

THE QUEST FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION: 80 YEARS LATER

THE ATLANTIC CHARTER FROM 1941 TO 2021

On June 10, 2021, 80 years after UK Prime Minister Winston Churchill and US President Roosevelt first met together to outline their hopes for the future through the Atlantic Charter, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson and US President Joseph Biden met to reaffirm their countries' past commitments through the New Atlantic Charter. While both documents have the same purpose of pursuing a better future for the world, the way they hope to achieve it has changed, a reflection of the respective eras in which they were published.

Historic hopes for a better world

The Atlantic Charter, a joint declaration between UK Prime Minister Winston Churchill and President Roosevelt issued in 1941, aspired to a peaceful future in the height of World War II. The Charter declared that it would “afford assurance that all men in all lands may live out their lives in freedom from fear and want.” The leaders drafted The Atlantic Charter together at their first wartime meeting in August 1941, with Churchill hoping to bring America into the war and Roosevelt aiming to increase American support for intervention. Although, at the time, they failed in their aims, the Atlantic Charter and its principles later served as an example for future international cooperation in the establishment of the UN and the formulation of international human rights.

Recommitting to past principles

The New Atlantic Charter partly functions as a way for the US and the UK to reaffirm their past commitments under the Atlantic Charter. The preamble of the New Atlantic Charter reiterates the collaborative relationship between the two countries, emphasizing the need for both countries to “work together” to achieve their unified vision of a better future.

The New Atlantic Charter recommits to the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and freedom of travel first declared in the Atlantic Charter. Additionally, the New Atlantic Charter recommits to “promot[ing] economic advancement and the dignity of work; and enabling open and fair trade between nations.” It seeks to achieve these principles by supporting and using the “rules-based international order” established since the Atlantic Charter. This principle demonstrates how the world has progressed from establishing these rules to protecting and strengthening the process under these rules.

Seeking peace in a different world

The New Atlantic Charter and the Atlantic Charter differ in the areas they prioritize and how they seek to achieve their goal of a better future for the world. The key differences in these two documents can best be understood by the influence that differing worlds have had on the U.S. and the U.K.'s positions on world peace.

The original Atlantic Charter takes a broad multilateral view, repeatedly referring to its principles as applying to “all states.” It declares, for example, that “all states, great or small, victor or vanquished,” deserve equal access to “the trade and to the raw materials of the world.” At the time of writing the original Atlantic Charter, the leaders were dealing with a tragic world filled with despair. Yet they hoped for a better future – a world where all countries may share the benefits of the new global system.

THE Atlantic Charter

THE President of THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA and the Prime Minister, Mr. Churchill, representing HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT IN THE UNITED KINGDOM, being met together, deem it right to make known certain common principles in the national policies of their respective countries on which they base their hopes for a better future for the world.

In stark contrast to this hopeful view, the New Atlantic Charter takes a noticeably more reserved position. The New Atlantic Charter sets the tone from its preamble, drawing a distinguishing line between the countries that “share [the UK and US’s] democratic values” and those that “seek to undermine our alliances and institutions.” This ‘us vs. them’ dichotomy is evident in the New Atlantic Charter’s fourth declaration, where the two countries commit to “protecting their innovative edge in science and technology to support [their] shared security and deliver jobs at home.”

The most apparent difference between the two world documents is their position on future international peace. While the New Atlantic Charter vows to “support our shared security” and “reduce the risks of international conflict,” it avoids the Atlantic Charter’s adamant view that “all nations of the world . . . must come to the abandonment of the use of force.”

Historical circumstances offer some insight into the two documents’ different approaches towards international peace. The Atlantic Charter called for the nations to seek future ways of “lighten[ing] for peace-loving peoples the crushing burden of armaments.” This document was crafted in the midst of the most destructive world war that mankind had ever seen. Under those conditions, the leaders of the free world wished for nothing but an end to violence. Thus, although they knew it was an optimistic, far-reaching dream in 1941, President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill signed the Atlantic Charter in hopes of better future days.

In contrast, the New Atlantic Charter appears to accept the status quo. In fact, the New Atlantic Charter may even encourage armament by declaring that NATO “will remain a nuclear alliance.” Through the New Atlantic Charter, NATO allies and partners know that they can count on friendly U.K. and U.S. international presences while they “continue to strengthen their own national forces.” The New Atlantic Charter does declare that it will promote a “framework of responsible State behavior . . . to reduce the risks of international conflict,” but retains an overall pessimistic view about the possibility of future conflict.

In addition, the New Atlantic Charter seeks to strengthen countries’ internal rules by “champion[ing] transparency, uphold[ing] the rule of law, and support[ing] civil society and independent media.” Notably, it commits to upholding the human rights of all individuals, a principle not explicitly found in the original Atlantic Charter.

Expanding the vision

The New Atlantic Charter expands old policies of maintaining international security to modern threats. Cyber warfare, nuclear arms, and terrorism are notable mentions to the “full spectrum of modern threats.” In a similar vein to the previously mentioned acceptance of modern weapons and armament realities, the New Atlantic Charter does not reassert its original declaration that “all nations must abandon the use of force.” Instead, it takes a more jaded approach to the status quo and only pledges to promote “responsible State behavior” in modern and developing threats to international peace.

The New Atlantic Charter also declares new principles in the areas of the environment and public health. These two areas have been at the forefront of the international public consciousness in the 21st century. International environmental treaties such as the Paris Agreement as well as the recent COVID-19 crisis ensured the UK and US recognize the need for international cooperation to take on the climate crisis, protect biodiversity, and sustain nature. Environmental considerations also appear around the edges of other principles, such as building a “climate-friendly” global economy or fostering sustainable global development. However, in dealing with future health crises, the UK and the US appear to take a more bilateral position – they will focus on their “collective [health] defenses” before assisting others in doing the same.

Even 80 years after the original Atlantic Charter, the US and the UK remain united in their hope for a better and more peaceful world. The New Atlantic Charter demonstrates the continuing difficulties of establishing a genuinely multilateral framework, but also stands as a representation of how far the world has come during this period by tackling new issues such as the environment.

JUNE 10, 2021

The New Atlantic Charter



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Today, the President of the United States and Prime Minister of the United Kingdom reaffirm their commitment to work together to realise our vision for a more peaceful and prosperous future.

Our revitalised Atlantic Charter, building on the commitments and aspirations set out eighty years ago, affirms our ongoing commitment to sustaining our enduring values and defending them against new and old challenges. We commit to working closely with all partners who share our democratic values and to countering the efforts of those who seek to undermine our alliances and institutions.