

Around the world, people are rejecting divisive and dangerous politics. We can – and must – build on that

[theguardian.com/commentisfree/2026/aug/26/world-people-dangerous-politics-global-public-human-rights](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2026/aug/26/world-people-dangerous-politics-global-public-human-rights)

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Composite: Alex Mellon for the Guardian/Getty Images

The vast majority of the global public wants international cooperation on human rights, climate and AI. Like-minded countries must stand together to deliver

Britain's new prime minister, Andy Burnham, is already having to make one of his gravest decisions. He has to issue the instructions that he alone gives to the military, setting out the UK response in a doomsday scenario of a nuclear weapons attack on us. He will, as I did two decades ago, sign a piece of paper telling commanders whether or not to retaliate and, if so, whether through targeting civilian conurbations or military sites. These instructions are written down in the aptly named ["letter of last resort"](#).



Now, more than at any time since the 1960s Cuban missile crisis, the [European public fears a third world war](#). With the nuclear [Doomsday Clock](#) developed by atomic scientists moving ever closer to midnight, and Japan, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Poland and Germany contemplating either acquiring [nuclear weapons or siting them on their soil](#), our world is descending from a rules-based order to a power-based one, where might is deemed right and brute force dominates.

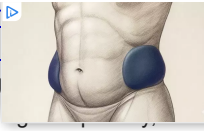
Russian [president Vladimir Putin](#) has abandoned any pretence of supporting international law – "no one is ready to play by rules set by one person somewhere far away," he has said – while China's [president Xi Jinping](#) has warned that reunification with Taiwan "cannot be stopped by any force or anyone". And with Donald Trump's [recent threat](#) of genocide against the Iranian people – "a whole civilisation will die tonight, never to be brought back again" – and his further threat to even [bomb an ally, Oman](#), the American president has demonstrated yet again his contempt for every single pillar of the previous US-led order: human rights, multilateral cooperation, humanitarian aid and the rule of law itself.

But what should give us a measure of hope, is that people's rising fears of conflict are now matched by a clear demand that the world come together to counter this collapse into chaos. This has been revealed in a survey covering more than [36,000 people in 34 countries](#), conducted for [my new book](#) by Focaldata, on behalf of the Rockefeller Foundation (for whom I am a trustee).

We asked a most demanding question: whether people would support "international cooperation", even if it meant some compromise of their "country's national interest". The [55%](#) who said yes, with only 20% saying no, were clearly signalling their rejection of the "America first", "Russia first", "China first", "my country first" dogmas that view life as no more than an endless struggle between an "us" and a "them". Clear [majorities](#) in every continent oppose those populist nationalist leaders, who would pull up the drawbridge and see geopolitics as a zero-sum game in which their country can only do well if other countries do badly.



Indeed, more than
crisis, [AI and cyber](#)
there should be a g
all, requiring action



**Cardiólogos: Cómo perder rápidamente ur
colgante (¡Es genial!)**

Wellness Tip

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Most important of all, we now know how support for cooperation can be increased. In every country, it is the very people who are active in their own communities, and who have connections that cross ethnic and religious divides, who are [50%](#) more likely to support international cooperation, even when it involves some sacrifice of national interest. The message is clear: to rebuild support for cooperation across borders, we should start by rebuilding communities at home.

But even if there is an emerging consensus on what to do, the question is: who can bring people together, now that we are moving from a unipolar world, where the US sets the agenda and could enforce its will, to a more multipolar world, with many competing centres of decision-making power, not least a rising [China](#)?

We find that the big three nuclear-weapon powers – the US, China and Russia – are more unloved than ever. Instead, the global public looks to other countries – principally Canada, Australia, Italy, Japan, the UK, France, Brazil and South Korea, and in that order – as potential unifying forces. These also turn out to be the countries whose own people are the most eager to cooperate and take on a leadership role, advocated by [Canadian prime minister Mark Carney](#) and [Finnish president Alexander Stubb](#).

But can a new concert of countries ever overrule the US and China on the big issues such as nuclear disarmament or AI and cyber regulation? Unlikely, given those two countries' coercive power through military threats, tariffs, trade bans and sanctions, and the US's singular power to [weaponise the dollar](#). Still, now is the time to discuss how we move from a world where technology dominates the state, as in the US, or the state dominates technology, as in China.

Already, the rest of us are creating a new system for [arbitrating trade disputes](#) and for [outlawing crimes against humanity](#). The [EU and Asian-led CPTPP](#) may yet form the biggest trade alliance the world has ever seen. How many battalions do the lesser powers have, one might ask, adapting the question [Stalin is said to have asked of a previous pope](#)? But, up against the power to compel, we can counterpose the legitimacy accorded by most fair-minded people to international human rights and humanitarian law.

Countries other than Russia, China and the US and their satellites control 75% of the votes at the [International Monetary Fund](#) and the [World Bank](#), and have huge majorities at the World Trade Organization and the World Health Organization, as well as 12 of the 15 votes – and two of the five vetoes – on the UN security council. So there is no reason why we cannot make progress on agreeing principles of cooperation, and reforming these institutions, to deliver on the climate crisis, humanitarian aid, peacemaking and the global war against poverty. When a new UN secretary-general is appointed, [to begin work in the new year](#), I would urge like-minded countries to agree with her or him a programme of action for 2027.

The US public also prefers cross-border cooperation to going it alone. They want the US to lead by persuasion, not by coercion. And they can be convinced that the US that used to act multilaterally in a unipolar world should stop acting unilaterally in what is becoming a multipolar world.

But, for the time being, progress will depend upon a coordinated push by the UK and cooperation-minded powers. The message from our survey of global opinion is that our citizens do look out in hope of a better world – and a troubled world looks to us. That's an issue for Britain's new PM – and for everyone.

Gordon Brown is the UN's special envoy for global education and was UK prime minister from 2007 to 2010