

COUNCIL OF COUNCILS

An Initiative of the Council on Foreign Relations



Council of Councils Fifteenth Regional Conference

The Council of Councils

*From May 18 to 20, 2025, the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) hosted the fourteenth annual conference of the Council of Councils (CoC) in Washington. The conference was made possible by the generous support of the René Kern Family Foundation. The views described in this report are those of workshop participants only and are not CFR or René Kern Family Foundation positions. **CFR takes no institutional positions on policy issues and has no affiliation with the U.S. government.** In addition, the suggested policy prescriptions are the views of individual participants and do not necessarily represent a consensus of the attending members or their home institutions.*

Introduction

The postwar order that has guided international relations for the past eighty years is being reshaped. New international groupings are being formed and existing ones strengthened, national security considerations rethought, and accepted norms on global trade disrupted. The second Trump administration has ushered in an era of transactional rather than values-based relationships and made clear that support for international institutions is not guaranteed. Other countries have followed suit and pulled back support for certain institutions.

Informed by such international changes, the Council of Councils fourteenth annual conference included sessions on the future of the world order, changing regional dynamics in the Middle East, global health institutions, cooperation and contest in space, competition in the Arctic, and the acquisition of critical minerals. Thirty-seven participants from

seventeen countries gathered at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York in May 2025 to discuss these pressing issues.

The Future of the World Order After Disruption: No Rules, New Rules, Spheres of Influence, and the Limits and Prospects for International Cooperation

Participants aired a range of views in the opening session. For some observers, changing political tides and destabilizing events around the world have called the effectiveness of the post–World War II international order into question. For others, current conditions reflect a Global South more confident in its strategic autonomy and moving away from a dominant Western order. The increased role of the private sector and nonstate actors, the emergence of middle powers, and the growth of regionalization all contribute to changes in the international system.

On the global economy, participants disagreed over whether the system would fragment into blocs. Some believed that the growth of regionalization would lead to blocs and increased trade within those blocs, while others predicted a more complex intertwining of trade agreements—plurilateralism, rather than multilateralism. Instead of forming blocs, states would work in ad hoc fluid groupings. Participants agreed that the era of the “Most Favored Nation” principle and multilateralism in trade is likely over, especially at the World Trade Organization. Participants also observed greater prioritization of national security in international trade.

Participants agreed that international cooperation is currently at its lowest point in recent memory and that regional organizations and multilateral organizations alike have been unable to address complex challenges. However, participants disagreed on whether it would be best to reform existing multilateral institutions and enforce current international law, or focus on improving regional organizations as building blocks for new global institutions.

On the topic of national security, participants agreed that U.S. aid and deterrence is no longer guaranteed, but that Europe and Australia have been slow to accept that reality—and both have been reluctant to increase their defense spending. Views differed on Russia’s exact intentions in Ukraine and Europe, but there was a general unified concern among participants, especially European participants.

Participants discussed the changing nature of alliances and partnerships in the disrupted world order and the need to be more flexible with those relationships. They agreed that bringing all nations together for a global conference, like the UN Conference on International Organization did in 1945, is not feasible in today’s political climate. Participants also deliberated over how to move forward with alliances and agreements if

the United States is not at the table; most agreed that cooperation must go on, even without the United States.

Recommendations discussed:

- The U.S. government should address its fiscal deficit, while the Chinese government should reform its export-driven economic system to avoid overcapacity. Otherwise, exports may pour into neighboring countries, and resource allocation may become distorted.
- Countries should strengthen and allocate more resources toward regional organizations to serve as building blocks for effective multilateral and global cooperation.
- Group of Twenty (G20) countries should elevate the G20's importance as an avenue and arena for multilateral and global cooperation.
- Nations should improve strategic communications and confidence-building measures, as well as establish permanent, ongoing negotiations and conversations with adversaries.
- Countries should cooperate on combating illicit and illegal activities, particularly through functional international organizations. That is a natural point of collaboration as it is in every nation's self-interest and those issues are inherently less political than others. For example, countries may come together to focus on promoting responsible maritime governance practices or combating the flow of fentanyl.

Developments in the Middle East

The October 7 attacks on Israel were a watershed moment for the Middle East. As the conflict between Israel and Hamas continues, power dynamics in the region remain in flux. This panel explored possible outcomes for Gaza, key players outside of the region, and solutions for dealing with Iran's nuclear ambitions.

Participants discussed cross-cutting issues that Israel faces as the conflict continues, including securing the freedom of the remaining hostages, further weakening Hamas' capabilities, and addressing the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. They also discussed possible post-conflict plans for Gaza and navigating the personality-driven politics of the Middle East. Participants agreed that the two-state solution is not currently being seriously considered in the region, as some countries are more interested in normalization.

The role of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and other regional actors was considered, including their worry about spillover conflict from Israel and their tepid support of the Palestinian people. On Iran, participants agreed that transparent oversight of Iran's nuclear program is

necessary and that there should be more cooperation on that in the region. However, it was noted that the threat posed by Iran had diminished. Participants concurred that the United States is still a prime driver of relationships in the Middle East, while China takes a more apolitical, transactional approach to the region.

Recommendations discussed:

- Regional and non-regional actors such as the United States should leverage cooperation in the region to create an oversight scheme to monitor Iran's nuclear capabilities.
- Israel and the United States should involve Saudi Arabia and other regional actors in the resolution to the Israel-Hamas conflict and the post-conflict plan for Gaza.
- Regional and non-regional actors such as the United States should use this moment as an opportunity to expand normalization in the region.

International Organizations Without the United States: The World Health Organization

Under the second Trump administration, the United States has distanced itself from established multilateral organizations, including preparing to leave the World Health Organization (WHO). Taking their cues from the United States' withdrawal, Argentina, Hungary, Israel, and Russia are exploring withdrawing from the WHO, and France, Germany, and the Netherlands have announced cuts in foreign assistance. This panel explored that decline of support, particularly in the absence of U.S. support, and how it makes the world less prepared for future global health crises.

Participants discussed the fact that spending on global health and other humanitarian programs might suffer, given the increase in defense spending by countries, especially in Europe. The panelists agreed that the WHO's decline leaves a dearth of experience in global health programs around the world, and that cutting those programs increases the likelihood of instability, negative economic impacts, and unpreparedness for the next major global health event.

Panelists also pointed out that a decline in the WHO's capabilities mean a loss of expertise and institutional memory for global health programs in middle and developing economies, where funding for global initiatives makes up the backbone of health programs. Those communities are looking to the United Kingdom and the rest of Europe to fill funding gaps left by the United States, but the political will and resources are lacking. Wealthier countries are looking to private entities such as the Gates Foundation to fill those gaps.

Recommendations discussed:

- Higher-income countries should continue to operate and invest in multilateral health organizations, including the Pan American Health Organization, WHO programs, and other funds, such as the Pandemic Fund.
- UN member states should reform the WHO to meet the current moment and consider whether Geneva is still the best location to house and overhaul those types of multilateral organizations.
- The decline of the WHO may be interpreted as dissatisfaction with how multilateral organizations addressed the COVID-19 pandemic. Countries should consider what comes next as far as international collaboration on global health.
- Countries should reshape their health preparedness plans and consider Finland as a possible case study for resilience and preparedness planning, as the country is a hub for chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) stockpiles and has a national secretary of preparedness.

The Future Frontier of Space: Cooperation, Competition, or Conflict?

Humankind relies on outer space assets for everyday services that are taken for granted, such as GPS, the weather forecast, and basic connectivity. However, renewed geostrategic competition and a lack of space traffic and debris regulation are increasing the risk of making space an unusable domain and, therefore, reducing or eliminating access to these services.

The participants agreed that global cooperation is critical to ensuring that space remains a peaceful and sustainable domain. There is currently no single international organization dedicated to regulating outer space. Participants agreed that a stronger governance framework is needed now as more nations and commercial entities launch objects into outer space.

Participants discussed the existing organizations that focus on space issues: the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the Conference on Disarmament, and the UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space. None of those organizations are equipped with the resources necessary to create strong governance mechanisms for launching objects or sharing space situational awareness data. However, participants did note that some functional international organizations could serve as useful models for integrating private sector voices.

Participants also expressed concern over the return of geostrategic competition to outer space, particularly considering reports of Russia's alleged plans to launch a nuclear weapon or nuclear-powered object into outer space, which would be a blatant violation of the Outer Space Treaty of 1967. Participants discussed the dangers of using anti-satellite missiles or

electromagnetic jamming to disarm satellites, and the threat that dual-use technologies pose to national security.

Recommendations discussed:

- A grouping of interested countries working within the United Nations system should equip existing international institutions with resources to better regulate space traffic and improve data sharing for space situational awareness. Creating a brand-new international organization for this purpose would not be realistic in today's political climate.
- Leaders from interested countries should use existing international organizations' models for integrating expertise and private sector voices into decision-making. Examples include the ITU, the International Maritime Organization, and the International Civil Aviation Organization and its relationship with the International Air Transport Association.
- National governments, militaries, and private companies should focus on building resiliency in their satellite constellations rather than redundancy. There needs to be a dedicated effort to build terrestrial alternatives and spread satellites out across orbits, rather than just relying on launching more satellites.

Tensions in Transatlantic Security: Arctic Geopolitics and Beyond

Many factors are transforming geopolitics in the Arctic. The rapid melting of Arctic Sea ice, caused by climate change, is leading to the opening of new shipping and trade routes, as well as raising concerns about shrinking biodiversity and other negative environmental effects. Additionally, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has led to a breakdown of multilateral cooperation in the Arctic and increased militarization in the region. The participants discussed the scientific, strategic, and commercial interests of non-Arctic states and organizations in the Arctic region. China, in particular, has gone so far as to describe itself as a "near Arctic state." China has also recently built four icebreakers that can navigate the Arctic Ocean ice, while the United States has only two polar icebreakers (soon to be three). Besides an interest in the Northern Sea Route, China is also interested in the Arctic's liquefied natural gas, which Russia has been successfully producing, especially in the Yamal Peninsula.

Participants expressed concern over the breakdown in diplomacy around Arctic issues following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In 2022, nearly all scientific cooperation ceased following the start of the invasion, as Russia chaired the Arctic Council—the main multilateral forum for Arctic governance. Norway restarted the Arctic Council's work with

its chairship that began in 2023, but participants lamented that cooperation on Arctic-wide issues without Russia is a difficult feat.

Participants noted that the United States' and other countries' attention to the Arctic is enhanced by interest in critical minerals and geostrategic issues. The United States already has a strong presence in Greenland, as well as extended continental shelf claims, both of which are believed to store a wealth of critical mineral deposits.

Security issues also inform policymakers' interest in the Arctic. Russia keeps its submarine fleet in the Yamal Peninsula—further arming and militarizing the Arctic. That is particularly relevant because with the accession of Finland and Sweden into NATO, NATO has dramatically increased its Arctic presence and its border with Russia.

Recommendations discussed:

- The Arctic Council, in addition to its usual scientific and environmental cooperation, should create a new working group to improve cooperation on commercial and navigation issues.
- If the United States wants to compete with Russia and China in the Arctic, the U.S. government should continue efforts to build polar icebreakers. President Donald Trump already issued an executive order on April 9, 2025, "Restoring America's Maritime Dominance," which incentivizes U.S. shipbuilding.

The Future of Economic Security: The Search for Critical Minerals

The demand for critical minerals is growing largely due to increasing demand for renewables and improved defense capabilities, placing pressure on states to fortify and expand their supply chain. Panelists explored the current state of critical minerals acquisition and how acquisition and processing might change in the near future.

Participants discussed China's dominance in the critical minerals market over the last few decades, and the vulnerabilities posed for countries dependent on that supply chain. The negative environmental impacts of aggressive mining were also discussed. It was agreed that China's preeminence was due in part to the world's complacency and willingness to depend on China for those materials, and that China has paid a high environmental price for the overexploitation of its land. However, participants disagreed on whether China was playing fairly regarding related investments in overseas mining and processing, and on its export controls on critical minerals.

Participants also discussed the need for Europe to diversify its critical minerals supply chain in order to achieve economic security. The European Union has expanded its partnerships with several countries, including Argentina, Canada, Chile, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Namibia, Rwanda, and Zambia, and hopes to add to that list by presenting itself as the most attractive and fair international partner.

Participants agreed that the EU should continue to maintain its environmental and human rights standards when forming new partnerships. Participants disagreed on whether the European Commission or EU member states have the right to control European sanctions and security issues.

Recommendations:

- Countries working through the United Nations or other groupings should establish international guidelines to mitigate the environmental harm associated with utilizing critical minerals markets. An international institution would need to be identified or created to oversee adherence to these guidelines.
- The United Nations or another international organization (as mentioned above) should provide oversight of operations in host countries to ensure that partnerships are not solely extractive.