**Last Best Hope**

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The West’s Final Chance to Build a Better World Order

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Russia’s invasion of Ukraine confirmed what has long been apparent: the rules-based order created after World War II is at risk of collapse. Russia is not content to be a responsible stakeholder in a system set up by others, and neither is China, which has supported Moscow’s aggression. Both countries want to remake the order to serve their autocratic interests. As U.S. President Joe Biden said in Warsaw in March, the West now faces “a battle between democracy and autocracy, between liberty and repression, between a rules-based order and one governed by brute force.”

History was not supposed to play out this way. In the heady days after the [Cold War](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/2022-04-06/cold-war-never-ended-russia-ukraine-war), the order appeared both unchallenged and unchallengeable. Washington believed that its unquestioned primacy allowed it to determine the future of other countries as well as its own. U.S. allies believed they had escaped the tragedy of great-power politics and had entered an era of self-enforcing rules. As time went on, however, habits of collaboration eroded, and the sense of common purpose faded. Rather than using the unique moment of U.S. dominance to deepen and strengthen the rules-based order, the West let that system wither.

Washington and its allies now have a chance to correct that mistake. Russian President Vladimir Putin’s historic miscalculation to [attack Ukraine](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2022-06-14/ukraine-war-russia-why-fails) has reminded them not just of their shared interests and values but also of the importance of acting collectively. The West responded to the invasion with a show of unity not seen since the height of the Cold War. The United States and its allies have levied unprecedented sanctions, begun weaning themselves off Russian energy, and shipped massive quantities of weapons to Ukraine. But this surprising unity may not last. As the economic pain of sanctions increases and the war settles into the prolonged battle of attrition that intelligence officials forecast, domestic and other concerns may start to sow divisions within the West.

Even as the West works to manage these differences, it should turn its newfound unity into a broader effort to save the rules-based order. The first step should be to create a new group, the G-12, that would bring together the United States and its leading allies in Asia, Europe, and North America. Every member of this group has a vital interest in preserving the order, and none of them can do it on their own. But formalized cooperation alone will not be enough. The United States and its allies will need to take the second step of learning from the mistakes they had made over the last three decades. Washington will need to curtail its penchant for unilateralism, to listen as well as talk, and to give as well as demand. Asian and European allies, for their part, will need to accept more responsibility and overcome their tendency to free-ride.

If the West sticks to its old ways, it will bungle something that is exceedingly rare in international politics: a second chance. Only by seizing the moment, learning from its errors, and acting collectively can the West rebuild an international order that promotes the rule of law rather than the law of the jungle.

**WHAT A WASTE**

Although it emerged triumphant from the Cold War, the United States quickly squandered the extraordinary opportunity to turn its unipolar moment into something more permanent. It had outlasted the Soviet Union, unified Europe, and propelled a historic expansion of the global economy. This victory, which was both strategic and ideological, paved the way for the West to broaden and deepen the rules-based order of collective security, open markets, and respect for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. In the early 1990s, democracy was spreading, and free markets were emerging. Even old enemies, such as Russia, and possible future rivals, including [China](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/competition-with-china-without-catastrophe), appeared to have no choice but to embrace the free flow of capital, goods, ideas, and people—or be left behind. Cooperation and conciliation seemed set to replace competition and conflict as the defining features of world politics.

But events didn’t go as planned. The United States overplayed its hand, believing that its role as the world’s “indispensable power” allowed it to hurry history along. A series of military interventions launched in the name of stability and democracy often produced more chaos and misery than security and riches. It hardly helped that even as it trumpeted a rules-based order, Washington regularly ignored rules it disliked—as when it intervened in Kosovo in 1999 and Iraq in 2003 after failing to secure a UN mandate, and when it tortured detainees during its war on terrorism. The United States refused to join new cooperative arrangements on nuclear testing, arms control, prosecuting war crimes, and regularizing trade in the Asia-Pacific, fearing that such commitments would limit its freedom of maneuver. Washington felt justified because it had convinced itself that its own motives were pure. “We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future,” U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright proclaimed in 1998. But friends and foes alike did not see strength and integrity; they saw hubris and hypocrisy.

Washington was hardly alone in its failure to make the most of the moment created by the Soviet Union’s collapse. Its allies in Europe suffered from delusions of their own, believing that the end of the continent’s Cold War divisions meant the end of conflict. They saw themselves as postmodern states that could rely on cooperation and multilateral institutions to maintain peace. Although they recognized that terrorism and nuclear proliferation remained threats, they were content to let Washington address such problems. They also assumed that economic engagement, arms control, and dialogue would transform Russia into a partner and that China’s need for access to their markets and technology would turn it into a stakeholder in the rules-based order. With great-power competition seemingly relegated to the dustbin of history, economic interests could now drive foreign policy.

American hubris and European wishful thinking ruled the day, and leaders in Western capitals ignored signs that great-power competition was far from dead. Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, and then six years later, it annexed [Crimea](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2016-04-18/why-russian-president-putin-took-crimea-from-ukraine) and fomented a separatist rebellion in Ukraine. These acts elicited mostly symbolic responses from the West. Rather than reducing its dependence on Russian oil and gas, much of Europe increased its reliance because, as the German chemical executive Martin Brudermüller put it, “cheap Russian energy has been the basis of our industry’s competitiveness.” China, for its part, conducted unprecedented acts of economic espionage, coerced its trading partners, laid claim to the South China Sea, imprisoned more than one million Uyghurs, and crushed democracy in Hong Kong—a string of outrages that earned Beijing little more than mild rebukes. Wall Street relied ever more on Chinese riches, and in 2020, the EU signed a new trade and investment deal with Beijing.

**Establishing a G-12 is the last best hope to reinvigorate the rules-based order.**

These developments gradually eroded the core features of the rules-based order. The ability of great powers to use force with impunity against smaller neighbors exposed the weaknesses of the UN Security Council and other collective security institutions. The proliferation of mercantilist trade practices highlighted the gaps in global trading rules. The economic disruptions caused by unfettered globalization fueled populist nationalism and claims by autocrats that liberal democracy was decadent and obsolete. When the [COVID-19 pandemic](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-01-28/why-world-lost-pandemic) hit, countries responded not by acting collectively against a common threat but by pursuing “every country for itself” policies. The world order, in short, was unraveling.

The invasion of Ukraine roused the West from its slumber. The speed, scale, and scope of the U.S.-led response surprised Western leaders almost as much as they [surprised Putin](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2022-04-07/why-putin-underestimated-west). Economic sanctions are pummeling the Russian economy. Europe is rapidly cutting imports of Russian energy, sharply reducing Moscow’s leverage. NATO is bolstering its presence from the Baltics to the Black Sea and is preparing to welcome Finland and Sweden as new members. And [Ukraine](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-06-17/how-ukraine-will-win), aided by new weapons shipments and Western intelligence, has successfully resisted a much larger Russian military.

Much of the West’s diplomatic energies will rightly go into sustaining its support for Ukraine. Equally important, however, is for Western leaders to think more ambitiously about restoring the crumbling rules-based order. By reminding Western democracies of their common interests and their strength when they work together, [Putin’s](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2022-06-21/can-putin-survive) strategic blunder has created an opportunity to heal three decades’ worth of self-inflicted wounds.

**BETTER TOGETHER**

The first step will be to institutionalize the cooperation that has emerged in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The best way to do this is for the United States and its advanced democratic allies in Asia, Europe, and North America to create a G-12 consisting of the current G-7 members (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States) plus Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, and the EU. NATO would have a seat at the table for all security-related discussions.

Establishing a G-12 is the last best hope to reinvigorate the rules-based order. The prospective G-12 member states and institutions have the capacity, the interest, and the ability to work collectively to do so. They are home to nearly one billion people and account for more than 60 percent of global GDP and military spending. China and Russia together are more populous but constitute barely 20 percent of the world’s economic output and just 17 percent of its military spending. As their reaction to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has shown, the potential members of the G-12 all recognize that their security and prosperity rest on finding ways to avoid returning to a world in which [brute force](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-04-06/ukraine-russia-war-return-conquest) replaces the rule of law. And they were able to react so quickly against Russia because they had a long history of working cooperatively on a wide variety of issues, whether in their bilateral relations or in multilateral forums.

What these countries have not done is work together intentionally as a group or for the specific purpose of strengthening the global order. The formation of a G-12 would remedy that failing. In contrast to a loose association such as the G-7, which has traditionally approached global issues in an ad hoc fashion, the G-12 states and institutions would commit to identifying global challenges, assessing available responses, and responding in a coordinated fashion. The arrangement would not require a formal treaty, structure, or secretariat. Instead, it would rest on a joint commitment among G-12 members to base their engagement abroad on the principle that cooperation and coordination among themselves is vital to achieving their objectives and maintaining the rules-based order. The G-12 heads of state should meet at least biannually, and their foreign, defense, economic, and other ministers should meet more frequently—much as the Council of the European Union conducts its business across a full range of issues.

Policy coordination would need to start in the foreign policy sphere. G-12 members would need to come together on foiling Russian revanchism, competing with China, halting nuclear arms proliferation, countering terrorism, fighting [pandemics](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-01-28/why-world-lost-pandemic), and curbing climate change. The post-invasion coordination at the UN and within the G-7 and NATO needs to become the norm for the G-12 on all major issues. To facilitate common action, the G-12 countries should caucus with the UN, the World Trade Organization, the international financial institutions, and other international organizations to develop common positions and agree to concerted actions on critical issues.



Biden and Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese in Tokyo, May 2022

Jonathan Ernst / Reuters

In the economic sphere, the G-12 would need to coordinate on trade, investments, export controls, digital commerce, and other critical economic issues. The COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have reinforced economic nationalism and protectionism, disrupted trade, and upended supply chains, slowing growth and spurring inflation. Growing security concerns about intellectual property and critical technologies have further limited trade, especially with U.S. rivals such as China and Russia.

The G-12 should become an engine for economic cooperation and growth, pushing against the temptation to turn inward. A crucial first step would be for the United Kingdom, the United States, and the EU to accede to the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement, which already includes Canada and other potential G-12 nations in Asia. The United States and Europe should also revive negotiations on a trade and investment pact, thus complementing the EU’s existing bilateral pacts with Australia, Canada, and Japan. G-12 members would also need to coordinate their policies on export controls and foreign investment to ensure they maintain their competitive edge over [China](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/issue-packages/2021-06-22/can-china-keep-rising). And they would need to consolidate supply chains for critical goods—such as semiconductors, robotics, artificial intelligence, and rare-earth metals—within the Western world.

In the security field, the United States would remain first among equals within the G-12. It alone has a military with true global reach. Even so, in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, other members of the prospective G-12 have finally made good on their promises to spend more on defense. Japan is considering possibly doubling its military expenditures over the next few years, and Germany’s decision after the invasion to increase its defense budget makes it the third-largest military spender in the world. These outlays will add as much as $150 billion to what the West now spends annually on defense, making Germany and Japan far more effective security partners for the United States. The principal channels for enhancing defense capabilities among G-12 members would remain the same—defense arrangements through nato and bilateral agreements with the United States—with the addition of greater coordination within the EU. But the G-12 would provide a useful forum for driving these efforts and ensuring that transatlantic and transpacific security policies were far more aligned than is currently the case. Increased military capabilities and enhanced coordination would greatly improve the chances of deterring and, if necessary, defeating any further [aggression](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-05-19/crime-search-court) by Russia, China, or other countries.

As important as formalized cooperation will be, the success of the G-12 will depend on the United States and its allies abandoning the bad habits they have developed since the end of the Cold War. Washington has too often acted unilaterally, believing that leading means deciding what to do and commanding others to follow. Consultations have often taken the form of informing others of decisions already made rather than developing new positions together. This type of behavior was on display in the Trump administration’s decisions to walk away from the Paris agreement on climate change and the Iran nuclear deal and the Biden administration’s decision to hastily [withdraw](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2021-09-02/american-credibility-after-afghanistan) U.S. troops from Afghanistan. Conversely, U.S. allies have frequently shirked responsibility for tough decisions, free-riding off of U.S. security pledges while allowing their own hard power to atrophy. The G-12 would need to be a partnership of equals—in ways its members have long professed to want—with Asian and European members assuming more of the burden of acting and the United States sharing more of the decision-making. To be sure, as is the case in NATO and in the EU, forging agreement can take time, especially when interests clash. But just as in these other institutions, the source of the G-12’s strength will lie in its ability to act collectively—as Russia has now discovered at its own peril.

**REALITY CHECK**

The G-12 offers the best chance to mobilize the resources of the world’s most powerful and advanced democracies to defend the rules-based order. It is fair to ask, however, whether creating a G-12 would widen the divide between democracies and autocracies, inflame current tensions, and make it harder to forge the solutions needed to address the broad array of global challenges that the world, not just the West, faces. The G-12 will no doubt be seen as a means of explicitly countering Chinese and Russian power. Beijing and Moscow won’t respond by shrugging their shoulders. They will redouble their efforts to undermine the rules-based order and work hard to bring other countries into their orbit.

Concern about deepening divisions glosses over a critical point: Western democracies are already locked in a struggle with authoritarian governments over whose values will guide the world order. Neither China nor Russia is looking to improve existing international arrangements. Both are revisionist powers contesting the norms and institutions of the postwar order. They wish to return to an era of great-power politics in which they would be free to dominate their neighbors. Western democracies have been reluctant to recognize the challenges both countries pose, hoping that engagement would persuade Beijing and Moscow to work with rather than against them. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, with China’s all-but-formal endorsement, has made clear that the Chinese-Russian partnership is headed toward confrontation over everything the West—and the rules-based order—stands for.

The formation of a G-12 would not prevent the West from ever working with China or Russia. Efforts to curb climate change and prevent pandemics would certainly benefit from more cooperation among all the major powers. But Chinese and Russian cooperation on these issues hasn’t been forthcoming, even as the West downplayed China’s economic intimidation and ignored Russian aggression. Beijing and Moscow have shown that they will make concessions only out of self-interest, not out of goodwill. By mobilizing the resources of the world’s strongest democracies, a G-12 would enable the West to conduct its diplomacy with both countries from a position of strength.

The G-12’s approach to China, Russia, and other autocracies should be similar to what U.S. Secretary of State [Antony Blinken](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/2022-06-01/antony-blinken-conversation-us-secretary-of-state) has described as the Biden administration’s approach to China: “competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be.” To that end, the G-12 would need to make clear what it is for, not just what it is against. Its purpose would not be to hold down China or Russia or transform them or other countries into Western democracies. Its purpose would be to defend the core principles of the postwar order: respect for the sovereignty of large and small countries alike, adherence to the rule of law, support for democracy and human rights, and a commitment to the peaceful settlement of disputes.

**DEMOCRATIC DIVISION**

Western democracies may share a commitment to liberal values, but they will always have their own interests. This fact has been reflected in the West’s response to the invasion of Ukraine, with the varying levels of enthusiasm among U.S. allies for cutting off [Russian energy](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2022-05-17/right-way-sanction-russian-energy) exports and supplying heavy weapons to Ukraine. The difficulty of forging common policies will only grow as the subject shifts from existential threats to more mundane choices over trade or technology policy.

Just as important, democracies outside the West have [not united](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2022-06-15/strategy-fence-sitters) against Russia’s aggression. Brazil, India, South Africa, and other democracies in the Americas, Asia, and Africa have refused to condemn the violation of Ukraine’s sovereignty, declined to back sanctions against Russia, and, in a few cases, sought to exploit the war to their benefit. This resurfacing of Cold War–style nonalignment reflects a complex mix of self-interest, historical sympathies and resentments, and preoccupations with more immediate problems closer to home. None of this should be surprising. Democracies aren’t immune to being shortsighted, nursing grudges, or playing two sides against each other for their own benefit.

Even though democratic cooperation cannot be assumed, it can be forged. For all their failures and missteps, Western democracies have an established record of building successful collaborative arrangements and have generally fared far better than autocracies because their interactions go beyond the transactional. Their shared commitment to the rule of law makes it possible for them to trust one another, which is why the United States has formal security commitments with more than 50 allies. Russia has only five, and China has just one—North Korea.

To build on this success, the G-12 would ideally focus on building solidarity with democracies in the “global South” that stand to be the biggest losers if [China](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2022-06-09/chinas-southern-strategy) and Russia remake the world order in their own image. Neither Beijing nor Moscow sees smaller powers as sovereign equals; rather, they see such countries as ripe for exploitation and manipulation. Recognition of that fact is why Kenya, Singapore, and other non-Western democracies have joined the West in condemning Russian aggression.

Western democracies offer other democracies much more. To begin with, the joint economic output of the G-12 countries is triple that of China’s and Russia’s combined. And if the West worked more closely with non-Western democracies, it would likely find more willing partners for all its diplomatic endeavors.

But the G-12 would need to live by the rules it wishes others to follow, in ways that the United States and its allies have not always done themselves. Critics rightly point to plentiful instances of Western hypocrisy, with the U.S. invasion of Iraq chief among them. “Do as we say, not as we do” is a poor foundation for building cooperation. Just as important, the G-12 would need to view its interests broadly and recognize that trying to compel other democracies to follow its lead would be a losing strategy. Far better to demonstrate the real benefits, economic and otherwise, of active cooperation with the G-12 than to pressure other democracies to blindly follow along.

As the West works to overcome divisions among democracies, it will also need to overcome political divisions [at home](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2022-06-21/hierarchies-weakness-social-divisions). Populist nationalism is a driving political force in the United States and elsewhere, fostering foreign policies that are skeptical of the intentions of others and encouraging unilateral action rather than compromise and cooperation. The good news is that for now, Russia’s assault on Ukraine has shaken Western publics out of their complacency. Germans have overwhelmingly embraced Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s interpretation of the war as a *Zeitenwende*—a “historic pivot”—through which Germany will take military security more seriously. Large majorities of Finns and Swedes now support [NATO membership](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2022-04-26/natos-nordic-expansion). Americans have supported the steps the Biden administration has taken to aid Ukraine; in a Pew Research Center poll conducted in March, five times as many respondents agreed that the United States should provide more aid to Kyiv as agreed that it was providing too much. Congress has followed suit and rallied behind Ukraine.

But worrying signs exist. Hungarian Prime Minister [Viktor Orban’s](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/hungary/2022-04-19/how-autocrats-endure) resounding victory in his country’s March parliamentary elections and the politician Marine Le Pen’s strong performance in the French presidential race show that a fondness for Putin is not automatically disqualifying in European politics. More troubling is the possibility that former U.S. President Donald Trump—who said Putin was “a genius” and called him “savvy” and “smart” after Russia launched its invasion—or someone else who shares Trump’s fondness for autocrats could become U.S. president in January 2025. No G-12 could succeed without the active participation of the United States. When Trump was president, he did much to upend the very rules-based order the G-12 would seek to uphold.

And yet Orban’s effort to forge a coalition of EU discontents with the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia collapsed with the shelling of Kyiv. The response by NATO member countries to the Russian invasion has answered Trump’s complaint that other alliance members are not doing enough for defense. And a 2021 Chicago Council survey of Americans found that respondents preferred, by a ratio of three to one, for Washington to share leadership with others rather than dominate them.

**ANOTHER CHANCE**

The fear that Trump, or at least his “America first” tendencies, could derail a G-12 does give reason for it to proceed with caution, however. For one thing, the G-12 cannot be a return to [Pax Americana](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/japan/2022-06-13/real-end-pax-americana). The group’s goal would be to share responsibilities and burdens among the most advanced Western democracies, not let Washington dictate its terms. For another thing, the G-12 would need to deepen economic cooperation just as much as it promotes coordination on security matters. The rise of populist nationalism reflects the consequences of unbridled globalization, which favored big business over workers and capital over labor, leaving far too many people behind. The success of the G-12 would ultimately rest on its ability to improve conditions in the home countries of its member states as well as abroad. This would mean reversing the race to the bottom on corporate taxes, avoiding trade deals that ship jobs overseas, and tackling growing income inequality.

The silver lining in the horror of the aggression against Ukraine is that it gives the United States and its Western allies a chance to do what they failed to accomplish after the end of the Cold War: reinvigorate international institutions and deepen cooperation on transnational threats. But this moment will not last forever. The West needs to resist the temptation to regard the aggression against Ukraine as an aberration rather than a trend. To that end, the United States should join with the 11 other prospective members of the G-12 to revitalize the rules-based order. Western democracies cannot afford to squander this second chance to get things right.