# Can Middle Powers Save the Liberal World Order?

Roland Paris

Summary

- With major powers such as China, Russia, and now also the US, chipping away at the foundations of the liberal international order, it falls to middle powers to sustain and reform some of its key elements. While middle powers may not single-handedly be able to prevent the disintegration of the liberal international order, they can at least slow its erosion.

- To achieve this, middle powers need to define their priorities, assemble issue-specific coalitions with clear goals, and coordinate their efforts effectively. Existing 'plurilateral' initiatives offer a model for issue-specific coalitions. Some may consist solely of states, while others might also include non-governmental actors such as corporations, private foundations and advocacy networks.

- Middle powers could prioritize modernizing the international migration regime; establishing new rules for international cybersecurity; or upholding norms against state assassinations, kidnappings and 'hostage diplomacy'. They can also play a vital role in helping to salvage the multilateral trade system and combat climate change.

- This coordinated effort would not require the creation of a new international institution or formal body. Regular, informal consultations among a core group of countries would enable them to clarify shared priorities and hold each other accountable for previous commitments.

- It is more urgent than ever that middle powers turn their expressions of concern into concerted action on a scale that matches the seriousness of the current crisis facing the liberal international order.

CHATHAM HOUSE

The Royal Institute of International Affairs
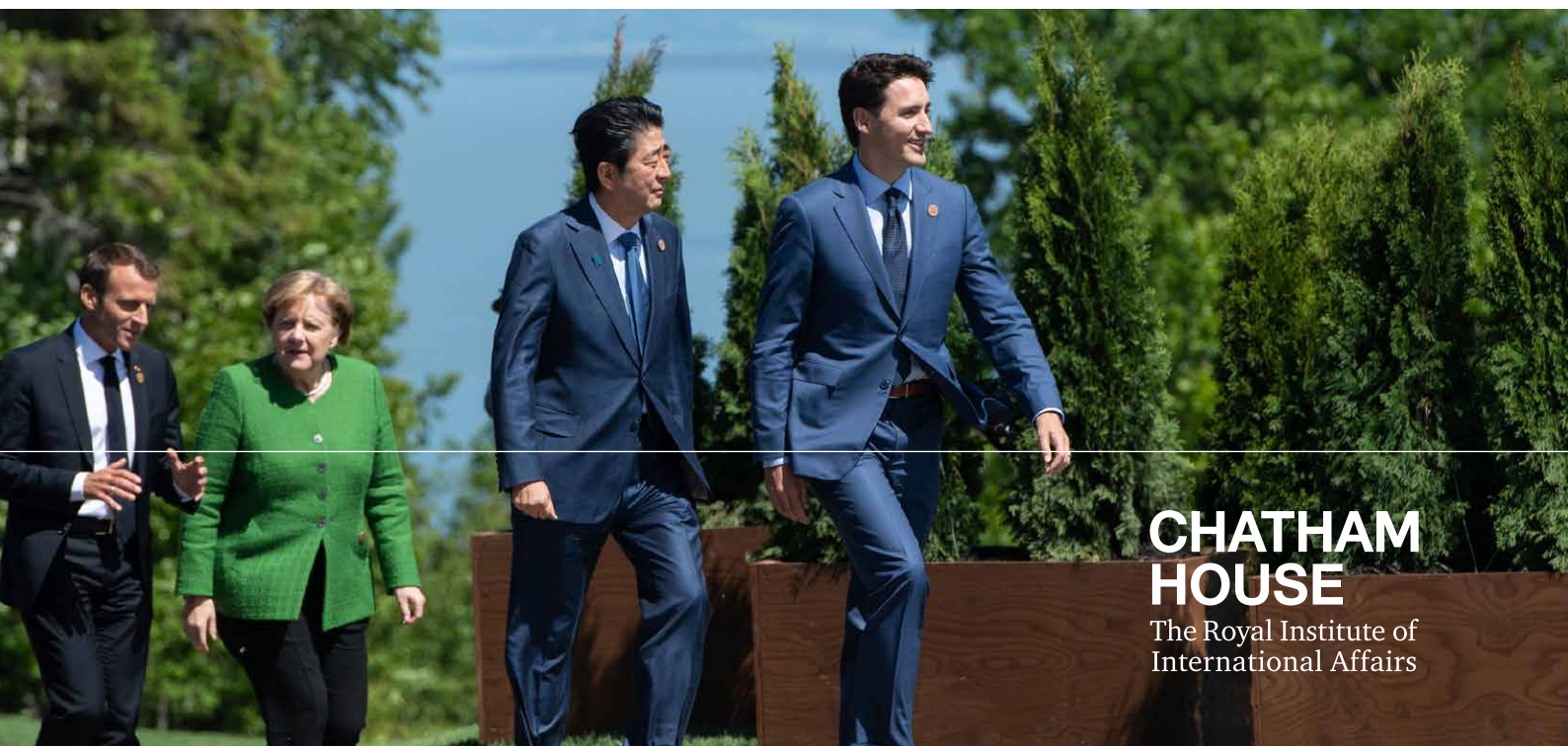
Introduction

At a joint press conference on 2 April 2019, the foreign ministers of Germany and France, Heiko Maas and Jean-Yves Le Drian, announced that they would launch an 'alliance for multilateralism' at the 74th session of the UN General Assembly.[1] The ministers had mooted the idea for some months, arguing that an alliance was needed 'to protect international norms, agreements and institutions when they come under pressure'.[2] They have reportedly discussed their proposals with representatives from Argentina, Australia, Canada, the EU, India, Indonesia, Japan, Mexico, Norway, South Africa, South Korea and the UK.[3]

It was not the first call for mid-sized states to assume greater responsibility for sustaining the 'liberal world order', broadly defined as the lattice of multilateral institutions, agreements and norms that for decades has underpinned a relatively stable and open international system. In December 2016, on his final foreign trip as vice-president of the United States, Joe Biden met with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in Ottawa. With Donald Trump poised to become the next US president and populist sentiments sweeping across Europe, Biden delivered a pointed message to Trudeau: 'The world's going to spend a lot of time looking to you, Mr. Prime Minister, as we see more and more challenges to the liberal international order than any time since the end of World War II. You and [German Chancellor] Angela Merkel […]'.[4] Prominent international commentators have issued similar appeals. Gideon Rachman, a *Financial Times* columnist, has proposed a 'middle-powers alliance' to 'preserve a world based around rules and rights, rather than power and force'.[5] Two eminent American foreign-policy experts, Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, have also called on US allies to 'leverage their collective economic and military might to save the liberal world order'.[6]

The rationale for asking middle powers to perform this role is obvious: challenges to the international order have been mounting in recent times – and not just from a rising China and a resurgent Russia. President Trump has embraced an 'America First' approach that repudiates his country's long-standing role as the leading defender and underwriter of the post-1945 multilateral system. Among other actions, he called the EU a 'foe',[7] blocked the appointment of judges to the dispute settlement panels of the World Trade Organization (WTO), withdrew from negotiations that ultimately yielded the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement, pulled out of the so-called Iranian nuclear accord (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – JCPOA), threatened

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[1] Agence France-Press (2019), 'France, Germany seek to boost multilateralism', 2 April 2019, https://www.france24.com/en/20190402-france-germany-seek-boost-multilateralism (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).
[2] Maas, H. and Le Drian, J.-Y. (2019), 'Who, if not us?', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 14 February 2019, reprinted at https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/germany/events/article/who-if-not-us-15-02-19 (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).
[3] Democracy Without Borders (2019), 'Alliance for Multilateralism to be launched at the UN in September', 3 April 2019, https://www.democracywithoutborders.org/7165/alliance-for-multilateralism-to-be-launched-at-the-un-in-september (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).
[4] Tang, J. (2019), 'Biden to Canada: The world needs you 'very, very badly'', *Globe and Mail*, 9 December 2016, https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/politics-briefing/article33279957 (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).
[5] Rachman, G. (2018), 'Mid-sized powers must unite to preserve the world order', *Financial Times*, 28 May 2018, https://www.ft.com/content/546ca388-625d-11e8-90c2-9563a0613e56 (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).
[6] Daalder, I. and Lindsay, J. (2018), 'The Committee to Save the World Order', *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2018, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-09-30/committee-save-world-order (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).
[7] Continuglia, C. (2018), 'Trump: EU is one of United States' biggest foes', Politico, 15 July 2018, https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-putin-russia-europe-one-of-united-states-biggest-foes/ (accessed 16 Apr. 2019); Rogin, J. (2018), 'Trump is trying to destabilize the European Union', *Washington Post*, 28 July 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/trump-is-trying-to-destabilize-the-european-union/2018/06/28/729cb066-7b10-11e8-aeee-4d04c8ac6158_story.html (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

sanctions against the International Criminal Court, and is reported to have discussed withdrawing from NATO.[8] At the same time, China and Russia have been increasingly brazen in their defiance of international rules and norms. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea has become a *fait accompli*. Hackers and social media accounts connected to the Russian government have reportedly engaged in efforts to disrupt recent democratic elections in the US and Europe. China has dismissed the ruling of an international arbitration court that rejected its sovereignty claim over most of the South China Sea, and has continued building and militarizing islands in contested locations.[9] Meanwhile, respect for international humanitarian law is weakening, arms-control regimes are eroding, the multilateral trade system is under threat, and democracy and human rights are receding in many parts of the world.

No system of international institutions and rules can survive for very long without the backing of its most powerful members

In the face of such challenges, what can middle powers realistically do? The notion that they can 'save the liberal world order' (to quote Daalder and Lindsay) seems fanciful. No system of international institutions and rules can survive for very long without the backing of its most powerful members.[10] The challenge, moreover, is not simply to preserve key elements of the existing order, but also to reform institutions that are failing, devise new rules for emerging policy areas, and adapt the multilateral system so that it better reflects the shifting realities of global power, rather than the post-1945 world in which its central institutions took shape. On the other hand, the collective influence of the middle powers should not be underestimated. Taken together, for example, Japan, Germany, the UK, France, Canada, South Korea and Australia account for more than one-fifth of the global economy.[11] If these and other countries worked together in a concerted campaign, they might succeed in slowing the erosion of the current order, and perhaps even strengthen and modernize parts of it. It certainly seems worth trying. After all, if the world's middle powers do not take on this task, who will?

There are compelling reasons for them to do so. International institutions and rules offer mid-sized countries a measure of protection from the whims of more powerful states. Democratic middle powers should be especially concerned about their prospects in a world where 'might makes right' holds sway and where they will be more exposed to threats and coercion from autocratic states. Most importantly, functioning institutions help to buffer the international system from shocks that might otherwise escalate into larger conflicts, creating a more brittle and dangerous world.

To a certain extent, this sort of middle-powers cooperation is already under way. Multilateral efforts have been made, for example, to preserve the JCPOA and the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change, and to address issues such as the future of the WTO or human rights abuses in Yemen. To date, however, these initiatives have been fragmented and uncoordinated. A more ambitious and concerted campaign is needed – one that defines core priorities, constructs issue-specific coalitions with clear goals, and demonstrates a level of commitment to match the seriousness of the threat.

[8] Barnes, J. E. and Cooper, H. (2019), 'Trump Discussed Pulling U.S. From NATO, Aides Say Amid New Concerns Over Russia', *New York Times*, 14 January 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/14/us/politics/nato-president-trump.html (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).
[9] Hayton, B. (2018), 'Two Years On, South China Sea Ruling Remains a Battleground for the Rules-Based Order', Chatham House Expert Comment, 11 July 2018, https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/two-years-south-china-sea-ruling-remains-battleground-rules-based-order (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).
[10] Paris, R. (2015), 'Global Governance and Power Politics: Back to Basics', *Ethics and International Affairs*, 29(4): pp. 407–418, doi: 10.1017/S0892679415000428 (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).
[11] Based on GDP in current US dollars in 2017. See World Bank (2019), Gross domestic product 2017, https://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP.pdf (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

Several mid-sized countries seem to be interested in taking further action. In addition to the Franco–German proposal for an 'alliance for multilateralism', in early 2019 Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe expressed his country's determination 'to preserve and continue the free, open, and rules-based international order'.[12] Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs Chrystia Freeland has advocated 'doubling down on an improved rules-based international order'.[13] In early 2017, British Prime Minister Theresa May referred to 'a new, global Britain' that would energetically defend 'the rules-based international system on which the stability of our world continues to rely'.[14] Indian Foreign Secretary Vijay Keshav Gokhale has warned that 'unilateral tendencies are coming to the fore, be they in rising trade protectionism or in the disregard for established international mechanisms governing the global commons', and has called for urgent efforts to 'strengthen multilateralism'.[15]

The time has come to turn these aspirations into a concerted campaign. Which countries should be involved in such efforts? What role should non-governmental actors play? How should participants determine their priorities and coordinate their efforts? This paper aims to provide answers to these questions.

The promise of plurilateralism

Fortunately, models for such multilateral cooperation already exist. Informal groups of 'like-minded' countries have improvised solutions to global problems in many policy areas, including international migration,[16] global health,[17] internet governance[18] and arms control.[19] The label frequently applied to this style of cooperation – 'plurilateralism' – underscores its informality and the diversity of forms it may take. Membership in these groups tends to be issue-specific and heterogeneous, with some being comprised solely of states and others including non-governmental actors, from corporations and private foundations to advocacy networks. As Stewart Patrick notes, 'governments have taken to operating in many venues simultaneously, participating in a bewildering array of issue-specific networks and partnerships whose membership varies based on situational interests, shared values, and relevant capabilities'.[20]

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[12] Reid, D. (2019), 'Japanese leader Abe tells Davos audience to rebuild trust in global trade', CNBC, 23 January 2019, https://www.cnbc.com/2019/01/23/japan-prime-minister-shinzo-abe-tells-davos-audience-to-rebuild-trust-in-global-trade.html (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

[13] Global Affairs Canada (2018), 'Address by Minister Freeland when receiving Foreign Policy's Diplomat of the Year Award', https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2018/06/address-by-minister-freeland-when-receiving-foreign-policys-diplomat-of-the-year-award.html (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

[14] *Financial Times* (2017), 'Theresa May: Speech to 'Congress of Tomorrow' conference, Philadelphia', 26 January 2017, https://www.ft.com/content/f7abaf42-e41b-11e6-9645-c9357a75844a (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

[15] Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India (2019), 'FS's keynote address to the 1st Disarmament and International Security Affairs Fellowship', https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/30910/FSs_Keynote_address_to_the_1st_Disarmament_and_International_Security_Affairs_Fellowship (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

[16] Oelgemöller, C. (2011), 'Informal Plurilateralism: The Impossibility of Multilateralism in the Steering of Migration', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 13(1): pp. 110–126, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-856X.2010.00442.x (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

[17] Hill, P. (2011), 'Understanding global health governance as a complex adaptive system', *Global Public Health*, 6(6): pp. 593–605, doi: 10.1080/17441691003762108 (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

[18] Raymond, M. and DeNardis, L. (2015), 'Multistakeholderism: anatomy of an inchoate global institution', *International Theory*, 7(3): pp. 572–616, doi: 10.1017/S1752971915000081 (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

[19] Dolan, M. and Hunt, C. (1998), 'Negotiating in the Ottawa process: The new multilateralism', *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, 5(3): pp. 25–50, doi: 10.1080/11926422.1998.9673148 (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

[20] Patrick, S. (2014), 'The Unruled World: The Case for Good Enough Global Governance', *Foreign Affairs*, 93 (1): pp. 58–73, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2013-12-06/unruled-world (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

Below, this paper describes three recent examples of plurilateral cooperation. Each highlights a different way in which mid-sized states can work together to sustain key elements of the liberal order. Specifically, such initiatives can help (1) to devise solutions to problems that have paralysed existing international institutions, (2) to renegotiate international agreements that seem destined for the ash heap of history, and (3) to sustain or expand multi-stakeholder campaigns to address significant global problems.

Dealing with paralysis: WTO reform

The WTO's rules have failed to keep pace with emerging areas of practice

In October 2018, the Canadian government convened what it termed a 'working group of like-minded nations' – comprising 12 members of the WTO, including Australia, Brazil, the EU, South Korea, Singapore and Japan – to explore possible solutions to problems that threaten the organization's future. The WTO's last significant round of trade liberalization was in the 1990s. Its rules have failed to keep pace with emerging areas of practice – including the expanded participation of state-owned enterprises in international trade, new types of financing arrangements, and barriers to digital trade – in part because changes to the rules require a consensus of WTO members, which has been elusive. The failure of many countries, including major economies like China, to comply with reporting obligations has made it even harder to reach agreement.[21] The organization's dispute settlement mechanism is also at risk. If the US does not stop blocking the appointment of new judges to the WTO Appellate Body, it will soon have too few judges to hear new cases. Without a means of adjudication, international trade disputes will go unresolved – or, what is worse, they will be decided through a raw contest of wills.

The middle-powers initiative organized by Canada, known as the Ottawa Group on WTO Reform, has initially focused on improving the functioning of the WTO's committees, but it also aims to tackle harder issues, including the reform of the dispute settlement system. The hope is to find a formula that will persuade the US to resume the appointment of judges, at least as an interim measure. Longer-term fixes will be more challenging. Although many countries share Washington's concern that the dispute settlement process is too slow and that judges have a tendency to overreach in their decisions, achieving consensus among all WTO members on far-reaching reforms seems unlikely. Alternatively, a subset of members could agree on the creation of a new mechanism that would be open to all states that agree to its terms. Similar plurilateral approaches may unlock solutions in other areas of concern, including rules on subsidies and state-owned enterprises, clearer standards for determining which countries are designated 'developing states', and stronger requirements for reporting national policies.

Renegotiating and reviving agreements: The Trans-Pacific Partnership

In 2015, 12 countries – Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, the US and Vietnam – concluded seven years of negotiations on a trade agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which sought to reduce tariffs and to establish common standards on intellectual property, digital commerce, labour and environment regulations, and dispute resolution, among other things. The administration

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[21] Caporal, J. and Gerstel, D. (2018), 'WTO Reform: The Beginning of the End or the End of the Beginning?', Centre for Strategic and International Studies Interview, 23 October 2018, https://www.csis.org/analysis/wto-reform-beginning-end-or-end-beginning (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

of US President Barack Obama saw the TPP as a vital trade-opening and rule-setting initiative for a strategic region. 'If we don't write the rules, China will write the rules out in that region. We will be shut out', Obama asserted in 2015.[22]

The countries that launched the CPTPP did so not in spite of the US, but in the hope that the US would eventually rejoin the agreement

When Donald Trump signed an executive order in the first week of his presidency withdrawing the US from the pact, many observers thought the deal was dead. How could it proceed without its principal and biggest sponsor? At Japan's urging, however, the remaining 11 members revised the terms of the agreement and brought it into force. Renamed the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), it now covers approximately 13 per cent of the global economy and 500 million people. Importantly, the countries that launched the CPTPP did so not in spite of the US, but in the hope that the US would eventually rejoin the agreement. Other countries are reported to be exploring the possibility of membership: these include South Korea, Colombia, Indonesia, Thailand, and even the UK (following its planned withdrawal from the EU). Some observers speculate that China might one day consider joining, too, but doing so would require Beijing to accept the imposition of rules on sensitive issues – including intellectual property, technology transfer and labour rights – that it has hitherto resisted in WTO discussions.[23] Mounting trade tensions between China and the US make it even less likely. Nonetheless, with or without China, the CPTPP could eventually develop into a multiregional economic zone, open to any country willing to embrace its rules.

Sustaining global policy campaigns: climate change

Finally, efforts to combat climate change provide an example of plurilateral cooperation aimed at sustaining an imperilled global campaign. Shortly after taking power in January 2017, the Trump administration announced its intention to withdraw from the joint commitments agreed by the COP21 (21st Conference of the Parties) UN climate change conference, held in Paris in December 2015. Many observers had feared that the COP21 agreement would collapse, but most of its signatories instead reaffirmed their commitment. The 24th Conference of the Parties (COP24), meeting in Katowice, Poland in December 2018, agreed on a set of common standards to measure progress on their respective greenhouse gas emissions targets. Although many scientists believe that these targets remain insufficient to prevent the global temperature rise of two degrees Celsius that the COP21 agreement sought to avert, the fact that the COP21 negotiating parties have continued their cooperation towards its implementation despite the US withdrawal shows what might be achievable in other areas of policy.

The example of international cooperation on climate change also illustrates the benefits of involving subnational governments, private companies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in these efforts.[24] In September 2018, Governor of California Jerry Brown hosted a Global Climate Action Summit, bringing together local leaders,

[22] Vanderklippe, N. (2018), 'TPP deal a way for U.S. to reassert primacy over China', *Globe and Mail*, 15 May 2018, https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/tpp-deal-a-way-for-us-to-reassert-primacy-over-china/article26660167 (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).
[23] Zhou, L. and Wu, W. (2018), 'Beijing 'looking into joining trans-Pacific trade pact' to hedge against US', *South China Morning Post*, 11 October 2018, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/2168147/beijing-looking-joining-trans-pacific-trade-pact-hedge-against (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).
[24] Duggan, J. (2019), *The Role of Sub-state and Non-state Actors in International Climate Processes: Subnational Governments*, Chatham House Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/role-sub-state-and-non-state-actors-international-climate-processes-subnational (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

state governors, business executives and NGOs from around the world. Among the 500 or so new commitments to emerge from the event, 70 major cities pledged to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 while 488 companies, with a combined market capitalization of $10 trillion, adopted emission reduction targets for their respective operations. This type of plurilateral activism not only leveraged the contributions from subnational and non-state actors, but crucially it also enabled them to continue participating in a global campaign that their own federal government had renounced.

Organizing a middle-powers campaign

The examples cited above demonstrate the promise of plurilateral issue-specific coalitions, which should be the motor of any middle-powers campaign to sustain and reform key parts of the liberal international order. What is needed now, however, is a more focused and ambitious set of initiatives, along with a mechanism for their coordination. The following can be regarded as key principles of any campaign:

- **Form should follow function –** Each coalition should begin with a small group of states that share a common assessment of the problem at hand and possess the means to do something about it. Once this core group devises a general plan of action, others should be encouraged to join the coalition, contribute to its efforts, and refine its goals. Participation in the coalition should depend on its subject matter and objectives. A group defending liberal values such as media freedoms, for example, would naturally consist of democratic states and relevant non-governmental partners, whereas an arms-control initiative is likely to comprise a more ideologically diverse group of countries.

- **Involve non-governmental actors where appropriate –** Non-governmental actors can be powerful allies. Canada supported multi-stakeholder campaigns in the 1990s, which led to the establishment of the International Criminal Court and a treaty banning anti-personnel landmines, and, in 2010, when it launched the Muskoka Initiative on Maternal, Newborn and Child Health at that year's G8 summit. Other examples include the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (both of which were established in the early 2000s), which are prominent public–private partnerships in the global health field. City and regional governments, private companies and advocacy organizations have been important participants in coalitions to combat climate change, as we have seen.[25] On matters of financial and business regulation, the involvement of private-sector actors is also vital because of the influence they wield. Plurilateralism, in other words, can accommodate a wide range of actors.

- **Campaign-level coordination should be through informal consultations, not a formal body –** Regular consultations would permit a core group of states to exchange views on evolving threats to the liberal international order; discuss their respective priorities and undertakings in response to these challenges; coordinate actions across the issue-specific coalitions; and hold each other loosely accountable for their respective commitments. The Human Security Network, an association created by Norway and Canada in 1998, offers an interesting

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[25] Hale, T. (2018), *Catalytic cooperation: BSG Working Paper Series,* Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford, https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2018-09/BSG-WP-2018-026.pdf (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

model. Participants in the network (which gradually expanded to comprise 13 countries) subscribed to the shared goal promoting the security of individuals, rather than solely that of states, but the real work of the network took place within the projects that its members led – such as efforts to strengthen the protection of children in armed conflict and respect for international human rights and humanitarian law – often in partnership with other states and non-governmental partners that were not part of the coordinating group.

Which countries should constitute the coordinating group of a campaign to 'save' the liberal world order?

This raises a potentially sensitive question: which countries should constitute the coordinating group of a campaign to 'save' the liberal world order? Limiting the membership to a small number of like-minded countries that possess the diplomatic networks and resources to lead issue-specific coalitions – say, Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, South Korea and the UK – would offer an efficient design. However, this list might strike some as too 'northern' or 'western', particularly if the campaign's purpose includes adapting multilateralism to the shifting landscape of international affairs. Expanding the core group to encompass a more globally representative group of middle powers – for instance, Brazil, India, Indonesia, Nigeria and South Africa – would help address this concern, but it might also yield an unwieldy group of less-than-like-minded countries. At worst, it could reproduce the political frictions that have paralysed aspects of the multilateral system. The purpose of plurilateralism is to overcome these problems, not to replicate them.

Once again, the Human Security Network offers a possible solution: to start with a small group of like-minded liberal states and subsequently invite other countries to self-select as partners, on condition that they (1) subscribe to the goal of sustaining and modernizing the liberal international order, and (2) commit to leading or participating in one of the related issue-specific coalitions. The advantage of this approach is that it focuses attention where it belongs: on the *activities* of the campaign rather than its loose coordination structure.

Basing an initiative on a core group of liberal democracies offers another advantage. These countries have an interest in adapting the rules-based international system to reflect the interests of emerging powers, but not at the price of abandoning human rights, freedom of expression, open rules-based trade, and the principle that governments should be accountable to the people they serve. Striking this balance will not be easy, but it is essential. Democracies must work together to uphold liberal values in a world of mounting authoritarianism and illiberal populism, while at the same time recognizing that international institutions and rules perform another vital function: enabling countries with different political and economic systems to manage their relations peacefully. Establishing a strong 'caucus' of liberal states at the core of a broader middle-powers campaign would help to resolve this issue.

- **The campaign should not become a vehicle for anti-Americanism or 'soft balancing' against the US –** The Trump administration opposes some multilateral institutions but supports others. Even when the White House demurs, powerful actors in the US political system and in its civil society can be important allies. Over the long term, sustaining and adapting the rules-based system will require renewed leadership from the US, not least because it remains the world's foremost economic and military power. A middle-powers campaign that indulges anti-Americanism would work against this goal. Indeed, it would be a non-starter for countries such as Canada and Japan, which prioritize good relations with the US.

Defining priorities

There is no shortage of potential initiatives for a middle-powers campaign. Some could focus on protecting or reforming existing institutions or rules; others on formulating new approaches to old problems, or devising new rules in emerging policy areas. Two of the issues discussed above – climate change and international trade – are obvious candidates for such a campaign, the first because of its impact on human livelihoods everywhere, and the second because escalating tit-for-tat protectionism could wreak ruinous effects on the global economy. There is also a need to 'backfill' in areas where the US has been disengaging, such as multilateral support for family planning and safe abortion (where the latter is legal). What matters most, however, is that countries that have been calling for action now take on this responsibility themselves. They need to assemble and lead issue-specific coalitions in policy areas that matter to them and their partners.

Below are three examples of possible initiatives: to modernize the international migration regime; to establish new rules for cybersecurity; and to uphold norms against state assassination, kidnapping and 'hostage diplomacy'. Each would involve a different constellation of partners, but all would require leadership, ambition and organization.

The migration crisis

The rise of illiberal populism in Europe can be partly attributed to a nativist reaction to the arrival in the continent of nearly two million refugees and migrants since 2014

The international regime for managing migration and refugees is broken. The UN estimated that there were a record 258 million international migrants in 2017, compared with 173 million in 2000 and 84 million in 1970.[26] According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the number of forcibly displaced people in the world also reached a record high of 68.5 million in 2018.[27] In addition to creating humanitarian crises of unprecedented scale, mass movements of people across borders risk destabilizing governments and regions. The rise of illiberal populism in Europe can be partly attributed to a nativist reaction to the arrival in the continent of nearly two million refugees and migrants from Africa and the Middle East since 2014. Although these arrivals peaked in 2015–16, migration pressures in Europe and elsewhere are likely to remain strong. In addition, protracted refugee situations – where large populations are stuck in exile for more than five years – can become breeding grounds for hopelessness and radicalization.[28]

Addressing these pressures requires a more concerted effort to alleviate the causes of population flows from source countries, along with a new approach to sharing responsibility for resettling refugees. As Lloyd Axworthy, the chair of the World Refugee Council, stated in 2018: 'The current approach is neither politically nor financially sustainable, nor does it afford refugees the protections and prospects

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[26] International Organization for Migration (2017), 'Migration Data Portal', https://migrationdataportal.org/?i=stock_abs_&t=2017 (accessed 16 Apr. 2019); International Organization for Migration (2018), *World Migration Report*, https://www.iom.int/wmr/world-migration-report-2018 (accessed 16 Apr. 2019). The International Organization for Migration defines 'international migrants' as people living in a country other than their country of birth.
[27] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2018), 'Forced displacement at record 68.5 million', https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2018/6/5b222c494/forced-displacement-record-685-million.html (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).
[28] UNHCR defines a 'protracted refugee situation' as one in which '25,000 or more refugees from the same nationality have been in exile for five consecutive years or more in a given asylum country'.

that basic human dignity demands'.[29] However, multilateral responses have had limited success to date. The Global Compact for Migration, concluded in 2018 under UN auspices, was a non-binding list of largely aspirational goals. Worse, the compact became the target of a misinformation campaign by a 'global network of nationalist, far-right activists'.[30]

A different approach is needed. A smaller group of capable countries – along with civil society organizations and private foundations – should develop their own plurilateral initiative, focusing on specific migration source countries, displaced populations, and transit routes. More than anything else, the migration crisis is a development problem: its biggest driver is lack of economic opportunity, followed by conflict and persecution. Once established, the plurilateral coalition could also press for changes to strengthen the international refugee regime, including more reliable financing mechanisms.[31] It could also launch a further initiative to improve the prospects for millions of children and youths living in the purgatory of protracted refugee situations. Many of these children are receiving no formal education and have bleak employment prospects – a time bomb of hopelessness. Aiming to provide 100 per cent of these young people with quality primary education and skills training would be an ambitious goal, and is achievable if a multi-stakeholder coalition, backed by a group of committed mid-sized states, makes it a priority.

Cybersecurity

There is an urgent need for new rules and norms in cyberspace. Digital threats to national security, critical infrastructure, domestic political systems, the global economy, and privacy are growing. A malicious hack disabling just one major cloud service could cause losses of $53 billion, according to the insurer Lloyd's, or roughly the same amount of financial damage as could be inflicted by the costliest tropical cyclone on record.[32] Yet this would be nothing compared to the destructiveness of cyber conflicts that escalated into larger attacks, or even armed confrontations, as David Sanger explains in *The Perfect Weapon*.[33]

UN-sponsored efforts to devise cyberspace rules for international security have recently reached an impasse. Since 2010, a series of Groups of Governmental Experts (GGE) have put forward various norms for responsible state behaviour in cyberspace. A GGE report in 2013, for example, helped to establish the fundamental principle – supported by the US, Russia and China – that international law is applicable to cyberspace.[34] However, the most

[29] World Refugee Council Interim Report (2018), *Transforming the Global Refugee System: Solidarity, Humanity and Accountability*, Centre for International Governance Innovation, 10 April 2018, https://www.cigionline.org/publications/transforming-global-refugee-system-solidarity-humanity-and-accountability (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

[30] Cerulus, L. and Schaart, E. (2019), 'How the UN migration pact got trolled', Politico, 3 January 2019, https://www.politico.eu/article/united-nations-migration-pact-how-got-trolled (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

[31] World Refugee Council Final Report (2019), *A Call to Action: Transforming the Global Refugee System*, https://www.worldrefugeecouncil.org/sites/default/files/documents/WRC_Call_to_Action.pdf (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

[32] Lloyd's (2017), 'Extreme cyber-attack could cost as much as Superstorm Sandy', 17 July 2017, https://www.lloyds.com/news-and-risk-insight/press-releases/2017/07/cyber-attack-report (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

[33] Sanger, D. (2018), *The Perfect Weapon: War, Sabotage, and Fear in the Cyber Age*, New York: Crown Publishing Group.

[34] United Nations (2013), 'Group of Governmental Experts on Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security', General Assembly document no. A/68/98, 24 June 2013.

recent GGE, in June 2017, failed to reach a consensus due to disagreements over the application of international legal principles – such as self-defence, state responsibility and countermeasures, and international humanitarian law – to this domain.[35]

If there is any hope of establishing and upholding international norms, states and private actors will need to collaborate closely

In a separate initiative in November 2018, however, 51 countries and more than 250 private organizations signed a declaration – entitled the Paris Call for Trust and Security in Cyberspace – condemning 'malicious cyber activities' that harm individuals or critical infrastructure.[36] Signatories pledged to work together to prevent attacks, the theft of intellectual property, and interference in electoral processes, *inter alia*.[37] The involvement of global information technology companies in this initiative – including Facebook, Microsoft, Google and Samsung – was noteworthy. If there is any hope of establishing and upholding international norms in this field, states and private actors will need to collaborate closely. Since early 2017, several companies have put forward proposals, including Microsoft's call for a Digital Geneva Convention, which would prohibit states from launching cyberattacks against critical infrastructure, private-sector targets and intellectual property, and Siemens' Charter of Trust, which proposes global cyber norms.[38]

Although the Paris Call sets out important principles, the means by which these will be enforced are less clearly defined. The next, more difficult, step is to devise a mechanism for identifying violators and bringing them to justice. While the ultimate goal should be a global agreement including the world's major cyber powers, the difficulty of reaching universal agreement – illustrated by the impasse in the UN GGE – suggests that the most productive approach is to build regulatory arrangements among a subset of like-minded states, and then to encourage other states to join this system. It will be a difficult task. The list of countries that signed the Paris Call – a diverse community, including Canada, Colombia, Japan, Mexico, Morocco, New Zealand, Qatar, Senegal and South Korea – does not include several nations with advanced cyberattack capabilities: notably China, Iran, North Korea, Russia and the US. Furthermore, the agreement also failed to cover particularly sensitive issues, such as espionage and offensive operations.[39] Nevertheless, the Paris Call has established a foundation upon which to build. Mid-sized countries and large private corporations have an opportunity, if not the responsibility, to map out the core elements of a new regime, solicit broader support, and begin enforcing whichever parts they can.

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[35] Korzak, E. (2017), 'The UN GGE on cybersecurity: the end of an era?', The Diplomat, 31 July 2017, https://thediplomat.com/2017/07/un-gge-on-cybersecurity-have-china-and-russia-just-made-cyberspace-less-safe (accessed 16 Apr. 2019); Meyer, P. (2019), 'Visions on the future of cyberspace clash at the UN', OpenCanada, 15 November 2018, https://www.opencanada.org/features/visions-future-cyberspace-clash-un (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

[36] Government of France, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2018), 'Paris Call for Trust and Security in Cyberspace', 12 November 2018, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/paris_call_text_-_en_cle06f918.pdf (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

[37] The Group of Seven (G7) also created a 'rapid response mechanism', at its Charlevoix Summit of June 2018, 'to strengthen coordination across the G7 in identifying, preventing and responding to threats to G7 democracies'. Democratic Institutions (2019), 'G7 Rapid Response Mechanism', 30 January 2019, https://www.canada.ca/en/democratic-institutions/news/2019/01/g7-rapid-response-mechanism.html (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

[38] Smith, B. (2017), 'The need for a Digital Geneva Convention', Microsoft *On the Issues* blog, 14 February 2017, https://blogs.microsoft.com/on-the-issues/2017/02/14/need-digital-geneva-convention (accessed 16 Apr. 2019); Siemens (n.d.), 'Charter of Trust for a secure digital world', https://assets.new.siemens.com/siemens/assets/public.1552654703.a0dce9a0-164c-431e-91a9-2ed3be663108.charteroftrust-2019-en-online.pdf (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

[39] Laudrain, A. (2018), 'Avoiding a World War Web: The Paris Call for Trust and Security in Cyberspace', Lawfare, 4 December 2018, https://www.lawfareblog.com/avoiding-world-war-web-paris-call-trust-and-security-cyberspace (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

Assassination, kidnapping and 'hostage diplomacy'

A growing number of countries have been venturing abroad to threaten, kidnap or assassinate their adversaries and critics in recent years. Between 2001 and 2009, according to the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, the CIA abducted at least 119 suspected terrorists from locations around the world and transported them to secret CIA-run prisons, where at least 39 were subjected to 'enhanced interrogation techniques'.[40] More recently, the Russian state has been implicated in the disappearance or death in suspicious circumstances of certain overseas dissidents. The attempted poisoning of a former Russian spy, Sergei Skripal, and his daughter in the UK in March 2018 (which was followed by the death of a British citizen who accidentally came into contact with the discarded remains of the poison) was broadly seen as an example of extraterritorial score-settling by the government of President Vladimir Putin. This speculation appeared to be confirmed when the two men charged with the attack by the British authorities were identified by independent investigators as active Russian intelligence agents.[41] Chinese security agents have also reportedly conducted kidnappings abroad. In 2015, five people connected with a Hong Kong-based bookseller and publishing house disappeared; the following year, the mainland Chinese police confirmed that these individuals were being investigated on suspicion of illegal activities. One man, Gui Minhai, was reported to have been snatched from his apartment in Thailand.[42] In another case, democracy campaigner Li Xin disappeared while travelling by train in Thailand (where he had sought political asylum) in January 2016, surfacing one month later in police custody in China, and claiming to have returned voluntarily.[43] Other Chinese dissidents have reportedly been seized in Myanmar and Vietnam.[44]

In another case provoking international outrage, in October 2018, a team of Saudi agents deployed to Istanbul murdered and dismembered a dissident journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, inside Saudi Arabia's consulate – a crime that the Saudi regime acknowledged when Turkish officials publicized surveillance footage and other damning evidence. However, Turkey has conducted its own aggressive campaign to silence suspected opponents at home and abroad. Since a failed 2016 coup against his government, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has sought to repatriate supporters of a former political rival, whom he has accused of orchestrating the coup attempt. In April 2018, Deputy Prime Minister Bekir Bozdag publicly bragged that Turkish intelligence services had seized at least 80 Turkish nationals from multiple countries.[45] In an apparent example of one such attempt in July

[40] Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (2012), 'Committee study of the Central Intelligence Agency's detention and interrogation program', Declassified version with redactions, 13 December 2012, https://fas.org/irp/congress/2014_rpt/ssci-rdi.pdf (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

[41] Simmons, A. (2018), 'Second U.K. Spy-Poisoning Suspect Identified as Russian Military Doctor', *Wall Street Journal*, 9 October 2018, https://www.wsj.com/articles/second-spy-poisoning-suspect-identified-as-russian-military-doctor-1539069356 (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

[42] Holmes, O. and Phillips, T. (2015), 'Gui Minhai: the strange disappearance of a publisher who riled China's elite', *The Guardian*, 8 December 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/08/gui-minhai-the-strange-disappearance-of-a-publisher-who-riled-chinas-elite (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

[43] Demick, B. (2016), 'Why did China kidnap its provocateurs?', *New Yorker*, 16 February 2016, https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/why-did-china-kidnap-its-provocateurs (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

[44] Dorfman, Z. (2018), 'The disappeared', *Foreign Policy*, 29 March 2018, https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/29/the-disappeared-china-renditions-kidnapping (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

[45] Cunningham, E. (2018), 'Turkey says its global dragnet has seized dozens of its citizens in 18 countries', *Washington Post*, 5 April 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/turkey-says-its-global-dragnet-has-seized-dozens-of-its-citizens-in-18-countries/2018/04/05/3e4c144a-38d1-11e8-af3c-2123715f78df_story.html (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

2018, a Turkish educator was abducted in Mongolia and taken to a private aeroplane whose call sign matched that of the Turkish Air Force. She was released only after Mongolian authorities grounded the flight.[46]

The use of 'hostage diplomacy' may also be on the rise.[47] China's detention of two Canadian citizens in December 2018 – in apparent retaliation for Canada's arrest of Huawei's chief financial officer, Meng Wanzhou, following an extradition request from the US – seemed to be an attempt by Beijing to coerce Canada into suspending its extradition proceedings and releasing Meng.[48] In January 2019, a prominent Australian writer, Yang Hengjun, who had previously renounced his Chinese nationality, arrived at Guangzhou airport and was promptly arrested on suspicion of endangering China's national security – the same grounds that Chinese authorities cited for detaining the two Canadians.[49] These apparently arbitrary arrests of foreign nationals represent a potential threat to the citizens of any country that displeases Beijing.

The alternative is to stand aside as the rule of law gradually gives way to the law of the jungle

Such behaviours by national governments are eroding important restraints on international conduct. Worse, they risk normalizing murder, kidnapping and arbitrary detention as forms of statecraft. Mid-sized powers can and should work together to counter this trend – by publicizing such events, coming to each other's assistance when their citizens are targeted, and penalizing perpetrators when it is feasible to do so. The alternative is to stand aside as the rule of law gradually gives way to the law of the jungle – a world in which mid-sized countries would face even graver dangers.

Conclusion

Previous generations understood the necessity of a rules-based international system. They experienced cataclysmic wars, notably those ending in 1815, 1918 and 1945. Although there is no imminent prospect of a great-power war today, the dense structure of post-war institutions, rules and norms that for decades has underpinned a relatively stable and open international order is decaying faster than many could have predicted. This decay, combined with the growing recklessness of some global and regional powers, is worrying. Self-restraint and a network of functioning institutions help to buffer the international system from shocks; in their absence, isolated crises are more likely to spiral into larger confrontations. We can see similarities in the situation in Europe in the early 1910s, leading up to the First World War, when national leaders appeared blind – perhaps wilfully so – to the decaying foundations of continental stability. One historian refers to those leaders as 'sleepwalkers' because they failed to recognize the corrosive effects of their own increasing recklessness.[50] Yet somnambulism is no excuse for today's leaders, who have the benefit of hindsight as regards the outcome of that story.

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[46] Beech, H. (2018), 'Turkish School Leader Abducted, and Released, in Mongolia', *New York Times*, 28 July 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/28/world/europe/turkish-school-leader-abducted-and-released-in-mongolia.html (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

[47] Clarke, D. (2019), 'China's Hostage Diplomacy', Lawfare, 11 January 2019, https://www.lawfareblog.com/chinas-hostage-diplomacy-0 (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

[48] Paris, R. (2019), 'Canada Is on the Front Lines of Challenges to Rule of Law', Chatham House Expert Comment, 25 January 2019, https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/canada-front-lines-challenges-rule-law (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

[49] Dixon, R. (2019), 'China's arrest of Australian writer is called 'hostage diplomacy'', *Los Angeles Times*, 24 January 2019, https://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-china-writer-arrested-20190124-story.html (accessed 16 Apr. 2019).

[50] Clark, C. (2012), *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, New York: HarperCollins.

Many middle powers have been warning of the dangers inherent in the decline of the liberal international order. Moreover, they have a clear interest in sustaining that order, since it protects them not only from systemic instability, but also from a world of unrestrained great-power politics. The time has come for these countries to translate their warnings into concerted action. Middle powers need to launch a campaign to sustain and reform key parts of the international order. They need to decide who will do what, with whom, how, and to what end. They need to organize.

The task is daunting and there is no guarantee of success. Indeed, the results of this campaign may be inconsistent and messy, but they do not need to be perfect. The goal – to paraphrase former Secretary-General of the UN Dag Hammarskjöld – is not to deliver us to heaven. Saving us from hell would do just fine.

About the author

Roland Paris is professor of international affairs at the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, University of Ottawa, and associate fellow of the US and the Americas Programme at Chatham House.

Previously, he was senior adviser on global affairs and defence to the prime minister of Canada, founding director of the Centre for International Policy Studies at the University of Ottawa, director of research at the Conference Board of Canada, assistant professor of Political Science and International Affairs at the University of Colorado at Boulder, visiting researcher at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, DC, and visiting fellow at the Institut d'études politiques (Sciences Po) in Paris. He has also served in several advisory positions in Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs and its Privy Council (Cabinet) Office. In addition, he was appointed to a 10-member group of international experts advising the secretary general of NATO.

His research on international security, civil conflicts, peacebuilding, and Canadian and US foreign policy has appeared in leading academic outlets and earned several prizes, including the Grawemeyer Award for Ideas Improving World Order. He has also won seven awards for teaching and public service, and provides regular analysis of international affairs to international and Canadian media.

He holds a PhD from Yale University, an MPhil from the University of Cambridge, and a BA from the University of Toronto.

Acknowledgments

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Cover image: French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau during the G7 Summit in La Malbaie, Quebec, Canada on 8 June 2018.
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