

World at Crossroads: From Scenarios to Action

These short summaries and discussions address highly complex global, regional, and translocal developments occurring up to March 2025, involving numerous actors, perspectives, and nuances. They do not offer comprehensive accounts or detailed analyses, and inevitably may overlook certain events, developments, or viewpoints. Instead, their purpose is to help stakeholders critically engage with the four RESPACE scenarios, stimulating reflection, strategic foresight, and deeper exploration of transformative possibilities for collaboration. Each RESPACE scenario outlines distinct, plausible future pathways but is explicitly not predictive. Users are encouraged to continuously adapt and update these Dialogue Inputs to reflect evolving contexts and emerging understandings.

Dismantling of the Rules-Based World Order

April 2025

Summary & Context

In the past months, a series of actions by major powers has accelerated the unravelling of the post-WWII international system. In Washington, the returning Trump administration moved to withdraw from multilateral bodies and agreements. In February 2025, President Trump cut off US engagement with the UN Human Rights Council and halted funding to the UN Palestinian refugee agency (UNRWA), echoing steps from his first term. Trump has openly disparaged the UN as not well run and threatened to slash US contributions, despite US treaty obligations as the top UN funder. The retreat of Washington from institutions and norms – including reported plans to pull out of international legal frameworks and disregard adverse rulings – sends a signal that might makes right.

Other global actors are likewise chipping away at the rules-based order. Russia continues its war in Ukraine in defiance of UN General Assembly resolutions and an International Court of Justice injunction, using its Security Council veto to block enforcement. In late 2024, Moscow and Beijing deepened their strategic alignment, holding joint military drills and coordinating positions in international forums to

counter the West. For its part, China has promoted alternative institutions and leadership of the Global South. At the BRICS summits in 2023 and 2024, Beijing and Moscow repeatedly backed the expansion of BRICS, bringing in new members such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and even Indonesia by 2025, hoping to reshape global governance away from Western dominance. The G77 (a bloc of 134 developing nations) and allies have pushed for UN reform. In September 2024, world leaders did endorse the Pact for the Future at a special UN summit, pledging to make global institutions more effective and inclusive. Yet these commitments ring hollow as great-power rivalry and unilateralism intensify.

Multilateral institutions are paralysed or fragmenting. The UN Security Council is deadlocked by veto showdowns on multiple key global issues: Russia, China and the United States have all wielded vetoes to shield themselves or their allies. Russia on Ukraine. China on issues such as Myanmar. The United States on Israeli actions in Gaza. The impotence of multilateral institutions was glaring during the Gaza war in late 2024. Despite accusations of war crimes, the Security Council could not act, leading observers

to ask whether the UN has outlived its usefulness.

Other pillars of the world order are under strain as well. The World Trade Organization dispute system remains crippled. Some international arms control treaties have unravelled. Norms around human rights and democracy are eroding as authoritarian powers champion sovereignty over universal principles. In this void, ad hoc and regional alternatives have sprung up. Coalitions of the willing (contact groups or groups of friends) try to manage conflicts outside the UN framework. Regional organisations – the African

Union, ASEAN, the Arab League, etc. – attempt to mediate crises on their turf, albeit with mixed success and often hampered by their own internal splits. Civil society networks and city alliances (for example, global climate action networks of municipalities) strive to uphold cooperation and norms from the bottom up. But without broad power backing, these efforts struggle to fill the gap left by a fractured world order. The net result is a drift toward a more unmediated anarchic international landscape, raising profound questions about the future of peace and global collaboration.

Scenario Parallels/Contrasts

The realities of today starkly mirror the Walls scenario. In the RESPACE scenarios, Walls depicts a world of nationalist power plays, weakened institutions and rising conflict – exactly what we see as countries flout global rules. The retreat of the United States from the UN Human Rights Council and other UN agencies exemplifies the inward my-country-first mindset driving this shift. Similarly, the assertive moves of Russia and China to carve out spheres of influence – from Ukraine to the South China Sea – reflect a Walls-like landscape in which might trumps right and multilateral bodies are sidelined. We are effectively living through the downside of Walls: a multipolar free-for-all in which each bloc pursues its own interests, and international law is dishonoured in the breach. UN's inability to stop wars in Ukraine or Gaza despite horrific civilian tolls underscores how, in a Walls world, even gross violations of the UN Charter go unpunished. This fragmentation and drift toward every nation for itself is eroding the cooperative norms upon which peace and human rights have often depended.

In contrast, the current trajectory is the inverse of a Maze scenario. Maze envisions states reinvesting in multilateral cooperation and reforming global institutions to meet modern challenges. We did see a glimpse of Maze in the Pact for the Future – a pledge by all UN members to strengthen a rules-based, inclusive order. Those lofty promises have not translated into action, however. Instead of reinforcing

the maze of international institutions to solve problems, key players are abandoning or attacking them. For example, Maze implies empowering the UN and international courts to address conflicts, whereas in reality the major global powers are actively undermining these bodies – from the United States shrugging off UN human rights mechanisms to Russia ignoring International Criminal Court warrants. The contrast highlights a missed opportunity. If world leaders implemented the cooperative spirit of Maze, the crises we face – wars, pandemics, climate change – could be tackled collectively. Instead, dismantling the rules-based system is making global problem-solving ever more elusive.

Elements of a Towers scenario are also emerging but in a distorted form. Towers imagines a future in which regional blocs and powers take on greater responsibility for peace and development, potentially filling gaps left by a waning UN. We do see rising regionalism: the BRICS+ expansion and other Global South alliances can be viewed as new towers of influence. Likewise, organisations such as the African Union and ASEAN have tried to mediate conflicts in their regions when global diplomacy falters. In a positive Towers sense, one might hope these regional efforts will cooperate to uphold international norms. What is unfolding, however, is more competitive than cooperative – quasi-blocs forming East and West, and even regional groupings becoming arenas for rivalry. For instance, the idea of

the Global South uniting to reform global governance has promise (for example, calls for more UN Security Council seats for Africa and new development banks) but this risks splitting the world into separate camps if it is framed as South versus North. The Towers scenario's hopeful vision of complementary regional problem-solving is only partly visible. More often, there are patchwork responses or power vacuums. A clear example is peacekeeping. If the UN cannot act in a conflict setting, ideally regional coalitions step in (as Towers predicts) but in places such as the Middle East or Eastern Europe, no effective regional peace mechanism has emerged, leaving conflicts to fester. In short, although some towers are rising, without coordination they may further fragment the international landscape rather than stabilise it.

Finally, world turmoil also tests the potential of a Bridges scenario. Bridges foresees empowered grassroots networks and civil society bridging divides when states fail. In the current context, as governments step back from global commitments, bottom-up initiatives have tried to fill the void. Humanitarian NGOs, city networks, youth climate strikers and transnational activist campaigns are working across borders to address issues such as

climate action, human rights and peacebuilding. Notably, when the United States pulled funding from agencies such as UNRWA, local and civil society actors scrambled to try to prevent a humanitarian collapse. This self-reliance and solidarity speak to a Bridges ethos. Communities and NGOs cooperating internationally when states will not. The digital age also enables people's diplomacy – from global petitions to crowdfunding for disaster relief – reflecting an attempt to build bridges over walls. While these efforts are heartening, they face immense obstacles without state support. It is hard for NGOs to replace entire peacekeeping missions or for youth activists to enforce climate agreements without government buy-in. The current reality is still far from a true Bridges world. Civic space is shrinking in many countries and activists often find themselves under attack by the very nationalist forces ascendant in the Walls trend. If there is hope, it lies in these emergent networks of cities, citizens and civil society that continue to uphold cooperation and empathy across borders. They may be the scaffolding that prevents the complete collapse of international collaboration, keeping alive the idea – however faint – that a more Bridges-like global community could yet emerge from the current chaos.

Discussion Questions

- **For International Diplomats and UN Officials:** Given the breakdown in great-power cooperation, what creative strategies could multilateral institutions adopt to stay relevant? For example, can the UN and regional organisations form new coalitions (including middle-power states or regional leaders) to address conflicts that the Security Council fails to resolve? How might reforms such as curbing the veto, empowering the UN General Assembly or involving civil society in decision-making help bring multilateralism back from the brink? What immediate steps can UN agencies take to maintain critical services (peacekeeping, refugee aid, climate action, protection of human rights) when key states withdraw support?
- **For Government Policymakers (Mid-Sized Powers and Global South):** In a world where superpowers flout the rules, how can coalitions of small and medium-sized countries uphold international law and norms? Should they band together more tightly – for instance, expanding the influence of groups such as the G77 or regional organisations to press for fairer global rules – or would that further polarise the system? What leverage do developing and non-aligned countries have to demand reforms (such as Security Council reform or new global financial rules) that make the world order more equitable? Conversely, how can they safeguard their own interests if the trend toward a lawless might-makes-right order continues? Is there a risk of being forced to choose sides? How can they resist this to instead maintain a more neutral or even a more peaceful?

- **For Civil Society and Activists:** With traditional diplomacy faltering, how can NGOs, peace activists and citizen networks defend global norms from the bottom up? What are successful examples of cross-border and translocal civil society action mitigating the absence of government leadership? For instance, city coalitions tackling climate change, international human rights campaigns or grassroots peacemaking across conflict lines. How can activists amplify these efforts without state backing? Would it help to create parallel people's assemblies or civil society summits to hold leaders accountable to global values? Importantly, how can activists also counter the nationalist narrative that international cooperation undermines sovereignty? Are there ways to reframe global solidarity as compatible with, even beneficial to, local and national interests?
- **For Donors and Philanthropists:** As governments pull back from funding global public goods, to what extent can private philanthropies, foundations or even businesses step in? Can we see the rise of a parallel UN funded by billionaire philanthropists or corporate alliances to fight pandemics, support peacebuilding or aid refugees? If so, what are the pros and cons: Can private initiatives be a stopgap for international cooperation, and how would it be possible to ensure that they coordinate with one another and remain accountable to the people they serve? Should international donors prioritise sustaining grassroots movements and institutions (free media, civic education, conflict resolution NGOs) that uphold the ideals of a rules-based order at the community level, so that whenever political winds shift there is a strong foundation upon which to rebuild? What might a Marshall Plan for multilateralism look like, led by those willing to invest in keeping collaboration alive?
- **For Educators, Journalists and the Public:** How can we increase public awareness of what is at stake in the erosion of the rules-based order? Many citizens feel global treaties or UN debates are remote. So what compelling stories or evidence can educators and media use to illustrate the direct impact of those in people's everyday lives? For example, how UN paralysis on conflicts leads to real human suffering or how withdrawing from WHO and other health accords could harm everyone in a pandemic. In an age of misinformation and nationalist rhetoric, what role should independent journalism and academia play in demystifying global governance and championing the idea that cooperation is not a naive ideal but a practical necessity? Can we learn from history – such as the failures of the League of Nations – to engage the public in a dialogue about why imperfect international institutions are still better than none? Ultimately, how can pro-peace and pro-cooperation voices win hearts and minds against rising cynicism, building a constituency that demands leaders work together rather than tear down the fragile systems keeping global peace?

Explore the RESPACE scenarios here.

