

Strengthening multilateralism in a multipolar world

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On the contribution of this year's G7 and G20 Summits and suggested next steps for the EU.

Many countries in the Global South have refrained from condemning the grave violation of international law that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine represents. They do not support Russia, China, or the US. Given the growing weight of the Global South, finding common ground with it is essential for the EU and like-minded countries to strengthen multilateralism. In this respect, this year's G7 and G20 presidencies of Japan and India provide a welcome opportunity, as both are keen to do so, and the EU is a member of the G7 and the G20. While the topics of Ukraine and China dominated the G7 summit in Hiroshima from 19-21 May, much attention was also paid to the needs of countries in the Global South. India is similarly pressing their case under its G20 presidency. In this context, the EU could develop and implement a dedicated Strategy for Engagement with the Global South to support multilateralism in the run-up to next year's UN-led Summit of the Future, which aims to rekindle multilateralism with the UN at its core. A key challenge in such efforts will remain the strategic competition between the US and China, which complicates multilateral cooperation. The EU will also face choices on whether and how to cooperate with partners that do not share its values.

OUT OF ALIGNMENT

The world's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been disappointing from a Western perspective. There was no unanimous condemnation of Russia's massive violation of international law – the breach of Ukraine's territorial integrity and the use of force. Instead, Russia's war against Ukraine has divided the world into countries that stand by Ukraine in its defence, others that support Russia, and a surprisingly vast group of countries that take no sides. Many see the countries in the third group as representing the Global South. This term generally refers to a large and diverse group of mainly developing but also some more developed countries in the Indo-Pacific, Africa, and Latin America.¹ They are the new non-aligned. Unlike the historical Third World and the Non-Aligned Movements, the countries of the Global South do not work towards common objectives as a group, due to their geographical, political, economic, and cultural diversity. We use this term with these qualifications in mind.

The bedrock of the EU's foreign policy is its commitment to multilateralism, with a strong and effective UN at its core. It builds on the conviction that the international community needs an effective multilateral system based on universal rules and values to respond to global challenges such as climate change, environmental degradation, and wars. In this policy brief, multilateralism is understood, according to a widely accepted definition, as "the practice of coordinating the national policies of three or more states through ad hoc arrangements or institutions" (R.O. Keohane).² Sadly, despite its tremendous relevance, multilateralism is on the defensive.

The global governance established by the US after the Second World War, with the UN at its core, has become fragile. The world has become more multipolar and less multilateral. So, the question is, how can multilateralism be restored in this new reality?

Any reform of multilateralism and the search for a new global order must rely on a broad coalition of the willing. Given its weight in world affairs, any such effort requires the support of the Global South. The EU must therefore reach out to the Global South to find common ground on reforming multilateralism. Japan and India, in their respective roles as this year's G7 and G20 presidencies, are committed to strengthening cooperation with the Global South. Japan's outreach to the Global South builds on the efforts of Germany's G7 Presidency last year. As Prime Minister Meloni has already indicated that outreach to the South will be one of the priorities of Italy's G7 Presidency next year, it is likely that efforts will continue at this level. After India, two more countries from the Global South, Brazil, and South Africa, will hold the G20 presidency in 2024 and 2025, suggesting continuity at the G20 level as well.

This policy brief seeks to answer the following questions: What explains the neutral stance of critical countries of the Global South towards the Russian invasion of Ukraine? How can the EU win countries of the Global South as partners for a reform of multilateralism? How should the G7 and G20 presidencies of Japan and India be assessed in this context? Can the EU engage in multilateral cooperation with partners who do not share its values? What instruments can the EU use to realise its concept of multilateralism, and what actions should it take next?

THE WEST AND THE EMERGING POST-WESTERN WORLD ORDER

Following Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine, the West built a coalition of 141 countries that voted in favour of a UN General Assembly resolution on 2 March 2022 condemning the invasion and demanding the withdrawal of Russian troops. But 47 states abstained or did not vote,

including China, India, Pakistan, Iran, Algeria, Morocco, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and Uganda. And many more do not apply any of the sanctions imposed on Russia. Five countries voted against the resolution: Russia, Belarus, Syria, Eritrea, and North Korea. A similar picture emerged in subsequent votes, demonstrating the unity of the West and the failure of its attempts to isolate Russia diplomatically.

Many non-Western elites see the war as a European issue and reject the Western interpretation that it is an attack on the UN legal order and, thus, a global existential threat. They wonder why it should get more attention than conflicts closer to their home. They ask why the West is providing massive funding for Ukraine instead of spending more on climate change, accusing it of double standards. They believe wealthy nations could do more to help countries in debt. They are less concerned about the causes of the war than about its consequences, especially rising food and fuel prices. And they want to have more say in global governance.³ Recent analysis suggests that against this backdrop, several factors explain countries' decision to remain neutral on 2 March 2022, namely trade ties with Russia (especially in terms of imports) and various hard and soft power aspects, including defence cooperation, Russian foreign aid, and China's influence in the Global South.⁴

According to a survey by the European Council on Foreign Relations, the world's reaction to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine reflects the consolidation of the West and the emergence of a new, post-Western international order. Despite the West's renewed unity, most people believe that the US-led liberal order is in decline. In both the US and Europe, the prevailing view is that the world will be shaped by a new bipolarity, with the US and China as the main centres of power. Outside the West, however, many expect fragmentation into several poles. Two-thirds of the world's population live in countries that have not condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Non-Western countries have become more assertive in their dealings with the West as their political and economic influence grows.⁵



Many countries in the Global South have taken a pragmatic and opportunistic approach to cooperation with the West, Russia, and China. Their main goal is to promote their economic development, which remains their top priority. They resent the growing geopolitical rivalry between the US and China, and want to cooperate with whomever they wish without being drawn into a confrontation. Their willingness to engage multilaterally has diminished as the antagonism between the US and China has intensified. As a result, they are manoeuvring between the camps rather than siding with either.

The Japanese and Indian presidencies of the G7 and G20 provide a welcome opportunity for the EU, a member of both bodies, given that strengthening relations with the Global South is a priority for both presidencies. Improved relations have the potential to promote global understanding of the UN Secretary-General's vision for the future of global cooperation. This vision, set out in his "Common Agenda" report of 2021, emphasises the importance of inclusive, networked, and effective multilateralism.⁶ It underscores the urgent need to expedite the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to fulfil the overarching promises made by UN Member States in their June 2020 Declaration on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the UN. Next year, on 22-23 September, the UN will host a "Summit of the Future" in New York. The aim is to reconfirm the UN Charter and agree on actions to revitalize multilateralism in "A Pact for the Future."

But geopolitical tensions could hamper UN reform. The US sees itself in strategic competition with China. It is forming alliances with like-minded allies and partners to counter the security, economic, and value-based challenges China poses. Meanwhile, China is actively seeking partnerships to challenge US dominance. Russia supports China in this endeavour, as do the other members of the BRICS group (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), albeit to varying degrees. The US stance on UN reform in the coming years will also be critical. If a new administration after next year's presidential election follows the example

of the Trump administration and rejects multilateral cooperation, the efforts towards reforming UN-led multilateralism may fail.

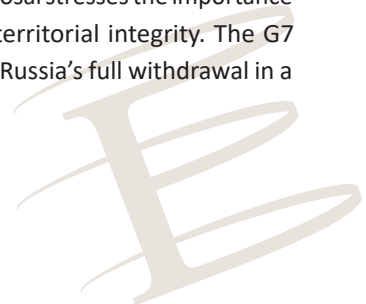
JAPAN'S G7 PRESIDENCY

Japan's approach to its G7 presidency reflects the reorientation of the country's foreign policy. Initiated under Prime Minister Abe and continued under Prime Minister Kishida, it aims to safeguard the international legal order against an increasingly assertive China.⁷ Against this background, Japan ensured that Ukraine and China would be high on the agenda of its G7 presidency, including at the G7 Summit from 19 to 21 May. Japan strongly opposes Russia's military aggression against Ukraine and is committed to upholding the rules-based international order. Such opposition is essential from Japan's perspective, because allowing such violations to go unsanctioned could embolden China to act outside the law as well, implying a potential threat to Japan.

As part of its outreach to the South, the Japanese G7 presidency invited several leaders to attend the summit as guests, namely India (Chair of the G20), Brazil (Chair of the G20 next year), Comoros (Chair of the African Union), Indonesia (Chair of ASEAN), the Cook Islands (Chair of the Pacific Islands Forum) and Vietnam – in addition to the leaders from neighbouring South Korea and Australia.

In Hiroshima, G7 leaders reaffirmed their resolve to address the diverse needs of the countries in the Global South. Their final joint communiqué,⁸ strongly focuses on ongoing and planned G7 support for the priorities of the Global South, including the SDGs, development financing, infrastructure investment, climate change, environment, biodiversity, ocean governance, energy, trade, and mobilising new financial resources.

Prime Minister Kishida also took the initiative to invite President Zelensky to Hiroshima, allowing him to present his peace proposal to G7 leaders and guests from the Global South.⁹ Zelensky's proposal stresses the importance of fully restoring Ukraine's territorial integrity. The G7 supported Zelensky's call for Russia's full withdrawal in a



separate statement.¹⁰ But three influential guests from the South - Luiz Lula da Silva of Brazil, Narendra Modi of India, and Joko Widodo of Indonesia – stressed the importance of peace in general, without explicitly endorsing either the G7's or Zelensky's essentially convergent views on Ukraine.

These reactions showed the G7's difficulty in asserting Ukraine's territorial integrity against Putin in front of a vague 12-point ceasefire proposal backed by Chinese President Xi, Russia's diplomatic ally. Many countries in the Global South have little desire to jeopardise their trade relations with China by standing up for Ukraine, given their priority of economic development. Brazil's trade with China even exceeds its trade with the G7 countries.

INDIA'S G20 PRESIDENCY

For India, the G20 presidency comes at a critical time. It has taken a neutral stance on Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine, encouraging "joint efforts by all sides" to find a diplomatic solution. Russia's role as India's largest arms supplier and India's difficult relationship with China is crucial for this stance. In fact, India is wary of Russia's growing relationship with China, which it sees as a significant challenge to its security due to a bilateral border disputes and China's support for Pakistan. In recent years, it has focused on improving relations with like-minded democracies, especially the US, Japan, and Australia. It has also joined the Quad.

India sees itself as a spokesperson for the Global South. Its motto for the G20, which represents two-thirds of the world's population and 85% of its economic output, is "One Earth, One Family, One Future", emphasising global cooperation. To ensure broad consultation beyond G20 members in the run-up to the G20 Summit on 9 and 10 September in New Delhi, India convened a virtual summit in February called "The Voice of the Global South", in which 125 countries participated.¹¹ In positioning India as a spokesperson for the Global South, Modi follows a tradition dating back to the Cold War, when India led the non-aligned countries and spoke for the developing world. Today India's aim is to build a bridge between the North

and South and become an independent actor alongside China in engaging Asian countries with the rest of the Global South.

In a promising sign of continuity, India's six G20 priorities are consistent with those of the G7. They focus on green development, inclusive growth, progress on the SDGs, technological transformation, multilateral institutions for the 21st century, and women-led development.

SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS FOR THE EU – INSTRUMENTS OF ENGAGEMENT

The EU will naturally play a role in implementing the G7 commitments in the Joint Communiqué, coordinating with G7 partners, other countries, and stakeholders relevant to the G7 agenda. It will contribute to the series of high-level events mentioned in the G7 Communiqué, for the rest of this year, notably the G20 Summit in New Delhi (9-10 September), the SDG Summit in New York (18-19 September), and the COP28 Climate Change Conference in the United Arab Emirates (30 November-12 December).

The follow-up to the G7 Summit will overlap with the EU's ongoing support to the Global South in managing the consequences of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which include the critically important issues of food and energy insecurity. Twice, once last year and again in April this year, EU foreign ministers discussed an action plan to address the geopolitical impact of the war on third countries. The version discussed by Ministers in April identifies four priority countries the EU aims to focus on: Brazil, Chile, Nigeria, and Kazakhstan. All are important players in their respective regions. The EU wants to establish itself as a reliable partner and counter Russian disinformation by implementing this action plan, which could eventually cover a wide range of countries.¹²

The EU's efforts will carry forward the ongoing upgrading of relations with critical regions of the Global South. In 2021, the EU launched its Indo-Pacific Strategy to strengthen its relations with the vast and crucial area it covers. Last year, African Union and EU leaders endorsed a "Joint Vision for 2030",

strengthening the EU-Africa partnership. Also, after a 16 year hiatus, the next Summit with the leaders of Latin America and the Caribbean will take place on 17 and 18 July in Brussels. Strong EU efforts are underway to allow for the implementation of the draft trade agreement with the Mercosur countries (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay) at the earliest possible moment. Sadly, another critical instrument is still pending in the Council, in the absence of the necessary unanimity required for its signing and ratification, namely the EU's new Partnership Agreement with 79 African, Caribbean, and Pacific countries.

In light of the above, this policy brief recommends that consideration be given to drafting and implementing an EU Strategy for Engagement with the Global South on Multilateralism. Specific outreach to the Global South could aim at developing shared views on revitalising multilateralism in a multipolar world despite geopolitical tensions. Such a strategy might be launched in cooperation with the four priority countries on which the EU's efforts to implement the action plan currently focus. An EU Strategy for Engagement with the Global South on Multilateralism would involve as many countries of the Global South as possible at the earliest possible stage. It would contribute to the preparation of the Summit of the Future and support the implementation of agreed outcomes. Discussions could build on the set of recommendations recently presented by the High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism.¹³ This board was established by the UN Secretary-General to assist UN Member States in preparing for the Summit of the Future.

HOW TO STRENGTHEN MULTILATERALISM IN THE CONTEXT OF GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION?

In the run-up to the Summit of the Future, the EU will wish to present in more detail how it sees its role in promoting UN reform. Key findings from the Joint Communication of the High Representative and the European Commission on Multilateralism in 2021 remain relevant. For example, there is agreement at EU level that the EU must proactively and forcefully promote its

position globally. It has to use its weight as an economic power, as a donor, and as a norm setter to advance its interests.¹⁴

From the EU's perspective, multilateral cooperation is inclusive and designed to be universal. However, strategic competition between the US and China complicates multilateral cooperation, as both countries try to use it to their advantage, which can lead to blockades. Tensions also arise from the fact that the EU needs to work with partners based on its core values. What is the best way to proceed when dealing with partners who do not share the EU's values but are crucial to addressing certain challenges? This concern is not exclusive to the EU. During a visit to Washington DC in January, Prime Minister Kishida said that the future world would not have a single set of values. He warned that even if we believe our path is correct, if the Global South, which occupies an important place in the international arena, turns away, we would be in the minority and unable to solve growing political problems.¹⁵ On this issue, Chancellor Olaf Scholz explicitly supported the US National Security Strategy, which acknowledges the need to cooperate with states that do not share democratic values but rely on and support a rules-based order.¹⁶

Since it is inconceivable that the EU ignores its core values in multilateral cooperation, it will have to decide whether and where cooperation is possible with countries that do not share the EU's values. Perhaps some differentiation can be envisaged: if partners are not democratic, they must at least respect international law, human rights and agreed rules. It should also be possible to identify issues, such as climate change, where values are not directly at stake. But on issues where values are paramount, such as migration or security, the EU will want to limit itself to multilateral or bilateral cooperation with like-minded countries, all the more so if the US makes the recognition of democratic and human rights values a condition for (inclusive) multilateral collaboration. But here, the EU could inadvertently be drawn into the rift between the US and China, with consequent complications of cooperation with the Global South.



OUTLOOK

While the success of next year's Summit of the Future will depend on many factors, the EU can help create the conditions for a favourable outcome through a timely and astute handling of its part of the ongoing preparations. Key elements include engaging with the Global South to promote progress on its most pressing concerns and, in parallel, finding common ground on future global governance while skilfully managing the challenges posed by the strategic competition between the US and China. Ultimately, the EU and like-minded countries must win over world opinion to build a sufficiently large coalition to ensure that Western values remain influential in UN-led multilateralism. So, they must do everything in their power to ensure that the Global South sees their offer as superior to China's. A lot is in the balance for the world in this UN reform.

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The views expressed here are solely those of the author and do not imply the endorsement of any other person, institution or organisation.



Endnotes

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