POLICY NOTE

THE PEACE AGENDA IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

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Abstract

The unipolar moment has ended; the authority of the United States and its allies is more openly contested, and a wider range of great and middle powers now influences the shape of the regional and global order in ways that exceed U.S. control. The danger is that this transition will be treated as a license for regional spheres of influence, proxy conflicts, and normalized resort to force. But multipolarity also creates an opening. There is a chance to seize the opportunity to improve the global order, while recognizing the risk that it could worsen.

The current moment calls for an anti-war agenda suited to a plural and rivalrous world, one that does not depend on ideological convergence or presumptions about shared values. The case for this agenda rests on reciprocal self-interest because states of every size benefit from limits on coercion. It can have four components. First, states should reaffirm and strengthen limits on the right of self-defense they can claim under the UN Charter's Article 51. Second, states should recommit to the inadmissibility of annexation or territorial acquisition by force (including de facto annexation). Third, great and middle powers should commit not to instigate, enable, or intensify proxy wars against one another. Fourth, states should not furnish military assistance or allow or sponsor arms sales which predictably abet gross violations of both *jus ad bellum* rules against aggression and *jus in bello* rules against atrocity.

The virtue of such a bargain among states lies not so much in robust content but just the reverse. Restraint is a plausibly thin core to another global order. It asks those who join to recognize one clear, narrow and urgent proposition: no state is safer in a world in which coercion is unconstrained because every exception claimed by one power becomes available to its rivals.

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The Opportunity and Risk of Multipolarity

The unipolar moment has ended; the authority of the United States and its allies is more openly contested, and a wider range of great and middle powers now influence the regional and global order in ways that exceed U.S. control.[1] The danger is that this transition will be treated as a license for regional spheres of influence, proxy conflicts, and normalized resort to force. Donald Trump's own vision clearly exacerbates this risk. In that version of multipolarity, the decline of American hegemony may produce an even more violent order than the one that has prevailed since the end of the Cold War.

But multipolarity also creates an opening to seize the opportunity to improve the global order, while recognizing the risk that it could worsen. If no single power can credibly claim to enforce the rules for all other states, then a global order based on mutual restraint is more likely to be stable than one predicated on a precarious hierarchy.

The current moment calls for an anti-war agenda suited to a pluralistic and rivalrous world, one that does not depend on an ideological convergence that has never been obtained and certainly does not now, or presumptions about shared values that obfuscate continuing tensions of ideology and interest. Fortunately, there is no need to choose between a clear-eyed assessment of likely state behavior and advocacy of cosmopolitan values; our point is that there is already enough convergence of the two to permit a minimal consensus on restraint. Not all states are likely to agree on every contested doctrinal question concerning the use of force, of course. But an anti-war agenda may begin from a thinner, harder, more reciprocal proposition: all states have an interest in preventing a world in which force becomes an ordinary instrument of policy.

That interest is shared across states of all sizes, albeit for different reasons. Smaller states depend on limits on coercion because they cannot protect their territorial integrity and political independence through power alone. Middle powers benefit when regional disputes are not converted into proxy contests, while great powers gain from limits on practices that rivals can use against their allies, partners, and interests. The gain depends on collectivity: unilateral restraint can leave a state exposed, but a reciprocal norm gives each state reason to accept limits on its own conduct because those limits also narrow the options available to others. A collective anti-war bargain therefore advances states' interests by making the international environment more predictable and less dangerous for all.

The G20 is particularly well-placed to reinforce these reciprocal expectations. The world's largest economies are also among the states most capable of financing, arming, enabling, or restraining conflict. They include established powers, rising powers, regional powers, and states

[1] Samuel Moyn, "Trump Wants to Reverse American Decline — Good Luck," *The Guardian*, January 27, 2025. But cf. Tim Barker, "Histories of Decline," *Phenomenal World* 1 (June 2026).

with different relationships to the existing order. That makes the G20 an imperfect but unusually useful forum for articulating a minimum bargain on restraint. The goal would not be to replace the United Nations Charter or to create a rival legal architecture but to reinforce the Charter's core anti-war commitment by translating it into a politically compelling bargain for a multipolar age.

Reciprocity, Not Restoration

The response to today's disorder cannot simply be a call to restore the old "rules-based" order. That appeal has limited persuasive force because for much of the world, the benefits of the prior order were uneven at best. Current nostalgia indulges the pretense that there ever was a credible rule-bound order in the first place.[2] Many states associate post-Cold War American unipolarity with expansive interpretations of self-defense, humanitarianized coercion, regime-change wars, punitive sanctions, and a tolerance for selective enforcement that condemned adversaries while condoning and even facilitating violations of core norms by allies or clients. Because the prohibition of aggression gave way to ever more elastic justifications for discretionary forms of coercion by the United States and its allies, the credibility of the United Nations' collective security system has eroded. To ask states simply to return to that order is to misread the legitimacy crisis that now surrounds the use of force.

However, the anti-war norm itself has not lost value. On the contrary, the prohibition on the threat or use of force remains the indispensable legal and political condition for any stable global order — even to the extent it was accepted only hypocritically by some states. The problem is that it emerged after World War II in a moment with many fewer states as part of a great power peace, with no commitment to making that peace an authentically global norm.[3] After decolonization, expectations of restraint based on that norm — which the states that emerged on the ruins of empire attempted to strengthen — have eroded as a consequence of selectivity, exception-making, and the repeated presentation of particular uses of force as unique, non-precedential, or compelled by higher values.[4] Over time, these claimed exceptions have become part of a repertoire available to all states. Rising and middle powers have adapted the language of self-defense, counterterrorism, humanitarian protection, and regional security to their own conflicts. The result is more corrosive than lawlessness — legal language has been emptied of its constraining force, and the practical threshold for violence keeps falling despite lip service to the UN Charter.

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[2] Samuel Moyn, "The Rules-Based Order Doesn't Constrain Russia — or the United States," *Washington Post*, March 1, 2022.

[3] See, e.g., Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (2009); Tarak Barkawi, "From Law to History: The Politics of War and Empire," *Global Constitutionalism* 7 (2018): 315-29.

[4] If anything, appeal to the values of human rights and humanitarianism furnish a further argument for restraint. Aslı Bâli, "The Humanitarian Paradox: Why Human Rights Require Restraint," *Quincy Institute Briefs* (August 1, 2022).

Reviving the anti-war norm requires more than a restoration of the mid-century compact, though it should begin from some of the insights that were clear to the original architects of the postwar order. For one, reciprocity need not entail moral equivalence between aggressor and victim, nor does it require indifference to atrocities. But it does require enlightened self-restraint, meaning that states must be asked to accept rules they would also want applied to their rivals, their allies, and themselves. A restraint bargain framed in this way has two advantages. First, it addresses the charge of hypocrisy more directly than appeals to an older order whose enforcement was systematically uneven. Second, it gives rival powers a reason to comply even when they do not share a common political project. States of every size are less secure in a world where preventive war, annexation, proxy conflict, and coercive strangulation are normalized tools of statecraft, although the dangers are distributed differently. For weaker states, the immediate risks are domination, territorial loss, and coerced alignment. Major and middle powers face prolonged proxy wars, alliance entrapment, arms races, commercial disruption, and doctrines of exception that rivals can invoke in return. Regardless of size, no state can confine permissive rules to its preferred uses or preferred users. The last quarter century has vividly demonstrated this reality through the global costs of the so-called war on terror, as well as Russia's war against Ukraine and the U.S.-Israeli war on Iran. These costly wars of choice illustrate an argument for restraint grounded in self-interest, rather than virtue.

A Minimum Bargain around Restraint

A workable bargain would have to be modest enough to attract support across political divides but concrete enough to constrain states. Four commitments would form the core.

First, states should reaffirm and strengthen limits on the right of self-defense they can claim under the UN Charter's Article 51. They can do so individually and in various groupings, including at the G20 level. The right of self-defense was never meant to be a general license to attack on the basis of speculative future threats, degraded deterrence, or broad claims of regional danger. The distinction between imminent defense and preventive war is essential to the Charter system. Once that distinction collapses, every rivalry can be redescribed as a security emergency, and every powerful state can claim the right to strike first. Even states capable of striking preventively have an interest in preserving this distinction, because a doctrine that converts inchoate future danger into lawful self-defense invites their rivals to claim the same latitude. Comparably, states must oppose other latitudinarian interpretations of self-defense — since, to take one example, only a minority of G20 states have publicly embraced the doctrine that self-defense allows for attack on the territory of states "unwilling or unable" to control non-state actors on their territory.[5]

[5] See, e.g., Kevin Jon Heller, "The Absence of Practice Supporting the 'Unwilling or Unable' Test," *Opinio Juris*, February 17, 2015.

Second, states should recommit to the inadmissibility of annexation or territorial acquisition by force, including de facto annexation accomplished through occupation, settlement, demographic engineering, or the creation of irreversible facts on the ground. This principle is one of the clearest tests of whether multipolarity will be governed by mutual restraint or by regional domination. A world of spheres of influence is, almost by definition, a world in which weaker states' territorial integrity becomes negotiable, as U.S. threats against Venezuela, Cuba, Greenland and even Canada have made clear.[6] This principle need not mean indefinite sanctions in every territorial dispute, nor does it preclude negotiated settlements, but it does require that no settlement, recognition policy, or stabilization arrangement validate territorial acquisition by force as a precedent. A multilateral order of restraint must make clear that territorial conquest cannot be normalized or rewarded.

Third, great and middle powers should commit not to instigate, enable, or intensify proxy wars against one another. Defensive support for a state resisting aggression is one thing; measures designed to prolong war or turn a local conflict into a means of bleeding a rival is quite another. Recognizing that distinction is crucial. Proxy conflict is one of the main ways in which formal adherence to the Charter coexists with escalating violence. It allows states to deny direct responsibility while sustaining conflicts that devastate civilian populations, destabilize regions, and increase the risk of wider war. States in whose territories proxy wars are fought bear the most immediate costs, while sponsors face escalation, entrapment, and loss of control over clients whose objectives may diverge from their own. A restraint bargain should therefore include not only direct uses of force but also indirect military support designed to bleed, weaken, or encircle rivals through third states or non-state actors.

Fourth, states should not furnish military assistance or allow or sponsor arms sales which predictably abet gross violations of both *jus ad bellum* rules against aggression and *jus in bello* rules against atrocity. This commitment links concerns about illegal uses of force to the current crisis of international humanitarian law. Systematic civilian harm affects the structure of global order by making war harder to end and more likely to metastasize across borders. When outside powers arm and shield partners engaged in mass civilian harm, they help convert local or regional wars into tests of global alignment, as the wars in Gaza and Ukraine have illustrated. They also signal that legal limits apply less to allies than to adversaries, deepening the very selectivity that has weakened the anti-war norm. Supplier states also assume direct strategic costs: arms transfers can prolong conflicts, fuel regional instability, produce blowback, and draw suppliers more deeply into wars they do not control.

The limits of nostalgia are nowhere clearer than in the old "rules-based" order's failure to interdict or regulate the trade in conventional weapons. States spent nearly three trillion dollars

[6] Aslı Bâli and Aziz Rana, "The Path to the Trump Doctrine," *Boston Review* (Winter 2026).

on weapons in 2024.[7] But the market is highly stratified, with one country (the United States) accounting for forty-two percent of exports, and the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council sending nearly seventy percent to the rest of the world.[8] And though a regime for the regulation of arms was anticipated at the time of the drafting of the United Nations Charter,[9] general international law has remained at a standstill. The Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) came into force in 2014 (though Russia has not signed, and the United States has not ratified, the instrument). It prohibits the trade when a state has "knowledge at the time of authorization" that the arms would be used to perpetrate the crime of genocide or crimes of war.[10] But there is no prohibition of other uses — including to commit the crime of aggression or otherwise disrupt the peace, such as through annexation, *de jure* or *de facto*. And in any event, the treaty calls for national self-enforcement alone. A robust agenda in international law, both within and beyond the G20, would insist on the expansion of the treaty's state parties, and take steps towards the construction of an enforcement regime. But it would also reformulate the treaty norms by expanding the instrument's coverage to include, or even privilege, rules against arms gifts or sales. It could also expand the prohibition on transfer to cases when it is *foreseeably more likely than not* that the beneficiary state or non-state actor will engage in aggression, annexation, or non-defensive force, or commit the crime of genocide or crimes of war.

These four commitments would identify a minimum zone of restraint without which multipolarity is likely to become a more permissive environment for war. The purpose is to move from a maximalist debate about the character of the global order broadly to a narrower bargain about the worst practices that all states have reason to fear.

Multipolar Stabilization Based on Restraint

A restraint bargain of the kind envisioned here would not depend on the existence of strong *ex post facto* enforcement by the United Nations Security Council. That is precisely why it may be suited to the current moment. In a multipolar order, the most important legal work occurs before violations take place, by shaping the background expectations against which states, officials, firms, insurers, arms manufacturers, procurement officers, military lawyers, and international institutions assess the costs of action. A thin but firm consensus can alter the calculations that make war easier to initiate, expand, finance, arm, and justify. For states, that preventive effect is itself a material benefit: it lowers exposure to regional escalation, reduces pressure for arms racing and counter-intervention, and provides firmer grounds for refusing demands from allies or partners to participate in unlawful or open-ended conflicts.

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[7] SIPRI, "Fact Sheet, "Trends in International Arms Transfers," 2024.
[8] *See generally* the SIPRI database at https://armstransfers.sipri.org/ArmsTransfer/.
[9] UN Charter, art. 26.
[10] The Arms Trade Treaty, April 2, 2013, 3013 U.N.T.S. 26, art. 7(3).

This is also how the original Charter bargain should be understood today. The Charter was concluded before the vast majority of the world's states had joined the United Nations through decolonization. Its prohibition on the threat or use of force was indispensable, but it was not the final word on what an anti-war order required. The 1970 Friendly Relations Declaration[11] adopted by the UN General Assembly should be read as an effort to restate and develop the Charter bargain after decolonization.[12] It supplemented the Charter by specifying that friendly relations require not only abstention from armed attack, but also respect for territorial integrity, political independence, equal sovereignty, peaceful settlement, and freedom from coercive intervention in states' domestic and external affairs.

That history matters for how equilibrium should be pursued in today's emergent multipolar context. Stabilization should not mean consolidating regional spheres of influence under the domination of great powers or a bargain among major states to discipline smaller ones. Such stabilization, even without desirable Security Council reform, is fully consistent with building adequate global consensus to pursue Chapter VI and VII remedies against bad actors that pose threats to peace through the UN's collective security architecture where possible. But as a default, a multipolar order should treat restraint as an ex ante condition of sovereign equality, requiring states to accept limits on the forms of coercion they are most tempted to use themselves, including preventive war, annexation, proxy conflict, and arms transfers that foreseeably enable aggression or mass civilian harm. The goal is to make the most destabilizing practices harder to normalize across conflicts even absent moral consensus about specific conflicts.

Such a bargain will give governments a common vocabulary for resisting pressure to participate in unlawful or escalatory conduct. In the absence of robust centralized enforcement, it would still increase the legal and reputational risks for officials who authorize arms transfers, intelligence support, or coercive measures that predictably contribute to aggression, annexation, or wide-scale civilian harm. Moreover, a consensus on restraint can and should influence the regulatory infrastructure through which arms-transfer approvals, procurement decisions, export licenses, due diligence processes, and end-use monitoring are conducted. Finally, by clarifying that certain transactions carry heightened legal and political risk, it should also affect private actors, including insurers, lenders, logistics companies, and defense firms.

The virtue of such a bargain lies in its thinness: It asks those who join to recognize one clear, narrow, and urgent proposition: no state is safer in a world in which coercion is unconstrained because every exception claimed by one power becomes available to its rivals. In this sense,

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[11] Declaration on Principles of International Law Concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation among States in Accordance with the Charter of the United Nations, UNGA Res 2625 (XXV) (24 October 1970), Annex.
[12] Samuel Moyn and Umut Özsu, "The Historical Origins and Setting of the Friendly Relations Declaration," in Jorge E. Viñuales, ed., *The UN Friendly Relations Declaration at 50* (Cambridge, 2020).

reciprocity is not a retreat from legality but a condition for reviving it. In the absence of a hegemon capable of enforcing rules credibly and consistently, the best available path is to make restraint mutually intelligible, institutionally embedded, and harder to evade. The Friendly Relations Declaration offers a compelling model for that effort as a reminder that such a bargain need not be understood as nostalgia for the Charter as originally administered, but the renewal of its anti-war promise for a new context.