across the country (the UN system is put forward as an example). By pairing such efforts with increased access to the UN for school trips, raising the profile of the U.S. Ambassador to the UN, and expanding opportunities for Youth Observers, the new administration can mitigate the malaise that has been unfairly projected onto the international system.

Multilateral disengagement presents at best a lost opportunity to achieve U.S. foreign policy goals, and at worst a systematic unraveling of the international order founded on rule of law, human rights, and collaborative action in the face of global threats. While the role of the United States on the world stage must necessarily adapt to the times, American leadership on these issues and many more remains critical. The next administration must pursue purposeful multilateral engagement to shape our future and preserve American leadership in the 21st century.
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## Acronyms

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<tr>
<td>AU</td>
<td>African Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>ASEAN</td>
<td>Association of Southeast Asian Nations</td>
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<td>ASPA</td>
<td>American Service-Members’ Protection Act (ASPA)</td>
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<td>BWC</td>
<td>Better World Campaign</td>
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<td>CSD</td>
<td>Commission on Sustainable Development</td>
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<td>COP</td>
<td>Conference of Parties</td>
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<td>CORSIA</td>
<td>Carbon Offset and Reduction Scheme for International Aviation</td>
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<td>ECOWAS</td>
<td>Economic Community of West African States</td>
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<td>EAC</td>
<td>East African Community</td>
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<tr>
<td>E3</td>
<td>Expanded Economic Engagement</td>
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<td>GCC</td>
<td>Gulf Cooperation Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>GONGOs</td>
<td>Government Organized Nongovernmental Organizations</td>
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<td>HFCs</td>
<td>Hydrofluorocarbons</td>
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<td>IPCC</td>
<td>Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change</td>
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<td>ICC</td>
<td>International Criminal Court</td>
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<td>IGF</td>
<td>Internet Governance Forum</td>
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<td>JCPOA</td>
<td>Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action</td>
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<td>MEPI</td>
<td>Middle East Partnership Initiative</td>
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<td>MNC</td>
<td>Multinational Corporation</td>
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<td>MSI</td>
<td>Multistakeholder Initiative</td>
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<td>MSP</td>
<td>Multistakeholder Process</td>
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<td>NDC</td>
<td>Nationally Determined Contribution</td>
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<td>NATO</td>
<td>North American Treaty Organization</td>
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<td>OHCHR</td>
<td>Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights</td>
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<td>PD</td>
<td>Public Diplomacy</td>
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<td>SDG</td>
<td>Sustainable Development Goals</td>
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<td>TIFA</td>
<td>Trade and Investment Framework Agreement</td>
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<td>UNA</td>
<td>United Nations Association</td>
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<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNFCCC</td>
<td>United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change</td>
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<td>UNGA</td>
<td>United Nations General Assembly</td>
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<td>UNHRC</td>
<td>United Nations Human Rights Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNGP</td>
<td>United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights</td>
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<td>UPR</td>
<td>Universal Periodic Review</td>
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<td>WGIG</td>
<td>Working Group on Internet Governance</td>
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Introduction

In the aftermath of the Second World War, American policymakers built a new international system that reflected the values of the United States. They created a network of global institutions based on the rule of law, free markets, and basic human rights that would serve as a foundation for the nations of the world to resolve conflicts peacefully, prosper economically, and guarantee the freedom and dignity of their people. By acting as the chief architect of this system and shaping it in its own image, the United States embedded itself as a leader in the international order and created unprecedented opportunities for the peaceful expansion of American influence and power. This strategy led the U.S. to win the Cold War and emerge, at the end of the 20th century, the world’s sole superpower.

In recent years, however, doubt has arisen about U.S. leadership and commitment to the liberal international order. The American public saw our international commitments balloon endlessly, for what felt like diminishing returns. If Americans once imagined their country’s power to be limitless, many now believe its strength is diminished, sapped by shouldering too much of the burden of promoting global safety, liberty, and prosperity. No wonder voters in the last three presidential elections responded to messages of retrenchment, from Obama’s pledges to get the U.S. out of military engagements (the Iraq war in particular), to Trump’s promises of tariffs and re-negotiated (trade) deals.

Despite the United States’ unmatched capability to project power anywhere, anytime, American power cannot do everything, everywhere, all the time. Critics of the country’s leadership role in the international system have cited this limitation as a reason to pursue a more transactional and coercive approach to foreign policy. They note that other countries will take advantage of the United States if given the chance, and therefore the U.S. must not compromise and should instead leverage its power to coerce other states into agreeing to American terms. This zero-sum approach seeks to defend American power from the threat of freeloaders and competitors that would strengthen themselves at the United States’ expense, but it also sacrifices some of the very advantages that helped make the country strong. American leadership in the international order gave the U.S. tools to peacefully and cost-effectively promote its interests abroad
through engagement. It created allies that shared U.S. values and amplified U.S. power, and international rules that leveled the playing field and supported American prosperity.

Safeguarding American power for the 21st century does not mean turning away from leadership in the international system. On the contrary, investing in the international system is the best way to enhance U.S. power. As a leader of the international system, the country can shape international priorities to fit American interests and tackle global problems in ways that share burdens.

Now is a crucial time to lead, as the international system is in flux. The next administration must seize the opportunity to jump back in to guide the inevitable evolution of the international order before it changes in ways that are detrimental to the United States. It is not too late: even the U.S.’s closest competitors are not yet ready to put forward a vision for the future of the international system, leaving room for the U.S. to re-enter and exert its power, values, and influence.

The next administration should pursue a strategy of purposeful engagement with the international system, in which the U.S. leads unequivocally on issues that are critical to American interests. Such areas should include global challenges that explicitly threaten the U.S. homeland, like climate change and transnational terrorism and the promotion of universal values like human rights and the rule of law that ensure a level playing field and a free world for the American people. This report presents specific opportunities for policymakers in the next administration to find innovative ways to work both within existing global structures, like the UN and regional organizations, and with emerging structures, like multistakeholder initiatives, to find partners, set the agenda, explain it to the American people, and secure American interests.
Waning Trust in the Liberal International Order

In order to renew American leadership in global institutions, it is essential that the next administration understands why the public lost faith in the liberal international order. Taking steps to address these concerns will be crucial to preserving U.S. leadership. Many Americans believe they were promised a false bill of goods when, after the Cold War, policymakers used multilateral institutions to pursue international economic deregulation and globalization. Real changes to the American labor market and American demographics have contributed to a widespread sense of insecurity, lack of trust in the problem solving capacity of democratic institutions, and dissatisfaction with the liberal international order. The next administration should take concrete steps to build trust with the American public and demonstrate that multilateral cooperation can deliver on issues of fairness and prosperity as well as address critical challenges of the 21st century.

After the U.S. emerged the winner of the Cold War in the 1990s, a new consensus took shape regarding the goals of American economic and foreign policy. Officials from both major parties supported neoliberal economic policies that emphasized free trade and free markets. Policymakers viewed lowering the barriers to the flow of goods and capital as key components of the liberal international order that would enhance the liberty and prosperity of not only Americans but the entire world. In multilateral fora, The U.S. led initiatives to create interconnected global markets governed by a system of rules and norms. This process has brought real benefits in terms of GDP gains, technological development, lower prices for consumers, and the incorporation of post-Communist states into the rules-based liberal international order.

However, neoliberal globalization has also had negative consequences, especially for some segments of the American workforce. In combination with other forces like automation and the digital revolution, globalization has contributed to a transformation of the American labor market, profoundly affecting the jobs available, the training and qualifications necessary, the geography of employment, and the conditions of modern work. The U.S. has begun to transition from a production-based to a service-based economy as automation replaces low-skilled manufacturing jobs. Multinational corporations (MCNs) have moved much of their production overseas, lured by cheaper labor costs and looser regulations. Real wages have fallen, with the inflation-adjusted
median income for full-time male workers in 2016 lower than it was in 1984.\textsuperscript{1} Economic growth has become concentrated in high-density areas: in the years leading up to the 2016 election, the fifty-three largest metropolitan areas in the U.S. accounted for two-thirds of growth in economic output and almost three-quarters of job growth, despite making up just fifty-six percent of the country's population.\textsuperscript{2} Furthermore, geographic mobility is at its lowest value on record, meaning that Americans are increasingly unlikely to move to more economically vibrant areas to seek work.\textsuperscript{3} These changes have fed narratives of unfairness. Millions of people have been lifted out of poverty worldwide, massive amounts of wealth have been generated, and global ease of doing business is at record highs,\textsuperscript{4} yet many Americans believe the liberal international order has left them more economically insecure than ever. Prosperity has accrued in the hands of corporate entities and a small group of wealthy individuals, leading to growing income inequality.\textsuperscript{5} Affluent entities have moved their capital offshore to legally avoid tax burdens, costing the U.S. approximately $100-130 billion in tax revenue annually. Americans experienced a recession in 2008 while China, a state that has taken advantage of its developing status and colossal domestic market to skirt international regulations, has achieved breakneck growth without abiding by World Trade Organization rules. The U.S. spent billions of dollars on reconstruction, foreign aid, and military interventions in the name of security while slashing social safety net programs at home.\textsuperscript{6}

Meanwhile, open borders for goods and capital encouraged more open borders for people. Global patterns of migration are changing the demographic landscape of the United States in ways that have produced cultural anxiety and exacerbated some Americans’ sense of insecurity. The share of the U.S. population that is foreign born is now 14%, close to a historic high.\(^7\) For liberal cosmopolitans who often reside in areas with economic opportunity, these demographic changes and the increasing visibility of new cultures represent a positive trend for the country.\(^8\) Conversely, though, among other segments of the population, especially older, white men with religious faith, traditional gender values, and low-skilled employment or unemployment history, this same phenomenon has exacerbated the sense that their position of cultural influence and economic security is under threat.\(^9\) These differing perspectives in turn have contributed to increasing political polarization in the United States.

Dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs has led to diminished trust in government and the utility of multilateral engagement. The last decade has seen the longest period of low trust in government on record, irrespective of political affiliation.\(^10\) What does appeal to voters are candidates who appear to take their concerns about fairness, economic insecurity, and cultural change seriously. While the current administration validates these sentiments, its policies of disengagement fail to address the root causes of democratic malaise and international insecurity. The incoming administration needs to implement policies that both generate trust with the American public and garner support for the kind of sustained, purposeful engagement in the liberal international system that will truly benefit the nation.

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Recommendations

- **Validate public concerns and focus on root causes.** The public will not trust government if it does not think leaders take its concerns seriously. Policymakers in the next administration must acknowledge public concerns about globalization and the liberal international order to build the trust necessary to renew public faith in American global leadership. Demonstrating commitment to addressing Americans’ grievances will also undercut the arguments that populist politicians have exploited to oppose American leadership in the international system.

- **Push initiatives in multilateral institutions to limit the use of offshore tax havens for legal tax avoidance and reform multilateral treaties and institutions governing international tax policy.** Wealthy entities’ use of offshore tax havens for legal tax avoidance is a visible feature of the liberal international financial system that average Americans perceive as highly unfair. Working through multilateral institutions to close these loopholes will demonstrate to the American public that these institutions and the liberal international order more generally can deliver on issues of fairness and economic prosperity. The incoming administration should push for a multilateral instrument that will consolidate international tax policy and limit opportunities for tax avoidance. American diplomats should partner with other countries that also lose revenue to legal tax avoidance, such as U.S. allies in Europe, to overcome opposition from countries that profit from being tax havens.
Leadership at the United Nations

The United States helped create the United Nations in 1945 and has played a key role ever since in the organization’s efforts to address global problems and promote universal values. Yet in the last four years, frustrations and disappointments about multilateral engagement through the UN have in some cases led American policymakers to reject the country’s traditional leadership role. The withdrawal of the United States at the United Nations has impeded action on pressing challenges and cost the U.S. credibility. The Trump administration has rejected structures at the UN that it deems subpar, arguing that the U.S. is better off outside these structures than leading them. While this approach speaks to the genuine challenges of working within the UN’s highly bureaucratic, consensus-driven system, it also throws the metaphorical baby out with the bathwater. The incoming administration should reconsider this approach, and work to renew U.S. leadership at the UN in areas central to American national interests. The U.S. does not need to solve every problem through the UN, but some challenges cannot be addressed effectively any other way. Similarly, the lack of U.S. participation in a particular UN body does not mean it will cease its activities. The incoming administration should consider not only where American leadership at the UN is in the United States’ interest, but also where a lack of U.S. leadership will produce adverse consequences for American foreign policy. Climate change and the UN Human Rights Council are both instances where the Trump administration has abdicated leadership to the detriment of American interests, and the new administration should re-engage.

Climate Change

Climate change is an urgent problem that cannot be solved without multilateral action. The U.S. is the world’s second-largest emitter of greenhouse gases and is highly vulnerable to the worst effects of climate change. According to a 2018 UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, worldwide greenhouse gas emissions must fall dramatically within the next 10 years if global warming is to remain below 1.5°C. If warming exceeds 1.5°C, the result is likely to be catastrophic, with increased droughts, floods, extreme heat, natural disasters, mass extinctions, and sea level
Climate change is an inherently global problem that no country can solve alone. Preventing catastrophic climate change will require both U.S. leadership and unprecedented levels of multilateral coordination and cooperation.

The U.S. and Multilateral Efforts to Address Climate Change

Multilateral efforts to address climate change began nearly a quarter century ago, when world leaders gathered in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and ratified the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the international treaty that set in place the structure for future climate negotiations. The UNFCCC organizes the annual Conference of the Parties (COP) meeting and oversees bodies including the IPCC and the Green Climate Fund. Today all UN member states are parties.

The UNFCCC has generated two major international agreements on climate change, the first of which was the Kyoto Protocol, which was finalized in 1997 and ratified by 192 parties. President Bill Clinton signed the protocol when it was created in 1997, but the U.S. Senate declined to ratify it and President George W. Bush later withdrew in 2001, citing concerns about the agreement’s potential economic costs to the U.S. and the fact that developing countries like China and India were not required to commit to emissions reductions. The Kyoto Protocol is still technically in force but overall has not been effective. Today, world emissions have soared compared to 1990 levels.

In 2015, UNFCCC negotiators reached a new multilateral climate change agreement in Paris. Under the Paris Agreement, parties agreed to strive to keep global warming under 2°C. Each party made a non-binding pledge of a Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) to limiting or reducing carbon emissions to achieve this goal. The

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agreement also created mechanisms for developed countries to provide financial support for developing countries to mitigate their emissions and adapt to the effects of climate change. Today, 185 UNFCCC parties (out of a total of 197) have ratified the Agreement. President Obama signed the Paris Agreement in 2015, but two years later President Trump announced that he planned to withdraw the United States from the agreement. Due to mandatory waiting periods he cannot officially do so until 2020.

Despite its checkered track record on multilateral climate efforts and prevailing concerns about economic cost, it is in the interest of the U.S. to act aggressively to address climate change. The U.S. is already feeling the effects of climate change at home, with increasingly severe and frequent extreme weather events damaging infrastructure, ecosystems, and property; slowing the economy; and taking American lives. Climate change is also threatening national security by causing instability and conflict abroad and driving migration. The costs will grow higher if the next administration does not take action to mitigate climate change. In addition, the U.S. is well-situated to invest in research and development of green technology, which would position the U.S. as a leader in a rapidly-growing and lucrative sector.

Recommendations

- **Re-join the Paris Agreement.** This would quickly reaffirm the United States’ commitment to addressing climate change and supporting its allies, who are still adhering to the agreement. Along with re-signing the agreement, the new President should commit to pursuing a more aggressive domestic greenhouse gas-reduction target, which, given the United States’ position as the world’s second-largest emitter, would make a significant contribution to worldwide emissions reductions. The incoming administration should also re-commit the U.S. to providing significant support to the Green Climate Fund, which provides funding for developing countries to adapt to the effects of climate change. This is not only the right thing to do for the environment but will benefit the U.S. by decreasing poverty and instability abroad.

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• **Expand multilateral climate change mitigation efforts to include sub-national governments and the private sector.** In response to President Trump’s announcement that he would withdraw the U.S. from the Paris Agreement, many U.S. local governments, businesses, and organizations such as religious institutions and universities pledged to continue working to decrease carbon emissions and meet the terms of the agreement.\(^\text{17}\) The incoming administration should encourage these groups to expand their efforts by providing a federally-supported mechanism for city and state governments, non-governmental institutions, and the private sector to make commitments to reducing carbon emissions and to report on their progress. The incoming administration should also incorporate sub-national actors into multilateral engagement on climate change and facilitate peer-to-peer collaboration between domestic city and state officials and their counterparts in other countries, since in many cases these leaders are responsible for on-the-ground mitigation and adaptation efforts and have first-hand knowledge of what really works.

• **Encourage the private sector to increase climate finance.** For states to meet the Paris Agreement’s goal of keeping warming below 2°C, experts estimate that more than $1 trillion per year of investment in renewable energy, green transportation, energy efficiency, agriculture, water, forestry, and waste management will be required. Currently those targets are not being met.\(^\text{18}\) The next administration should therefore use tax incentives, risk insurance, and other mechanisms to make it easier for the private sector to invest in climate change mitigation and adaptation.

• **Support developing countries to increase readiness for climate finance.**

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Climate finance from developed to developing countries was a key pillar of the Paris Agreement, and developed countries have pledged unprecedented amounts of funding. However, not all developing countries currently have the institutional, skill, and policy frameworks necessary to effectively absorb and use available financing. If those frameworks are not in place, it is unlikely that climate finance will achieve the ambitious goals set out for it in the Paris Agreement. As part of its diplomacy and foreign aid projects, the incoming administration should incorporate capacity-building for developing countries to enable them to effectively absorb and use climate financing. In other words, the new administration should aim to promote “climate finance readiness” around the world.

- **Conduct bilateral and regional diplomacy to foster collaboration and cooperation on climate change.** The relationship between the U.S. and China provides an excellent example of the power of bilateral climate change diplomacy. The two countries have been cooperating on climate change and clean energy for several decades, and in 2014, President Obama and China’s President Xi made a joint appearance during which both announced domestic plans to decrease carbon emissions. This announcement was crucial for building momentum for the 2015 Paris Agreement. Bilateral cooperation between the U.S. and China also paved the way for two other influential multilateral climate agreements: the 2016 Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer, under which countries agreed to phase out the use of ultra-potent hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs), and the Carbon Offset and Reduction Scheme for International Aviation (CORSIA) Resolution, signed in the same year, under which countries agreed to cap aviation emissions at 2020 levels by 2027.


21 Ibid, 95-96.
The incoming administration should follow this successful model and engage in bilateral diplomacy with other countries on climate change. Climate change considerations should also be incorporated into trade negotiations and any new trade agreements the United States makes.

- **Seek to limit future domestic political resistance to climate change mitigation and multilateral engagement.** The U.S. has historically been an inconsistent partner in multilateral climate change negotiations. Some presidential administrations have promoted multilateral engagement and agreements and others have withdrawn from those same agreements. Much of the inconsistency flows from the fact that a significant segment of the American population and their elected leaders do not believe in the established science on climate change, and from the influence of lobbying and money in policymaking. Addressing these issues will be difficult but is critically important to create a sustainable, consistent climate policy. The incoming administration should therefore focus on producing and disseminating high-quality information about how climate change is affecting Americans now and how those effects will worsen in the absence of mitigation. The next administration should also push Congress to pass legislation that will decrease the influence of campaign contributions and lobbying on policymaking. Such legislation could include increased public funding for political campaigns, a ban on former lawmakers working as lobbyists, and a law preventing members of Congress from accepting contributions from interests in front of their committees. By pursuing these domestic goals, the new administration will be helping to ensure that the U.S. remains a leader in fighting climate change, which is critical to U.S. economic and security interests, for years to come.

**The UN Human Rights Council**

The U.S. should rejoin the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). Since First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt led the drafting committee for the Universal Declaration of
Human Rights, the U.S. has been a leader in the promotion and protection of human rights through multilateral fora. While U.S. strategies for human rights promotion have changed over time, it has consistently affirmed universal human rights values. Renewed membership on the Human Rights Council will give the U.S. greater leverage to promote human rights, achieve its foreign policy goals, and manage, if not resolve, the Council’s biggest flaws. The incoming administration should apply the strategies that worked between 2009–2017 to secure Council resolutions related to American foreign policy priorities; guide the work of other UN human rights agencies, especially the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), towards scrutiny of countries besides Israel; and push back against powerful rights abusers on the Council, such as China, that seek to use the body to avoid scrutiny. American diplomats should also strategize ways to turn the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process, under which the human rights record of every UN Member State is reviewed every four and a half years, into a more effective instrument for rights promotion.

**The U.S. and the UNHRC**

In 2006, the UN Human Rights Council was established to replace the UN Commission on Human Rights, which had served as the UN’s charter-based rights body since 1946. The Commission suffered a series of membership crises in the early 2000s that diminished its legitimacy and generated momentum for reform; the Council was designed to fix the problems of the Commission and restore the body’s credibility. Yet from the Council’s initial creation, American policymakers criticized it as a failure that neither improved upon the Commission nor advanced global human rights. John Bolton, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations at the time, famously described his attitude towards the Council by saying, “We want a butterfly. We’re not going to put lipstick on a caterpillar and declare it a success.”22 The Council was derided for repeating the Commission’s mistakes, especially for permitting rights abusers membership on the body, and failing to criticize some countries’ abuses while excessively dissecting the rights records of others, particularly Israel.

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These concerns that the Council was neither an improvement over the Commission nor a useful multilateral forum for advancing human rights led to U.S. ambivalence towards the body. The U.S. initially opted not to run for Council membership, although American diplomats still attended Council proceedings to advocate for U.S. policy positions. The U.S. changed tack in 2009 and actively engaged the Council as a member until 2017, during which time it pushed for a variety of near-term policy objectives on human rights and for longer-term Council reforms to membership criteria and treatment of Israel. American diplomats achieved several successes on the former set of priorities but were largely stymied on the latter.

Those successes were the result of several key strategies that capitalized on the unique opportunities the Council provided. The U.S. found cross-regional partners to support resolutions that advanced broader American foreign policy priorities, thereby leveraging states’ desire to vote according to their own interests and preferences to break regional voting blocs. Using this tactic, the U.S. secured a controversial resolution creating a Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran that Zambia, Colombia, the Maldives, and Macedonia cosponsored. It used requests for technical assistance from countries in political transition to secure country-specific Council resolutions and reporting mandates. Resolutions on Guinea and Kyrgyzstan committed new governments to fulfil human rights obligations, included investigation mandates into previous violations, and called for ongoing reporting that occupied time the Council might otherwise have spent excoriating Israel. The U.S. used the Council’s Special Procedures capabilities to hold a special session on Syria that resulted in a resolution condemning rights violations and calling for the OHCHR to dispatch an investigative team. Both publicly and behind the scenes, American diplomats encouraged more states to run for Council membership to make election slates competitive, pressured regional groups

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proposing noncompetitive, “clean” slates with rights violators to find alternatives, and led by example in 2012 by running for reelection to Council membership on a competitive slate. The U.S. seized on developing events to persuade Member States not to vote for Iran on a competitive Asian Group slate in 2010 and persuade Asian Group members to replace Syria on a clean slate in 2011. It used the deteriorating situation in Libya to successfully lobby the General Assembly to remove Libya from the body in 2011, the single instance in which a sitting Council member has been removed.

In 2017, the U.S. changed tactic again and prioritized Council reform. Ambassador Nikki Haley proposed a reform resolution and stated upfront that if the UN did not make progress on Council reform, the U.S. would withdraw from the body. The proposed reform resolution did not garner support, and the U.S. followed through on its threat and withdrew from the Council. One of the arguments the United States advanced was that its withdrawal would deprive the Council of credibility, thereby catalyzing efforts at the UN for Council reform. So far, this strategy has not yielded new reform proposals.

There is a degree of fatigue on the U.S.’s part when it comes to the Council. Despite over a decade of diplomacy, the Council still lacks positive membership criteria, allowing rights abusers like Cuba, Saudi Arabia, China, Russia, Venezuela, and Vietnam to all be elected to the body. Agenda Item 7, a stand-alone item targeting Israel’s human rights record, is still considered at every Council meeting. While the U.S. has consistently promoted international human rights, especially civil and political rights, through the UN, officials have questioned the benefits of devoting resources to a body as flawed and frustrating as the Human Rights Council. Would not American rights promotion efforts be better achieved elsewhere than the Council, “an organization that is not worthy of its name,” and would not the UN be better off if the Council were reformed and replaced, as the Commission was before it?25

However, U.S. leverage has diminished. It is no longer the final arbiter on the future of the Human Rights Council. The Council continues to enjoy support from civil society and other Member States without American participation. While civil society

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groups and the UN Secretariat joined with American calls to reform and replace the Commission in the early 2000s, both the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and civil society groups criticized the U.S.’s latest withdrawal from the Council. The creation of the Council without a ‘yes’ vote from the U.S. set a precedent that the U.S. is not necessary for matters related to the Council: the U.S. can say no and, as far as the Human Rights Council is concerned, the rest of the UN does not have to listen. American withdrawal reinforced this precedent and further sidelined the U.S. in Geneva. Rather than force a reckoning that would lead to Council reform, American withdrawal has created a leadership vacuum that other actors, likely ones less committed to human rights but more willing to engage with the Council, are working to fill.26

**Recommendations**

- **Rejoin the UN Human Rights Council.** The U.S. should rejoin the Council, preferably on a competitive slate so as to lead by example on competitive membership elections. Senior officials should publicly announce that the U.S. is re-committing itself to working with the Council and improving it from the inside but should expect skepticism from counterparts at the UN given American backtracking on this issue. The U.S. should work collaboratively with other Council members wherever possible to build credibility for this change in policy.

- **Seek cross-regional partners for resolutions invoking the Council’s Special Procedures.** Cross-regional partners enable the U.S. to break regional voting blocs; build U.S. credibility as a team player on the Council; and help American diplomats actually secure passage of Special Procedures mandates, which are a highly flexible tool for responding to rights crises worldwide. Mandates, especially those passed by consensus or a cross-regional group of Member States, enhance the strength and credibility of the OHCHR’s monitoring and technical assistance work, and

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can include ongoing reporting requirements. Special Procedures also raise the profile of an issue, catalyzing follow-up action both in and beyond the Human Rights Council.

- **Take a firm stand against rights abusers’ attempts to degrade and co-opt the Council.** Rights abusers recognize the Council’s value and seek to co-opt it to shield themselves from scrutiny. The U.S. is an irreplaceable bulwark against this abuse: it has the only track record of any present or former Member State of successfully leading initiatives, like the removal of Libya, to ensure that Council members uphold human rights. On the Council, the U.S. has historically been unafraid to take a principled stand and vote ‘no’ where necessary and call out rights abusers when appropriate, even if these decisions are controversial among other Council members.

- **Push for stronger language and procedures in Council resolutions and UPR activities.** Council resolutions set standards for human rights that civil society actors around the world use to hold their governments accountable. Stronger language is a stronger tool for accountability. Within the UPR process specifically the incoming administration should strategize and push for reforms that strengthen the UPR as a rights promotion tool and elevate the voices of civil society and human rights defenders. This would undercut the efforts of rights abusers like China to use Government Organized Nongovernmental Organizations (GONGOs) and allies at the UN to emphasize human rights ‘successes’ and limit scrutiny of violations.

- **Engage with domestic civil society critics regarding the United States’ human rights record and policies that could improve the human rights situation in the United States.** Admitting that the U.S. could improve its own human rights record and engaging with civil society on how to improve policy will undercut critics who decry American rights
promotion abroad as hypocrisy. That in turn will enhance American credibility on rights promotion. It will also demonstrate the resilience of democracies: whereas authoritarian competitors like China see human rights criticism as a threat to stability and power, American democracy is transparent and able to engage critics in a way that adds to American power.

- **Use Council membership to pursue broader American foreign policy objectives.** The incoming administration should strategize how the Council could support broader U.S. foreign policy objectives. Council resolutions on North Korea and Iran have previously contributed to U.S. efforts to isolate both states. The U.S. can support its ally Israel through a sustained diplomatic effort to convince Council counterparts to remove Agenda Item 7. Commitment to human rights through work on the Council will enhance American soft power by demonstrating American commitment to enacting its values and creating opportunities to establish partnerships based on those values. The U.S. could also potentially learn from strategies that successfully break up regional voting blocs on the Council and apply those same strategies to split up regional voting blocs in other UN bodies.
Leadership in International Justice: Engagement with the International Criminal Court

The International Criminal Court (ICC) is not part of the UN, but the Rome Statute which established it in 1998 was negotiated within the UN. However, the ICC shares many similarities with UN institutions, including a historically complex relationship with the United States. The ICC is a multilateral structure that represents and advances core American values of justice and the rule of law, but U.S. policymakers have often opposed the way the Court conducts its work. Though they differed in their level of support for the ICC, Presidents Clinton, Bush and Obama acknowledged the court’s relationship to justice and the rule of law and consistently affirmed American commitment to these principles. The Trump administration’s opposition, in contrast, has been more strident, and administration officials have expressed a more equivocal U.S. position on international justice as a value worth upholding. This approach risks emboldening human rights offenders and the United States’ geopolitical rivals and eroding the liberal values that the U.S. itself worked to infuse in the rules-based international order. The next administration should seek a more productive and balanced approach to the Court that emphasizes commitment to justice and the rule of law and considers ratification of the Rome Statute in the longer term.

The U.S. and the ICC

American policies towards the ICC have shifted through the years. President Clinton signed the Rome statute and indicated preliminary support but did not send it to the Senate for advice and consent. Despite the ICC’s principle of complementarity that prioritizes national jurisdiction, the Clinton administration was concerned about preserving U.S. sovereignty and protecting U.S. troops abroad in the face of universal jurisdiction. President Bush held these concerns even more deeply. His administration was initially more openly critical of the court, going as far as to inform the UN Secretary General that the United States was effectively “un-signing” the statute. During this period, the U.S. sought to insulate itself from the court through domestic mechanisms such as the 2002 American Service-Members’ Protection Act (ASPA), which protected American troops from international prosecution. President Obama improved the
relationship with the court by sending observers to annual meetings of the Assembly of States Parties and to the 2010 Review Conference in Kampala. Even the Obama administration, however, did not attempt to ratify the statute.

Under Presidents Clinton, Bush and Obama, the United States affirmed American independence from the ICC, albeit to different degrees, and expressed concerns about the primacy of the U.S. judicial system. Yet the U.S. simultaneously affirmed the importance of the justice and human rights values the ICC represented, and therefore refrained from calling for the Court to be dismantled. Although the Bush administration remained opposed to the ICC, it nonetheless validated its symbolic potential by abstaining on a vote to refer the Darfur situation to the ICC in 2005.

In contrast, the current administration has described the Court as a threat to rights and law, rather than a potential means to promote these values. National Security Advisor John Bolton described the Court in September 2018 as “ineffective, unaccountable, and indeed, outright dangerous,” intent on prosecuting American servicemembers and political leadership to such an extent that it “constituted an assault on the constitutional rights of the American people.” He spoke at length about the threat posed by a proposed ICC investigation of American war crimes in Afghanistan and said the United States would resist such an investigation by all available means. Bolton also offered more general consequences saying that the United States would “note if any countries cooperate with ICC investigations of the United States and... will remember that cooperation when setting U.S. foreign assistance, military assistance, and intelligence sharing levels.” Trump used even stronger language before the UN General Assembly (UNGA) later that month, stating that the ICC violates “all principles of justice, fairness, and due process” in claiming “near-universal jurisdiction over the citizens of every country.”

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This language echoes that which opponents of human rights, justice, and the rule of law typically use. Rather than supporting American values within the international system, it risks weakening universal rights norms and the rules-based international order more generally. This language also undercuts American credibility as a leader in the promotion of these values. Concurrent blows to American values-based multilateral engagement, such as the withdrawal from the Human Rights Council and defunding of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine (UNRWA), make these threats particularly significant.

It would be a mistake to characterize the current administration’s views as a return to the anti-ICC rhetoric of Bush’s administration or the natural change between administrations of different parties. While the Bush administration opposed the ICC, it did not seek to eradicate the court itself. Rather, the Bush administration focused on negotiating bilateral agreements, UN Security Council resolutions and U.S. laws that provided protection for Americans. While such measures certainly limited the jurisdiction of the court, they operated under international frameworks such as Article 98 of the Rome Statute itself, and by abstaining on the vote on Darfur, the Bush administration acknowledged that the ICC could be a useful structure for handling investigations in certain cases.

Trump ran for president on a platform of radical change, and indeed his policies towards the ICC revealed a dramatic shift. The Trump administration has been unique in its proactive interference and its failure to recognize any value in the ICC. Since joining the Trump administration, Bolton has repeatedly suggested the administration’s desire for the Court to be eliminated, saying “America should…strangle the ICC in its cradle.”

Such rhetoric fails to recognize the ICC’s effectiveness in promoting human rights and the rule of law. Though it faces criticism both from nationalists who fear universal jurisdiction and from human rights advocates who suggest that it does not go far enough, the ICC has contributed to the norms of international human rights and impeding impunity for war criminals. While the ICC reflected existing customary law when it was created, it has also mainstreamed human rights norms within foreign policy,
particularly as relates to sexual and gender-based violence.\textsuperscript{29} Though the court has tried only 28 cases and secured eight convictions, the egregious nature of these crimes means these outcomes are of significant value. The Court plays a unique role in investigating and prosecuting genocide and other grave rights atrocities that would otherwise go unpunished.\textsuperscript{30} Countries that are trying to strengthen their own rule of law and human rights standards see joining the ICC as a sign of committing to those goals and joining with the global community. Tunisia’s pursuit to become a State Party as it democratized following the Arab Spring is one such example. Officials from across administrations agree that the ICC is more than the sum of its parts and has institutionalized accountability for crimes against humanity.

If the U.S., traditionally one of the international system’s strongest advocates for human rights and rule of law, continues to oppose the ICC’s existence, it will lose credibility. As a result, crimes against humanity will go unprosecuted more frequently, eroding global human rights norms that have developed since the end of World War II. The ICC was created as an affirmation of principles of justice, the rule of law, and human rights that had been strengthened over the course of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. The United States has frequently affirmed that upholding these principles is a fundamental requirement of the liberal international order and has consistently linked human rights with stability. The ICC shares these goals, but requires legitimacy based on the support of states and on the capacity to operate. Thus, American interference with the court’s activities would severely limit the court’s effectiveness, while leaving a power vacuum to be filled by states with a weaker commitment to these values.

A best-case scenario for a world without the ICC would rely on national, regional or ad hoc international tribunals to dispense justice, but this solution is not realistic. It was a lack of faith in national and regional courts and exhaustion with the creation of ad hoc tribunals that led to the ICC in the first place. Regional courts and human rights


bodies still have relatively low capacity today and cannot fill this gap. The ICC does not preclude the existence of other judicial bodies, and indeed affirms a preference for national jurisdiction, but taking away the option of the ICC would force reliance on a system that is not prepared for such sensitive cases.

The worst-case scenario is one where war criminals act with impunity, counting on the weakness of national and regional courts. This is a scenario in which other powerful states capitalize on American opposition to the ICC and to multilateralism generally by working to abrogate international protection for human rights and the rule of law. In a time when humanitarian crises dominate the headlines, eliminating one of the most powerful mechanisms for accountability risks permitting warlords and despots to act with free reign. It would signal that the United States no longer defends the rule of law, giving a green light to states to commit atrocities without any risk of accountability. This risk is not theoretical. China’s willingness to overlook human rights abuses and repression in its investments has been particularly acute in recent years, as has its domestic political repression against Uyghurs in Western China.

Recommendations

• **Eliminate bellicose rhetoric.** The next administration should avoid caustic rhetoric against the Court. The administration should emphasize the ICC’s own preference for national jurisdiction as well as the protections within ASPA, consider prosecuting human rights offenses domestically to invoke the principle of complementarity, and rely on diplomacy to navigate the Afghanistan investigation and ensure protection for American citizens without attacking the ICC’s legitimacy.

• **Emphasize bipartisan support for the ICC.** The new president could point to the Bush administration’s tacit support for ICC prosecution of atrocities in Darfur and the vocal support for the Court from former Clinton, Bush and Obama administration officials. Emphasizing the growing appreciation for the Court over several administrations will make it more palatable to the vocal minority with significant concerns about the Court.
• **Capitalize on public support for human rights.** In 2018, polls showed that 63% of Americans agree that “the United States should dedicate resources…to international organizations that support human rights and that hold individuals accountable for mass atrocities.” The study also found that between 2014 and 2018, the proportion of Americans who supported increased engagement with the ICC increased from 34% to 50%.\(^{31}\) The incoming administration should capitalize on these trends, highlighting the links between the ICC and human rights.

• **In the long-term, consider re-signing and ratifying the Rome Statute.** Consideration of joining the ICC as a State Party should follow a recommitment to multilateralism and human rights and rule of law values generally. The ICC has already contributed to important human rights and humanitarian norms, a trend that the United States should seek to support because of its contribution to stability and security in fragile environments.

Leadership in Regional Organizations

As multilateral institutions both within and outside of the United Nations gained strength in the second half of the twentieth century, many states also sought to strengthen diplomatic relationships with their neighbors, leading to the rise of regional organizations. These organizations aim to protect political, diplomatic, security, economic, and social interests to varying degrees. Though the Trump administration has deprioritized working with regional organizations in favor of bilateral outreach, this approach has ignored the benefits of coordinated, cost-effective regional strategies and the role of regional organizations in establishing social and political norms. These benefits are often multiplied in the context of addressing complex security threats, which can surpass the capacity of individual state actors and bilateral approaches. The incoming administration should commit to engagement with regional organizations that encourages integrated regional approaches to security, economic cooperation, and, where appropriate, the promotion of human rights and other norms. One area in which the next administration can particularly leverage engagement with a regional organization is the Middle East, where renewed American cooperation with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) can help address ongoing complex challenges in the region.

Strategic Benefit of Regional Organizations

Regional organizations are a vital part of the liberal international order and multilateral system. The United Nations Charter explicitly says as much in Article 52, where it privileges regional organizations over the Security Council: “The Members of the United Nations entering into such arrangements or constituting such agencies shall make every effort to achieve pacific settlement of local disputes through such regional arrangements or by such regional agencies before referring them to the Security Council.”

Today, regional organizations vary in terms of priority and strength. The European Union is one of the most prominent examples of this type of regional multilateralism, as it has evolved from an effort to foster diplomatic relations on the continent to become a regional governance structure. Other organizations, such as the

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Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), have prioritized economic ties, while entities such as the African Union (AU) and the sub-regional Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have been strategic partners for development and humanitarian challenges. Members of regional organizations benefit from security guarantees such as in the case of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), increasingly lucrative trade based off comparative advantage such as through ASEAN, and improved, uniform customs systems that appeal to external trading partners as in the East African Community (EAC).

Regional organizations provide an opportunity for more strategic U.S. engagement as well, allowing the United States to coordinate coherent, region-wide policies and to achieve large-scale outcomes with fewer resources. Perhaps the starkest example of this is U.S. membership in NATO. With its collective security guarantee, NATO served for decades as a defense mechanism against the Soviet Union. During a peak in U.S. multilateral engagement in the 1990’s, the organization also successfully led operations to end military aggression and ethnic cleansing in the Balkans. While the United States is the largest financial contributor to NATO, the regional partnership has facilitated joint military exercises and bases across the European continent and achieved a level of regional coordination that would have been unlikely without the organization.

The United States has also benefited from engagement with regional organizations it does not belong to. During the Bush and Obama administrations, the United States strengthened its relationship with the AU, sending a U.S. ambassador to the organization in 2007 and increasing aid both in terms of core assistance and contribution of funds to regional peacekeeping missions. Of all regional organizations, the AU has developed the strongest peacebuilding presence, an important achievement since data shows that regional involvement is key for the resolution of conflict. However, breaches in diplomatic protocol and lack of American support for the AU-supported African Continental Free Trade Area have cooled relations between the Trump administration and the AU. Similarly, previous administrations also sought to strengthen partnerships with ASEAN, primarily for economic benefit. Since 2006, the ASEAN-U.S. Trade and Investment Framework Arrangement (TIFA) has aimed to promote trade and investment ties. TIFA expanded efforts in 2012 by launching the Expanded Economic Engagement
(E3) initiative, contributing to total two-way trade of $234 billion in 2016. While this trade relationship remains substantial, recent actions by the Trump administration have also cast doubt as to the future of the partnership. President Trump was conspicuously absent from the ASEAN summit in November 2018, raising doubts about the U.S.'s level of commitment to the organization.

Case Study: The United States and the GCC

Given its prominence in the Arabian Peninsula, the U.S. relationship with the GCC is particularly important to achieving American goals relating to security and stability in the Middle East. The GCC was established in 1981 with the aim of providing both political and economic security within the region in the context of the Iraq-Iran War. In the organization’s charter, the six member states—Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Oman—pledged to “deepen and strengthen relations, links and areas of cooperation now prevailing” and to work towards similar regulations in “economic and financial affairs; commerce, customs and communications and education and culture.” Coordination has been strongest in economics and infrastructure: member states constructed a common electricity grid between 2009 and 2011 and agreed to a joint customs union in 2015.

Recent American administrations have prioritized the relationship with the GCC as means to address security threats in the region. Despite different views on human rights and political events such as the Arab Spring and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, administrations acknowledged that complex issues such as ISIS, Iran, and counterterrorism required a coherent regional effort. The Obama administration in particular engaged with the GCC through the US-GCC Strategic Cooperation Forum in Riyadh in 2012 and the development of the U.S.-Gulf Cooperation Council Strategic Partnership from 2015-2016. A Camp David Summit in May 2015 established working groups to discuss a range of security issues from cybersecurity to military preparedness and training. These engagement efforts with the GCC dovetailed with continued U.S.

military presence in the region and creative diplomatic initiatives to enhance regional security. For example, though the U.S. has maintained a Defense Cooperation Agreement with Kuwait since 1991, starting in 2011 American troops in the country expanded their activities and began supporting Operation Spartan Shield to “deter regional aggression and stabilize countries within the region.” The U.S. under the Obama administration also sought to promote security in the region by reaching out to one of the U.S.’s most complex and significant national threats, Iran. The administration’s negotiations and achievement of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) aimed to limit the threat posed by a nuclear Iran and improve relationships between states in the region.

However, emerging fractures between GCC countries, compounded by the Trump administration’s lack of strategic engagement with the organization, threaten to weaken the GCC and erase the gains made through previous cooperation. The U.S.’s withdrawal from the JCPOA antagonized a still fraught relationship with Iran and diminished hopes for cooperation between Iran and Gulf states. In 2017, Saudi Arabia and other GCC states established a diplomatic and economic blockade against fellow member Qatar, citing threats of terrorism and Qatar’s warming relationship with Tehran. The Trump administration aggravated this cleavage, tweeting about Qatar’s culpability before walking back these comments and urging regional unity and peaceful dialogue. The Trump administration’s foreign policy generally has been to prioritize bilateral arrangements, believing that personal connections would lead to the most effective deal-making. This approach has certainly been applied to states in the Gulf: in Spring 2018, the president met with heads of state from Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar, but postponed plans for a GCC-wide summit. While the president reportedly stressed the threat of Iran in all bilateral meetings, the lack of a regional approach especially during a time of GCC disunity was a significant lost opportunity.

Recommendations

- **Use summits, high-level visits and official statements to affirm U.S. commitment to regional organizations.** The incoming administration should fill the absence left by the previous administration, prioritizing attending summits and
affirming the value of regional and sub-regional groups. Attending regional summits at the highest level possible is cost- and time-effective, as it affirms U.S. commitment to a region through one time-limited high-profile event as opposed to a drawn-out series of ad hoc engagements. The incoming administration should schedule a GCC Summit in 2021 and attend at head of state level that year’s ASEAN summit.

- **Work closely with regional hegemons to bridge the transition between the Trump administration’s bilateralism and a new strategy of increasing regionalism.** To minimize diplomatic whiplash, the incoming administration should maximize the value of the Trump administration’s bilateral outreach and encourage the most powerful states in a region to recommit to the relevant regional organization. In the Gulf, for example, Saudi Arabia is clearly the most significant country, both in terms of a bilateral relationship with the U.S. and for the integrity of the GCC. Saudi Arabia hosts the GCC headquarters and provides the organization with significant financial support, making it a pivotal state in the GCC. The next administration should therefore encourage Saudi Arabia to take its leadership of the GCC seriously and work towards solutions when issues such as Qatar’s blockade arise.

- **Push for traditionally economics-focused regional organizations to take a more significant role in addressing transnational security threats.** The U.S. should exert diplomatic leverage to encourage organizations like ASEAN and the GCC to expand beyond their traditional focus on economics in order to achieve regional security goals. Officials should point to NATO’s effectiveness in humanitarian intervention and the AU’s record of peacekeeping to persuade other organizations to take a leading role in resolving crises such as the displacement of the Rohingya and the destabilizing influence of Iran. Since expanding to tackle security concerns could increase vulnerabilities for regional organizations, particularly given nuclear imbalances such as between Iran and the Gulf states, the United States should emphasize its military commitment to individual regions through formal or informal security guarantees. For GCC countries, this
commitment is most apparent in arms sales and U.S. military bases in member
countries, as well as a consistent U.S. policy of the unacceptability Iran’s nuclear
and regional pursuits.

- **Maintain and strengthen mutually beneficial economic ties.** Increasing trade
  through regional organizations has proven successful in Southeast Asia and the
  U.S. should pursue similar arrangements in other regions. For example, in the
  Middle East, building on initiatives such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce’s
  2014 U.S.-GCC Business Initiative offers an opportunity to both deepen bilateral
  trade and investment and strengthen the GCC, allowing it to serve a larger role in
  addressing political and security challenges.

- **Press for human rights and other norms.** The incoming administration will
  need to balance advocating for human rights, including gender equality and
  freedom of political expression, with maintaining important regional
  relationships. Whether in terms of technical assistance for AU peacebuilding
  efforts in conflict-affected environments or pushing Gulf countries to increase
  economic opportunities for women, the administration should use the opportunity
  that strengthened regional relationships present to push for improvements to the
  root causes of economic, social and political instability.\(^{35}\) While some
  relationships, such as that with Saudi Arabia, are unlikely to be defined by
  American human rights priorities, the U.S. can make a compelling case for
  improvements in education and workforce participation and their linkages with
  stability. The incoming administration should push for these outcomes at both a
  policy and programmatic level, such through increased Middle East Partnership
  Initiative (MEPI) activities.

- **In certain cases, advocate for regional organizations to participate in larger
  security arrangements.** While the U.S. should increase the security capacity of

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regional organizations themselves, it should also encourage regional blocs to address critical threats through other multilateral arrangements. Just as the success of the Helsinki Accords brought together the USSR and NATO in 1975, the United States should encourage the GCC to engage in a forum with representation from non-GCC states that present threats to regional security, including Iran, Yemen and Iraq. While the exact timing of such a forum would be subject to current political realities, genuine participation by the GCC could make significant progress on key issues such as arms control and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.
Leveraging the Strength of Multistakeholder Engagement

As state-centric multilateralism has struggled to keep up with the demands of ever-intensifying global challenges, new opportunities have arisen for less state-centric approaches, such as multistakeholderism. Multistakeholderism aims to involve the sub-national actors who are most impacted by an issue in the resolution of that issue; it applies their knowledge and resources to solve complex problems. For the United States specifically, multistakeholderism provides the ability to do more with less. The incoming administration should seize on the opportunity multistakeholderism presents to leverage the robustness of American civil society, academic, and private sector entities, which can lead solutions to transnational issues with minimal investment of government resources. Multistakeholderism remains a relatively new policy tool. Now is an excellent moment for the policymakers to take concrete steps to establish the U.S. as a leader in its deployment.

The U.S. and Multistakeholder Multilateral Solutions

Multistakeholder engagement is an exercise in networking. In a multistakeholder process, stakeholders are brought together to communicate, explore solutions, and make decisions; the process strives to ensure equity and accountability between and among members. Including the perspectives and input of all stakeholders in turn builds transparency and consensus that increases the legitimacy of proposed solutions and their likelihood for success. As the world becomes more globalized, hierarchies are being restructured and networks are becoming more prevalent and important. The multistakeholder process connects academia, civil society, the private sector, individuals, and governments in order to address complex challenges. Although the inherent inclusion of varied perspectives means the United States cannot fully control multistakeholder processes, it is well-positioned to leverage its robust networks of civil society, academic, and private-sector actors to exert broad influence.
The idea of multistakeholderism is rooted in both development and management theory. The term itself was coined in the early 1990s and has only gained real traction in the last twenty years. The UN has been a leader in creating multistakeholder processes, one of the first of which was the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), established in 1993 following the 1992 UN conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, also known as the Earth Summit. The CSD was created to implement the Rio Summit’s Agenda 21 which called for a greater role for “Major Groups” in the development process. These groups represented nine sectors of society:

- Women
- Children and Youth
- Indigenous Peoples
- Non-Governmental Organizations
- Local Authorities
- Workers and Trade Unions
- Business and Industry
- Scientific and Technological Community
- Farmers

The representation and involvement of these groups in the CSD was a test case for the multistakeholder process. In 1999, the CSD created its first multistakeholder initiative (MSI), which was designed to address issues of tourism. In 2000, the UN General Assembly agreed to leverage multistakeholder processes as an integral part of the 2002 Earth Summit process. This was the first official acknowledgement of multistakeholderism by the UN.
The CSD also led to the emergence of multistakeholder standards and certification processes. These processes grew out of a frustration with the multilateral system’s inability to reach consensus on internationally binding agreements about environmental conservation issues. In the absence of formal legal text, NGOs organized with relevant private sector groups to create mutually agreeable standards for certification. One of the first such standards was that provided by the Forest Stewardship Council, which promotes responsible management of the world’s forests. Created in 1993, the group has grown to include 820 members and has 1,229 certified forest areas in 80 countries. Since then, similar MSIs have been created to address issues including marine life, palm oil, cotton, beef, and bioenergy.

The most famous, and successful, contemporary example of multistakeholderism is that of Internet infrastructure and governance. Until the late 1990s the American government largely controlled the Internet through the Departments of Defense and Commerce. Today, however, non-state actors control almost all Internet infrastructure, and multistakeholder initiatives are working to address Internet governance. The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) was created as a non-profit in 1998 to support efforts to sustain and maintain the internet. The U.S. government was willing to relinquish control over Internet infrastructure to ICANN because it was a trusted multistakeholder body led by IT firms and free from competing government interference. Meanwhile, the 2003 World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Geneva applied multistakeholderism to Internet governance. Although the WSIS failed to reach an agreement in 2003, it re-convened in 2005 in Tunis and created the Internet Governance Forum (IGF). The IGF is an MSI that brings together various stakeholders from the public, private, and non-profit sectors as well as academia to discuss issues related to Internet governance on an annual basis.

The UN has begun to fully embrace multistakeholderism and has made it a central part of its effort to implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 2030 Agenda. The UN created an entire webpage devoted to “Applying Multistakeholder
Approaches for SDG Integration.”36 The webpage encourages all possible stakeholders to actively participate in the SDGs by increasing awareness of the SDGs and reviewing and renewing existing plans, dialogues, and formalized public-private partnerships to leverage stakeholders’ strengths.

The U.S. government has historically supported MSIs on an ad-hoc basis, but there is space for the U.S. to play a concerted leadership role in the ongoing push towards greater multistakeholder thinking and engagement. The principles of multistakeholderism—convention, communication, and coordination—give the U.S. opportunities to manage a wide range of efforts that seek to address transnational issues at minimal cost to the American taxpayer. Multistakeholderism leverages the strength of American private sector, civil society, and academic actors to advance American interests abroad even absent direct government involvement. The incoming administration should recognize the value of these sub-national efforts and seek to utilize them to create innovative policy solutions.

The next administration can also engage its counterparts to address some of the difficulties multistakeholderism itself presents as a policy tool. For all its potential advantages, multistakeholderism also comes with challenges that the international community will need to overcome in order to make the most of this format. First, the natural power asymmetries among members should be equalized within a given MSI to balance the input of participants. Second, MSIs are most effective when the participants are truly representative of the general stakeholders; achieving this representation can be especially challenging for some issues. If deployed on the international level, MSIs should include and encourage active participation from the Global South. Third, MSIs are generally voluntary in nature and lack enforcement capabilities; the U.S. in particular can address this, legitimate MSIs, and strengthen enforcement by formally supporting and even codifying the outcomes of these processes. Fourth, the inclusion of private sector, profit-driven entities in global governance can be disconcerting for individuals, including the American public. While this discontent is understandable, policymakers advocating

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for multistakeholderism should emphasize the resources, agility, and innovation the private sector brings to these processes that civil society and governments cannot.

Recommendations

- **Study multistakeholderism and identify best practices and areas for further engagement.** The National Intelligence Council has already examined the possibility for future multistakeholder engagement and several Departments, such as State, have experience interacting with current multistakeholder initiatives. The next administration should coordinate efforts to share information, engage in active study of the potential applications for multistakeholder engagement, and identify best practices in previous experiences. The work being conducted around internet governance provides the best example of successful multistakeholder processes and will likely illuminate broadly applicable lessons. There are also myriad issues in which multilateral progress has stalled; the incoming administration should therefore conduct an exercise in strategic planning and forecasting to identify priority issues to serve as initial areas of focus for multistakeholder engagement.

- **Prepare U.S. entities for multistakeholder leadership by establishing advisory boards and working with businesses to embrace the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.** A successful transition to multistakeholder engagement will rely on strong relationships with the potential stakeholder groups. The incoming administration should establish advisory boards with relevant stakeholder groups to elevate and strengthen these relationships. The White House already has an established Business Advisory Board that facilitates dialogue with leading private sector entities and could serve as a model for similar structures. The incoming administration should also work with American businesses to embrace the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. This will help businesses assume greater responsibility for addressing global issues and will build stronger norms for engagement and an ethos of corporate responsibility.
• **Work with civil society members to elevate their voices and improve their diplomatic engagement.** The State Department has experience working with domestic NGOs on international issues and should build on this experience to coordinate efforts in the context of multistakeholderism. While government actors should be mindful of keeping a healthy separation between state structures and civil society, they should also use their asymmetric power to help elevate and enhance civil society voices in multistakeholder processes.

• **Distill best practices for multistakeholder governance and lead efforts to support MSIs at the UN.** Once the necessary steps have been taken domestically to prepare for multistakeholder governance on the international level, the United States should initiate the process of formal adoption of multistakeholderism as a widely accepted principle for multilateral governance. The incoming administration should use its resources and knowledge to begin planning for the operationalization and growth of multistakeholderism, and should push for greater use of MSIs multilaterally, including at the UN. U.S. leadership on multistakeholderism in the multilateral arena will build consensus, encourage other states to engage with multistakeholder processes, and generate momentum for creative solutions to global challenges.
Presenting Purposeful Multilateral Engagement to the U.S. Public

In order to effectively advance U.S. leadership in the global system it is critical that the American people understand and support it. The divide between “Washington elites” inside the beltway and everyday Americans across the country can lead to incongruities between government foreign policy efforts and public opinion, priorities, and support. This is especially true in the context of multilateral institutions, which Trump administration messaging often maligns in accordance with the “America First” agenda. Despite the U.S.’s role in creating the international system and the ongoing broad alignment of that system with American interests, the public has lost a sense of why multilateral engagement is valuable to the U.S. Public diplomacy (PD) efforts can do more to elicit widespread public understanding and support amongst the American people for continued, robust multilateral engagement. If properly focused, PD efforts can make the case for U.S. multilateral leadership to advance American prosperity at home and enhance the international order.

Whether or not unfavorable characterizations of multilateral engagements prevail will depend largely on the extent to which the next administration collaborates with public and private actors to fill in gaps in knowledge and understanding about the U.S.’s role at the UN and other multilateral institutions. Enhancing domestic PD regarding the United Nations is particularly vital and would help to promote the public’s understanding of foreign policy issues more generally. For more effective domestic messaging about US-UN involvement, more concerted public diplomacy efforts must aim to go beyond the echo chamber of educated, internationally minded elites and focus on younger, socioeconomically diverse audiences.

U.S. Public Opinion Trends

According to the most recent Gallup polls a mere 34% of Americans “think the United Nations is doing a good job in trying to solve the problems it has had to face.” (See Figure 1) Before assessing the work of the primary public and private actors that work to shape U.S. understanding of the UN, it is important to situate current public
diplomacy efforts in the context of public opinion trends. Closer examination of American favorability ratings of the UN through Pew survey data reveals disparity along party lines. The current 37-percentage-point difference between Democrats’ and Republicans’ UN favorability ratings is the largest partisan gap Pew has ever measured. As American politics becomes increasingly polarized the incoming administration should watch these trends when devising tactics for U.S.-UN advocacy initiatives. (See Figure 3)

Figure 2: Views of the UN Over time

Figure 3: Partisan gap on views of the UN over time
U.S. Government Actors

Using the UN as an example, the primary U.S.-UN public diplomacy influencers are U.S. government representatives. White House officials, the permanent U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations and the Secretary of State, among others, are all influential voices that shape narratives about U.S.-UN engagement. The next administration must create new U.S.-UN public diplomacy strategies, and those for other multilateral institutions, to demonstrate that the organization is an effective partner for advancing U.S. goals on global issues. In areas like climate change, human rights, and internet governance, the U.S. has opportunities (which have been highlighted in this report) to engage in multilateral coordination at the UN that furthers the interests of the American people. Specifically, the next administration must counter assertions that the U.S. is being taken advantage of and that the UN is a vessel for “bad deals.”

Once the next Ambassador to the United Nations takes office, public diplomacy officials should continue to harness social media to inform the American public about U.S.-UN interaction. Social media presents unique opportunities to inform the American public about U.S.-UN engagements in ways that make audiences feel more personally connected to initiatives. Social media can also leverage the background of the Ambassador his- or herself to create a sense of camaraderie with the public and emphasize the work diplomats do to advance American interests in multilateral settings.

Public Diplomacy officers have the dual job of communicating information about U.S.-UN engagement for the global UN audience as well as the domestic American audience. This makes specifically targeted public diplomacy for certain segments of the American population difficult. To remedy this, a new category of American PD officers should be created to focus on messaging and engagement with American audiences about U.S.-UN affairs. Diplomats in this new, domestically-focused PD officer group should be assigned different U.S. regional focus areas. The uniqueness of the UN as the world’s largest intergovernmental organization warrants that Americans at the state and local levels receive information about the U.S.’s policies and programs for UN engagement. While it is unusual to appoint American diplomats to deliver this information, their
intimate knowledge of multilateral processes makes PD officers ideal messengers to explain complex engagement policies in understandable ways.

Non-Governmental Actors

Numerous non-governmental organizations such as the United Nations Association (UNA), the UN Foundation, and the Better World Campaign (BWC) have a robust foundation of effective public diplomacy tools to inform the American public about the importance of the United Nations. The US Mission to the UN often partners with these UN advocacy organizations to execute effective public diplomacy initiatives. Organizations like the UNA have useful tactics for encouraging and facilitating American engagement with the UN. However, these organizations are not currently able to reach beyond mostly highly-educated participants who were already inclined to value the United Nations before engaging with UN-related public diplomacy programs.

Existing domestic-facing PD initiatives should be revamped to target overlooked segments of the American population. For instance, the UN Youth Observer’s objective is to pursue outreach and engagement activities with youth and diverse publics who otherwise may not be convinced of the value and purpose of the UN. To enhance these domestic PD efforts, the Youth Observer program should be expanded. Instead of one Youth Observer, there should be multiple, diverse Youth Observers who focus their public diplomacy work on different regions of the US. These Observers should be selected based on their connections to different regions and backgrounds (e.g. from urban and rural areas; liberal and conservative political ideologies; special attention to underrepresented minorities) and their ability to create campaigns relevant to diverse communities.

The Better World Campaign is another private organization with great potential to help expand U.S.-UN domestic public diplomacy efforts. The BWC website features an interactive map where browsers can click on any of the fifty states and Washington DC to learn more about how citizens of that state support and are supported by the UN. Using this data to identify areas with low UN engagement can create more specific audience targets for U.S.-UN public diplomacy efforts through Youth Observers and domestic PD officers. Additionally, BWC presents quantifiable benefits to local communities such as
revenue to local businesses from contracts with the UN. It is important to incorporate these tangible financial benefits into PD campaigns to demonstrate how UN involvement benefits Americans across the country.

A final set of UN-appointed private actors that can actively target more diverse audiences are the American UN Messengers of Peace and Goodwill Ambassadors. Current American Messengers of Peace include actress Angelina Jolie, cellist Yo-Yo Ma, and singer-songwriter Stevie Wonder. Each messenger is given a topic for which to advocate (e.g. climate change, refugees, persons with disabilities). While their mandate is to leverage their global fame to promote the UN internationally, there is high potential in directing the valuable time, talent and passion of these Americans into a much-needed domestic expansion of U.S.-UN public diplomacy outreach beyond UN-affiliated events and venues.

Recommendations

- **Appoint a team of American public diplomacy officers to focus on public messaging and engagement with American audiences about U.S.-UN affairs.** The recently announced merger of the State Department’s Public Affairs and International Information Programs Bureau presents an opportune moment to introduce this change. This team of inward-facing PD officers should use existing public opinion and UN-engagement data to target PD efforts towards regions and communities with low UN approval/engagement rates in partnership with private UN advocacy organizations. Messages should be engaging, using the most accessible medium of communication for the target audience and relevant to their primary concerns. UN benefits to American communities should be quantified as much as possible.

- **Create United Nations Day campaigns to highlight quantifiable American gains from UN engagement.** Domestic-focused PD officers and private organization partners should create UN Day (October 24) campaigns across the U.S. to highlight the UN’s quantifiable benefits to the American public such as revenue to local businesses from contracts with the UN. The incoming
administration should feature profiles of American citizens based outside of New York City who are directly and indirectly involved in advancing UN objectives in order to spread awareness about how the UN supports livelihoods of everyday Americans.

- **Showcase the specific regional and personal identity of the U.S. Ambassador to the UN during public and social media engagements to make him or her more relatable to the average American.** One social media account for the U.S. Ambassador to the UN should be used over time instead of separate accounts for each Permanent Representative so as to amass followings from diverse segments of American society.

- **Create and promote free UN tours and visits for New York City residents and American public-school groups.** This will demystify what goes on at the UN and create opportunities for further engagement through activities like Model UN. It will also serve to counter the narrative that the UN is a “club for elites.”

- **Increase American UN Messengers of Peace and Goodwill Ambassador engagements with domestic audiences.** This will garner greater visibility for UN projects related to domestic issues. Domestic-focused PD officers can coordinate this partnership.
Conclusion

The next administration must make the most of the multilateral tools at its disposal to advance the national interest and address urgent global challenges. Re-engaging as a leader in the rules-based international system and the institutions that govern it will not only help achieve American foreign policy goals but will position the U.S. to shape the future of our world. The international system is beginning to adapt to the 21st century. The U.S. must lead in these efforts and recommit to multilateral engagement now or risk losing critical leverage that will make it harder to safeguard universal values and secure the national interest for decades to come.

Climate, human rights, and regional security are good places for the incoming administration to start renewing American leadership and engagement in the multilateral system but are by no means an exhaustive list. The next administration should strategize where it can purposefully engage multilateral institutions to find innovative, cost-effective solutions to other pressing issues like cyber, trade, migration, and proliferation. Policymakers should leverage U.S. presence at a myriad of multilateral and international organizations, from subsidiaries of the UN to the Bretton Woods institutions, to lead creative approaches to common problems.

The incoming administration should also recognize that the days of leadership by default are over; it is no longer a given that the American public will view leadership in the multilateral system positively. The next administration must emphasize that multilateral institutions are an essential tool for accomplishing objectives in the national interest. Americans need to understand not only why their engagement and leadership on the world stage is beneficial for the world, but why it is beneficial for them.

The next administration needs to find a better, more productive balance between the impulse to turn inwards and the need to participate in the international system. The U.S. cannot give up on the international system. American leadership is still indispensable for finding global solutions to global challenges, upholding universal values, and advancing U.S. interests in an increasingly complex world.


Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. “Global Warming of 1.5°C: Summary for


https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english_paris_agreement.pdf


https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf


