



Global Swing States and the New Great Power Competition

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To cite this article: Richard Fontaine & Gibbs McKinley (2025) Global Swing States and the New Great Power Competition, *The Washington Quarterly*, 48:2, 7-28, DOI: [10.1080/0163660X.2025.2517441](https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2025.2517441)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2025.2517441>



Published online: 07 Jul 2025.



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Global Swing States and the New Great Power Competition

Global politics today is more contested, confrontational, and uncertain than at any time since the end of the Cold War. China seeks domination in Asia and beyond, while Russia remains aggressively revisionist in Europe. Both are working with Iran and North Korea in an “axis of upheaval” to resist a Western-dominated world. Key US allies in Europe and the Indo-Pacific are growing stronger and more unified, but each has doubts about the future—and America’s own trajectory. Policymakers in Washington today represent a mix of those who see the rules-based international order as key to US security, prosperity, and liberty, and others who argue that any such order exists only to enrich other countries at America’s expense.

Washington itself is pursuing a form of upheaval. In its early months in office, the current administration threatened to seize foreign territory, imposed trade barriers on the entire world simultaneously, downplayed the role of democracy and human rights, and hinted at accepting spheres of influence in Eurasia. But while the Trump administration is skeptical about the existing order, the axis countries are outright opposed to it. China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea share the goal of overturning the principles, rules, and institutions that underlie the prevailing international system, and they are increasingly active in the effort.¹

Despite doubts, including in the current US administration, the United States benefits from, and has a vital interest in maintaining, a global order governed by rules rather than brute power—one in which countries enjoy sovereignty, disputes are resolved peacefully, markets are open to trade, human rights are

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© 2025 The Elliott School of International Affairs
The Washington Quarterly • 48:2 pp. 7–28
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2025.2517441>

considered universal, and democracy can flourish. The current order has downsides, to be sure, and it has produced discontent among populations and policymakers. Yet the rules-based international order is also a bit like democracy: the worst system except for all the others.

To defend and extend this system, policymakers should focus on six “global swing states”—Brazil, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and Türkiye—that will together exert disproportionate influence over the future of international order.² Each is multi-aligned, maintaining simultaneous ties with the United States, Russia, and China. None wishes to be forced into a strategic alignment with one great power alone, and all seek meaningful changes in international rules and institutions. Each of the global swing states plays a dominant role in its region and takes actions with worldwide repercussions. They possess sufficient collective geopolitical weight for their policy preferences to sway the future direction of the international order.

US foreign policy should prioritize six countries to choose policies that reflect core principles

The United States should prioritize these six countries in their foreign policy, encouraging swing state governments to choose policies that reflect the core principles of international order and working to deny advantages to the axis states. That, in turn, requires dealing with each not simply as a pawn in great power competition, but as an important country in its own right, with interests and activities that may differ from,

but can ultimately align with, those of the United States. Washington should work with them on issues like military basing, digital infrastructure, trade arrangements, global norms, and the future of international institutions. This, in turn, requires the United States itself to stabilize its own approach to the world.

The Pillars of Global Order

The overarching goal of US foreign policy should be to preserve the core pillars of international order, even as specific rules and institutions change and adapt. This is an increasingly contested claim. Washington policymakers used to agree that an international order exists, that it serves American interests, and that the order is worth defending and preserving. No longer.

In recent years, some analysts have argued that the liberal international order is little more than a myth, and so there exists nothing to defend or preserve.³ Others, including some Trump administration officials, hold that the global order exists but has harmed, not helped, Americans by encouraging US

overextension and endless wars, driving mass migration, offshoring manufacturing jobs, and diluting the unifying bond of nationalism.⁴ Revisionist countries like Russia and China, for their part, bristle at what they see as an unfairly US-dominated international order that does not accord to them the weight, status, freedom of action, and spheres of influence that their power and civilization demand. And still others, including the global swing states, lament the underrepresentation of middle power countries in key international institutions and resent what some see as little more than a mask for Western domination.

Some of the confusion is definitional. Policymakers imply a wide range of concepts by invoking “international order,” the “liberal international order,” the “rules-based international order,” or some other variant. Yet its importance goes far beyond the rhetorical. There exists an identifiable international order today based on rules in multiple domains and rooted in institutions that seek to apply them. Some pillars of this order are under greater pressure than others, but together they have served US interests well across multiple decades. In many ways, today’s geopolitical era—with its great power competition, alliances and axes, middle powers, competition and cooperation—is a struggle over the shape of tomorrow’s world. That is, it is a contest for global order.

**Five pillars today
are key to inter-
national order**

The international order consists of rules in various domains and the institutions developed to apply them. It is comprised of numerous elements, but five pillars today are key.

The Territorial Pillar

The territorial pillar aims to protect national sovereignty and discourage wars of conquest. It enshrines a prohibition against the forcible change of national borders and holds, as a cardinal principle, that attempts to seize and annex land by force are prohibited. It also includes rules underpinning a maritime order, many of which have been formalized in the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The territorial order has served US interests by helping to prevent wars of conquest, the two largest of which drew in the United States during the first half of the 20th century. Russia egregiously violated the principal of territorial integrity when it invaded Ukraine, and China regularly violates rules in the South China Sea.

The Global Trade Pillar

The global trade pillar aims to regularize an open international trading system in which prosperity can increase. It is grounded in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and embodied in the World Trade

Organization (WTO) and its web of rules and dispute resolution mechanisms. Increasingly, legally binding rules established in bilateral and regional trade agreements shape the contours of international trade. Trump's April 2025 announcement of high tariffs on most of the world was widely interpreted as an effort to upend the global trading order. Nevertheless, the trade system has benefited the United States by allowing it and other states to acquire resources peacefully and boost prosperity without either conquering territory or enforcing closed economic blocs.

The Financial Pillar

The financial pillar aims to facilitate international trade and investment, promote monetary stability, and avoid crises. This pillar is rooted in the US dollar as the predominant international reserve currency, flexible exchange rates, and general currency convertibility. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) fills a role as a lender of last resort. The financial order benefits the United States; the global demand to hold dollars allows the United States to issue debt at a lower cost than would otherwise be the case and to use financial sanctions as a potent tool of foreign policy. In recent years, China and Russia have promoted alternatives to dollar dominance in both trade transactions and reserve holdings.

The Nonproliferation Pillar

The nonproliferation pillar attempts to limit the spread of nuclear weapons. The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) differentiates between recognized nuclear weapons states and all others. This pillar includes the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the four multilateral export control regimes that attempt to limit the proliferation of particular weapons and delivery systems. The nonproliferation order benefits the United States by reducing the number of nuclear-armed hostile countries to fewer than what would likely be the case otherwise, and by enhancing relative US military power. Some countries—India and North Korea, for instance—have acquired nuclear arms outside the NPT framework, and others, such as Iran, threaten to do so in the future.

The Human Rights Pillar

The human rights pillar seeks to preserve the basic rights and liberties of individuals everywhere. These rights are enumerated in documents such as the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the UN Convention on Civil and Political Rights, along with the constitutions and laws of many countries. The expansion of basic rights and liberties has benefited the United States by increasing the

number of like-minded democracies, making the preservation of freedom at home easier than would be the case in a world replete with autocratic predators. Moscow and Beijing actively reject the existence of universal values, even as their own constitutions nominally guarantee the rights to speech, assembly, political activity, and association.⁵

The Backdrop of Intensified Competition

China and Russia have strengthened their partnership since the end of the Cold War—a trend that accelerated rapidly after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014.⁶ Compounding the challenge, China and Russia are joined by Iran and North Korea in efforts to create alternatives to the prevailing order. Each of these four nations asserts a sphere of influence: China includes Taiwan and the South China Sea in its “core interests”; Iran views its proxies in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere as an “axis of resistance”; North Korea claims the entire Korean Peninsula; and Russia includes, at a minimum, the countries that constituted its historic empire in a “near abroad.” The United States is perceived by all four countries as the primary obstacle to establishing these spheres of influence, and they all seek a reduction in Washington’s presence in their respective regions.

These efforts may usher in an international system with two increasingly organized and competitive orders. China and Russia seek partners, and while none of the global swing states will make an overarching strategic choice to join the axis or the West, their loyalties and policy preferences will constitute a commons for rivalry. Just as Washington, Beijing, and Moscow compete for influence among the global swing states, the six countries themselves

The global swing states will constitute a commons for rivalry

will act to maximize their freedom of action amid the great powers. The result, as the 2025 director of national intelligence report put it, will be “pressure on other global actors to choose sides.”⁷

The global swing states can be expected to pursue economic, diplomatic, military, and technological ties with members of both orders. US policymakers should make it a priority to deny advantages to the axis in these countries, encouraging swing state governments to choose policies which favor the prevailing order. In practice, that means using trade incentives, military engagement, foreign aid, and diplomacy to prevent swing states from hosting axis members’ military bases, giving axis members access to their technology infrastructure or military equipment, or helping them circumvent Western sanctions.⁸

The current wild card in this changing geopolitical game is the United States itself. The United States created and has invested in the international order because it reflects American preferences and extends US influence. This approach can no longer be assumed. Since taking office for the second time in January 2025, President Trump has nodded toward a “spheres of influence” world rather than a strict territorial order, and he has upended the trade order.⁹ Trump downplays human rights abuses in foreign countries and takes a less dogmatic approach to nonproliferation than his predecessors.¹⁰

The United States itself may now be the quintessential global swing state. Does Washington wish to preserve world order or upend it? Time will tell whether the Trump administration rejects the traditional rules-based order and embraces some alternative. It appears, however, that no overall strategy and no alternative vision informs the administration’s foreign policy views. Instead, they stem from a combination of immediate security concerns, a cramped reading of trade economics, a penchant for deal-making, the desire for a generally peaceful international environment, and a desire to make highly visible announcements which will resonate among the president’s supporters. If this reading is correct, the pillars of global order will likely persist, albeit indifferently supported by the United States, and they will continue to serve American interests. Countries like Russia and China will continue to resist their application and seek alternatives which serve their autocratic systems and desires for regional dominance. The contest will endure, with the six global swing states continuing to play a disproportionately important role in the outcome.

The Global Swing States

The six global swing states differ in innumerable ways, but they share striking commonalities. Brazil, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and Türkiye are all multi-aligned regional powers that fit neatly and exclusively into neither the Western bloc nor the axis of upheaval. Each is a regional heavy-weight and takes actions with global resonance. All actively pursue institutional reform of global governance, including greater representation for countries like themselves. All are Group of 20 (G20) members, with large populations and sizable economies, and all are members of collective bodies—the BRICS, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue involving Australia, India, Japan, and the United States (Quad), NATO, the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the African Union—where they tend to hold out-sized weight. None of the six sanctioned Russia after its invasion of Ukraine, China is a top trade partner of all, and each has enduring and often complicated relations with the United States.

Brazil

Brazil is a longstanding democracy and boasts the largest population in South America. While it has taken a leading role in many multilateral institutions, including the presidencies of the G20 and BRICS groups in 2024 and 2025, respectively, Brasília is also a vocal advocate for reforming the current international system.

Brazil has pursued a relationship with Russia as part of its strategy of active nonalignment and relies on Russia for a quarter of its fertilizer imports, which are crucial for the country's agribusiness—a backbone of its economy.¹¹ It has enjoyed a “Global Strategic Partnership” with China since 2012, and sees Beijing as a partner in international institutions.¹² Brazil looks to China for economic opportunity and global political influence, and China has stood as Brazil's number one trade partner since 2009.¹³ The world's fourth largest democracy, Brazil shares similar values with Washington as well as a robust economic relationship—though the Trump administration's transactional and protectionist tendencies add layers of complexity to those ties.¹⁴

Sovereignty and the fundamental equality of states in the international system are enshrined in Brazil's constitution.¹⁵ However, Brazil's reticence to use sanctions as a punitive measure led Brasília to abstain from the 2014 UN resolution on the Russian annexation of Crimea.¹⁶ Though it has since taken a stronger stance in the face of Russia's ongoing aggression, Brazil has stopped short of providing weapons for Ukrainian defense.

Brazil participates in multilateral trade institutions, but it has long retained a notoriously closed economy, using the regional trade bloc Mercado Común del Sur (MERCOSUR, or “Southern Common Market”) to protect domestic industries. It is simultaneously active in the global financial architecture and invested in the development and maintenance of the World Bank and the IMF, while seeking alternatives to the US dollar dominance. Brazil supports the nonproliferation order while seeking changes that would address the imbalance between nuclear weapons and non-weapons states. Brasília tends to support human rights principles in multilateral forums but not to weave that support tightly into its bilateral relationships.¹⁷

India

India's economic and demographic growth have fueled its global influence, making it an increasingly strong military and economic partner. It claims the world's largest population—over 1.4 billion people—and is the world's fifth-largest economy.¹⁸ India has also taken on leadership roles in multilateral institutions, including chairing the G20 summit in New Delhi in September 2023.

India seeks a constructive relationship with Russia, which remains one of its major military and economic partners. New Delhi has been a major importer of

Russian weapons, including the S-400 missile defense system.¹⁹ Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, India took advantage of Russia's newly discounted crude oil and sharply increased its imports.²⁰ Even so, in light of broader geopolitical differences, the two countries are experiencing what some experts have termed a "managed decline" of their bilateral relationship.²¹

New Delhi is increasingly aligned with the United States and harbors similar concerns about China's rise and behavior. This is despite its significant trade relationship with China and a recent thaw in the two countries' persistent border dispute.²² Washington recognized India as a "major defense partner" in 2016, a status at that time unique to New Delhi.²³ The United States became India's top trading partner in 2022, surpassing China, and now accounts for 11.5 percent of total Indian trade.²⁴

India has been involved in two territorial disputes for decades, one with China and another with Pakistan. New Delhi has declined to condemn Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine and abstained from key votes at the UN security council on the issue. India is also skeptical of unfettered trade liberalization, pursuing industrial policy at home and retaining barriers to trade. Although frustrated by the lack of institutional reform, India remains active within the financial order; with the limitations of the BRICS New Development Bank and the Asian Infra-

structure Investment Bank ever more apparent, India has begun working more with the United States to rejuvenate the World Bank to provide sustainable financing to developing countries.²⁵

Though it rhetorically supports global disarmament, India possesses nuclear weapons of its own and is not party to the NPT. If heightened competition leads to a Sino-US arms race,

India may be incentivized to grow its own nuclear arsenal

India may be incentivized to grow its own nuclear arsenal. India has long championed basic human rights but has witnessed a sharp decline in its own democratic record. By 2021, Freedom House downgraded India's score from "free" to "partly free," citing increased violence and discriminatory policies targeting the Muslim population.²⁶

Indonesia

Located at the nexus of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, Indonesia is the world's sixth-largest emerging market by GDP, the third-largest democracy, and an influential global player. Indonesia was a founding member of the nonaligned movement and has since become more comfortable with the idea of mediating between great powers and middle powers.

Indonesia pursues a pragmatic relationship with China, which is its largest trading partner and second-largest foreign investor. Chinese companies and people dominate important Indonesian industries, from nickel mining to tourism.²⁷ Russia's primary avenue for engagement with Indonesia is through a transactional military relationship, and the Kremlin has little soft power influence in Indonesia.²⁸ The United States, however, is Indonesia's prime strategic partner.²⁹ The two countries have a long history of cooperation and elevated their relationship to a "comprehensive strategic partnership" in November 2023.³⁰ The two enjoy a robust trade relationship, but the absence of a multilateral US trade agenda in Asia has weighed heavily on Indonesian perceptions of the United States.³¹

Indonesia generally values the principles of territorial integrity and sovereignty, but did not overtly support Ukraine after Russia's invasion. Jakarta prioritized "rowing between two reefs," charting a middle path between great powers rather than criticizing Russia's actions. When it comes to maritime issues, Jakarta adheres more closely to the current order. After growing Chinese incursions into the South China Sea, Jakarta stood up for maritime rights, mobilizing fishermen to join warships in the South China Sea to help defend against Chinese vessels in 2020.³² Though Jakarta has benefited remarkably from its participation in global trade over the past twenty years, Indonesia's own trade policy vacillates between openness and protectionism.³³ Jakarta has endorsed open capital markets, an open financial system, and seeks to join multilateral financial organizations such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Indonesia is a model nuclear citizen, having signed the IAEA's Additional Protocol, which strengthens the agency's ability to verify that states are using nuclear material for peaceful purposes only. Indonesia has also signed a separate bilateral accord with the United States on nuclear safeguards and security. Though it has attempted to position itself as pro-democracy globally, Indonesia has experienced steady democratic backsliding. It passed a new criminal code in December 2022 that reportedly violated international human rights standards and has violently repressed protests in the Papua and West Papua provinces.³⁴ That said, it remains a remarkable example of enduring democracy after decades of dictatorship.

Saudi Arabia

Under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), Saudi Arabia has sought multi-alignment and to recast itself as a global influencer. Its economic growth and efforts to liberalize following reforms in 2016 and the implementation of MBS's "Vision 2030" have enabled Saudi Arabia to emerge as a key middle power shaping a changing global order. Saudi Arabia is also a significant

contributor to global oil markets, possessing around 17 percent of the world's petroleum reserves and leveraging its role as the de facto leader of OPEC + to its advantage.³⁵

On an increasingly competitive global stage, Saudi leadership seeks to diversify its relationships with major powers. Riyadh has strengthened its partner-

Like other swing states, Saudi Arabia sees itself as a potential mediator over Ukraine

ship with Beijing, and in 2022 King Salman signed a “comprehensive strategic partnership agreement” with Chinese President Xi Jinping. The BRICS group, dominated by China, also agreed in 2024 to expand its membership to include Saudi Arabia—though Riyadh has yet to join officially.³⁶

Saudi Arabia's balancing strategy assumed prominence in the wake of Russia's invasion. Though Riyadh voted in favor of the UN

General Assembly resolution condemning the invasion of Ukraine, it has since sought a position of neutrality.³⁷ Like multiple other swing states, Saudi Arabia sees itself as a potential mediator, and in September 2022 worked with Türkiye to execute a prisoner swap between Russia and Ukraine involving nearly 300 people.³⁸

Though Saudi Arabia's decades-old alliance with the United States was once seen as ironclad, cracks have appeared in recent years. Riyadh remains dependent on Washington for its defense, but Saudi confidence in the US security guarantee has been shaken in recent years.³⁹ The first Trump administration's decision not to retaliate after Iran's 2019 attack on Saudi oilfields, and Joe Biden's early determination to make the kingdom a “pariah,” stressed bilateral ties. Trump's overtures towards Saudi Arabia early in his second term may signal a positive turning point in the relationship.

The country's significant role in global trade order is shaped by its participation in multilateral trade institutions, integration into global value chains, and strategic economic transformation under Vision 2030. Saudi Arabia has, however, explored the idea of pricing its oil trade with China in yuan over dollars, which would shock world petroleum markets and challenge the dollar-based trade order.⁴⁰ Saudi Arabia is an active participant in multilateral financial institutions, including the IMF, World Bank, and G20, and remains structurally embedded in the US-led financial order.

Saudi Arabia's commitment to nonproliferation hinges on regional stability and Iran's nuclear program. Saudi officials have stated that, while the kingdom remains committed to nonproliferation, a fundamental shift in Iran's nuclear status would require a reassessment of its strategic options.⁴¹ Despite recent moves to improve women's rights and gender equality, Saudi Arabia's human

rights record remains weak both domestically and abroad. Vision 2030 makes no mention of human rights or democratic reform, and a leaked draft of Saudi Arabia's first written penal code criminalizes the rights to freedom of expression, thought, and religion, and fails to protect the right to freedom of peaceful assembly.⁴²

South Africa

South Africa is a dominant political and security player on the African continent. It is also, increasingly, a global actor—the only African member of the G20 (along with the African Union itself), an aspiring permanent UN Security Council member, and an active member of BRICS. It has the highest per capita gross domestic product of any large African country.⁴³

The African National Congress (ANC), which has long formed the core of the South African political establishment, sees itself as firmly nonaligned and has long been dedicated to this position—in theory.⁴⁴ In practice, the ANC recalls and remains influenced by support from China and the Soviet Union for the anti-apartheid movement—when Western countries at times failed to condemn or even supported the apartheid regime.⁴⁵

Despite initially criticizing Russia's unlawful invasion of Ukraine, South Africa has since become reticent to comment on the conflict. Though South Africa's relationship with China is primarily economic, the two countries have also grown closer politically in recent years—notably through the BRICS forum. Pretoria sees China as a more relevant model of development than the path charted by Western nations.⁴⁶ And South African policymakers have tended to see their role as pursuing liberation for the Global South from an unjust, Western-dominated international order.

These tendencies have strained what was, for decades, a strong political and economic relationship between the United States and South Africa. Tensions came to a head when President Trump suspended all US development aid to South Africa in February 2025 based on allegations that white Afrikaners were suffering “race-based discrimination” and offered asylum in the United States to white South Africans.⁴⁷

South Africa has traditionally supported a policy of nonintervention and is a signatory of UNCLOS, having ratified it in 1997. It supports free trade and is party to multiple international and regional trade agreements and institutions, though the country's leaders regularly complain about the deleterious effects of trade barriers, non-tariff barriers, and trade-distorting practices used by countries including the United States and China.⁴⁸ South Africa has made clear its efforts to reform the international financial system, including the IMF. Senior officials believe that global finance should be diversified and made more accessible to emerging and middle economies. In its pursuit of alternative sources of

international financing and investment, South Africa has prioritized the expansion and elevation of BRICS as a counterweight to the Western-dominated financial order.

South Africa is a vocal proponent of nonproliferation and a signatory of all major nonproliferation and test ban treaties.⁴⁹ It is the only nation to date that possessed and then voluntarily gave up its nuclear weapons, which it did in 1991.⁵⁰ Since overcoming apartheid in 1994, the country has been commonly regarded as a proponent of human rights, a leader on the African continent, and acted as a peacekeeper in multiple African conflicts.⁵¹ It has taken a hard line against some perceived human rights abuses, like in Gaza, while saying virtually nothing about abuses in countries like China, Myanmar, or Sudan. Nevertheless, the peaceful transfer of power in 2024 from an ANC government to a government of national unity marked an important step in South Africa's democratic consolidation.

Türkiye

Since taking power in Türkiye—first as prime minister in 2003, then as president in 2014—Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has helped shape a new role for Türkiye in the world and established his country as an ambitious regional and even global power. Ankara has developed a “360-degree foreign policy” premised on the notion that

Türkiye's Western alliances do not constrain its actions in other strategic regions

Türkiye's Western alliances do not constrain its actions in other strategic regions.⁵²

Acting on this policy, Türkiye has boosted its economic ties with Russia and turned to the Kremlin for military and diplomatic support. It agreed to purchase the Russian-made S-400 missile defense system in 2017—a sore point to this day in US-Türkiye relations. By seeking to join BRICS in late 2024, Ankara reaffirmed its commitment to

balancing between the West and a rising group of countries opposed to the current world order including both Russia and China. Though the United States is one of Türkiye's oldest allies, choices resulting from its policies on Russia, NATO expansion, and other issues have strained relations.⁵³

Türkiye largely supports the territorial order, voting in favor of all UN General Assembly resolutions related to Ukraine, including to suspend Russia's membership in the UN Human Rights Council. Ankara supported making Russia liable for war reparations, becoming one of the only swing states to do so.⁵⁴

As a founding member of the WTO and signatory of the GATT, Türkiye generally adheres to established trade rules. Membership in the European Customs

Union has encouraged Türkiye to follow the principles of commercial reciprocity and nondiscrimination.⁵⁵ Türkiye is an active participant in the global financial order as a member of the IMF, the G20, and the OECD. Türkiye has, however, faced grievous economic troubles since 2018, including high inflation. In hopes of recovery, Ankara is courting large investment flows from the Gulf, Russia, and the West to jumpstart the economy.

Türkiye has generally supported the nonproliferation order, refraining from pursuing nuclear weapons and embracing the legal nonproliferation regime.⁵⁶ Türkiye's willingness to promote human rights abroad, however, has declined over the past decade, and Turkish citizens have seen a crackdown on their own rights since the 2016 coup attempt. Arbitrary killings, torture, and forced disappearances have all become more common, and the government recently jailed Erdoğan's chief political opponent.⁵⁷

Strategies of Engagement

The United States is undergoing its own reevaluation of the international order and searching for its place within it. Yet with the right support, the key pillars are likely to endure in varying degrees of solidity, and they will—or at least can—continue to serve American interests. For all the talk about cutting a major deal with China and resetting postwar relations with Russia, the chances of success in either are vanishingly small. The United States is likely to remain in significant, long-term competition with Moscow and Beijing, a contest that will turn partially on each country's conflicting approaches to the way in which the world is ordered. Once this reality sets in for American policymakers, it should become clear that global swing states will play a disproportionate role in the ultimate outcome of that order.

Washington should pursue policies toward the six global swing states that: (1) encourage and assist them in bolstering key pillars of global order; (2) deny adversary countries like Russia and China advantages in areas like military basing, security ties, technology infrastructure, and diplomatic coordination; and (3) devote attention to and support for their own needs, on their own terms, in exchange for policies and programs that will further US interests. It can begin to do so by adhering to the following overarching policies.

Change the Diplomatic Tone and Tenor

A complaint universal among swing state governments is about Washington's tendency to see countries only through the prism of their relationships with China and Russia. To be sure, US interests in the global swing states stem, in part, precisely from their roles in great power competition. That is not,

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like a pawn in a superpower game, merely threatened or bribed to join one side or the other—even while some play off larger countries against one another in order to maximize their maneuver space. The United States should be sensitive to such sentiments, pursuing enduring ties with each country that go beyond their current positions on China and Russia.

Offer Increased Market Access

The United States boasts by far the world's largest market, with high rates of consumption and goods imports. Access to that market is desired by virtually every country, and in contrast with other tools of US foreign policy, allowing it costs nothing. The United States should pursue deals that offer access to the US market in exchange for reciprocal trade benefits, harmonized export controls on third countries, policies on digital infrastructure, and other economic security measures.⁵⁸ While Washington is currently moving backward, constricting access to its economy via tariffs and other barriers, these steps could form the first steps toward new, mutually beneficial economic and security agreements with each of the six states.

Increase Hard Power

A sustainable international order rests on two pillars: a sense of legitimacy among key powers and a balance of power. The first, as discussed above, has come under increasing challenge in recent years; if the United States does not sufficiently invest in hard power, the balance needed to preserve international order could crumble. Washington today spends roughly 3 percent of its gross domestic product on defense, approaching the lowest level since the late 1990s—the height of the post-Cold War peace dividend.⁵⁹ A significant increase in defense spending is necessary to deal simultaneously with China and Russia alongside other threats, and to demonstrate staying power to global swing states who might otherwise hedge against US decline by tilting toward American adversaries.

Rebuild Soft Power

China and Russia pursue influence in each of the global swing states through a variety of soft power activities. Depending on the destination country, Beijing and Moscow donate development and humanitarian aid, build infrastructure,

provide security assistance, make soft loans, and engage in strategic communications activities. Until recently, the United States did similarly, with many observers calling on Washington to increase the resources devoted to soft power tools and enhance their effectiveness.⁶⁰ In recent months, the United States has instead taken a drastic turn in the other direction by eliminating the United States Agency for International Development, ending 85 percent of its foreign aid programs, ceasing its international broadcasting, stopping its efforts to promote the free flow of online information, and interrupting its democracy promotion activities. While debates about the effectiveness of any particular program are necessary and appropriate, a wholesale evisceration of America's soft power tools will handicap the United States in its contest for influence.

Engage Alongside Allies

The sprawling US alliance system, while sometimes today seen as a burden on the American people, nevertheless remains the key enabler of global security. Washington should engage global swing states bilaterally but also at times with allies and partners. The United States has pursued productive relations, for example, with India through the Quad, Türkiye within NATO, and Saudi Arabia in the context of potential normalization with Israel. In engaging with global swing states, Washington is not, and need not act, alone. The United States should, as a start, establish an annual dialogue on engagement with pivotal nations involving the European External Action Service, the foreign ministries of interested European powers, and Japan.

Acknowledge the Need for United Nations Security Council Reform

The United States should continue to state the obvious—that the council's current structure no longer aligns with today's global power dynamics. US policy-makers should also accept the challenges that come along with achieving meaningful reform and prioritize working closely with influential swing states during their temporary terms on the Council.⁶¹

Country-Specific Engagement

In addition to these changes to broader US strategy and posture, Washington should take advantage of opportunities to partner with specific global swing states on shared policy challenges. Building stronger working relationships with the swing states is a two-way street. By prioritizing initiatives that advantage both the United States and the swing states, Washington will more successfully compete with axis countries to garner the support of and collaboration with those countries pivotal to the future of the international order. The following

country-specific policy recommendations are hardly exhaustive, but they are illustrative of the kinds of opportunities now present in Washington's relations with the global swing states.

Include Swing States in Minilateral Groupings

Minilateral frameworks have proliferated in recent years and now include groups as varied as the Quad; AUKUS; I2U2, a minilateral partnership that includes India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States; MIKTA, a bridging initiative with Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Türkiye, and Australia; and the BRICS. With universal bodies like the UN largely paralyzed by differences among the veto-wielding powers, minilateral groups—especially those devoted to a single set of issues—offer innovative ways of harmonizing approaches and multiplying efforts among would-be partners. Washington should explore areas in which minilaterals would be potentially useful—technology, critical minerals, defense industrial base cooperation, and maritime domain awareness—and look for opportunities to include global swing states.

Expand Defense Industrial Relationships

The United States should expand defense industrial relationships, notably with India and Türkiye. India's defense sector is rapidly growing; the United States should explore ways to reduce remaining barriers to bilateral defense trade, increase joint development and production, and increase overall cooperation. Washington and Ankara should also encourage increased bilateral defense deals that boost production in both countries. Washington's interest in acquiring drones—both for its own arsenal and those of allied countries—provides an obvious early opportunity given Turkish drone expertise.

Develop Critical Minerals Partnerships

The United States has awoken to its dependence on China and other chokepoint countries for supplies of critical minerals such as copper, lithium, nickel, cobalt,

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and rare earth elements—a fact driven home when China imposed export restrictions on seven rare earth elements in April 2025.⁶² Access to these minerals is necessary for the United States to sustain economic growth and technological innovation. As a result, Washington should prioritize sectoral trade deals in critical minerals with the global swing states: Brazil (notably rare earths), India (copper and cobalt), Indonesia (nickel and copper), Saudi

Arabia (gold, phosphate rock, and bauxite), South Africa (manganese), and Türkiye (boron).⁶³ The swing states have also expressed interest in capitalizing on their natural resources by working with the United States to process and market their minerals.⁶⁴ Washington should encourage Brazil, Indonesia, and South Africa to join the Minerals Security Partnership, a US-led effort to secure and diversify global supply chains for critical minerals (India and Türkiye are already members).⁶⁵

Diversify Semiconductor Supply Chains

As tensions in the US-China “chip war” continue to ratchet up, the United States should diversify semiconductor supply chains by investing in Brazil’s and Indonesia’s semiconductor capacity. Brazil hopes to develop the country’s semiconductor testing, assembling, and packaging capacity. It is also trying to become more competitive in semiconductor design—as evidenced by a 2024 law that aims to incentive domestic semiconductor production.⁶⁶ Indonesian officials also hope their country can emerge as a competitive player in the global semiconductor industry by testing and packaging semiconductors.

Empower the US Congress

The House and Senate are relatively untapped resources in engaging with global swing states. Washington should seek opportunities to link parliamentarians, encourage congressional delegations (CODELs) to the six swing states, support fellowships that embed professionals from each of them in US congressional offices, and encourage other visits and exchanges.

Shaping the Future Order

Global swing states will play an increasingly pivotal role in the contest to define the contours of global order. It is to Washington’s advantage to prioritize mutually beneficial relationships with the countries identified in this article—Brazil, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and Türkiye—to shape the world order so that it reflects the interests and values of the United States and its allies, not those of their adversaries. Many factors will together determine the next stage of global politics, but the collective weight of global swing states will remain critical. Washington should define an agenda with each of them, on the issues on which they matter most, and become active in its pursuit.

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