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# In Danger of Falling Short: The EU, the Global South, and the Reform of Multilateralism

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*“Even if we walk on a path which we believe to be right, if the Global South, holding integral places in the international arena, turn their back, we will find ourselves in the minority and unable to resolve mounting policy issues.”*

Fumio KISHIDA, Prime Minister of Japan

13 January 2023

## Summary

*In recent decades, the world order has shifted from the bipolarity of the Cold War and the unipolar moment dominated by the United States to a multipolar setting. China has established itself as a direct competitor to the US for global leadership. In addition, medium and large countries strive for regional and global influence, representing the Global South and seeking fair participation in global governance. Competing interests and perspectives in the new multipolarity have led to a decline in multilateral cooperation and prevented joint responses to significant challenges such as climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic and the wars in Ukraine and Gaza.*

*Against this backdrop, the reform of multilateralism proposed by UN Secretary-General Guterres in his 2021 report “Our Common Agenda” has received broad international support. A UN “Summit of the Future” is planned for 22-23 September 2024 in New York to enshrine commitments to reform multilateralism in a politically binding “Pact for the Future”. Key priorities include implementing global commitments such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adapting global governance institutions to current realities and tackling new areas such as digitalisation and artificial intelligence through enhanced global cooperation.*

*The European Union strongly supports the reform efforts led by the United Nations. However, there is a risk of failure unless all UN Member States throw their entire weight behind common reform goals. Given the changing global dynamics, this paper suggests that the EU should reflect thoroughly on the implications of a multipolar world, notably the rise of the Global South, for its own role in global affairs. On this basis, the EU should develop and implement a strategy for practical cooperation with these countries. The goal is to ensure the success of multilateralism reform and to promote EU leadership in advancing inclusive global governance.*

*At the same time, it must be recognised that the reform of multilateralism is particularly challenging in a context of high geopolitical tensions. The possible re-election of Donald Trump as US President would add to these difficulties.*



## I. INTRODUCTION

World politics has undergone a profound transformation in a gradual process spanning recent decades. It has witnessed the emergence of China as a formidable power to rival the United States. There has also been a sharp increase in the influence of many medium and large countries, such as India, Indonesia, South Africa, Nigeria, Brazil, Argentina, Turkey, and Russia. Located mainly in Africa, Latin America, and the Indo-Pacific, they form what is often collectively referred to as the Global South. Unlike the historic Third World and Non-Aligned Movements, these countries lack a unified agenda due to their vast geographical, political, economic, and cultural disparities. They are the new non-aligned. The post-Cold War hegemony of the United States is thus giving way to a multipolar world, characterised by the emergence of influential poles, each with its weight in the global system. A multipolar world means that no single country can unilaterally dictate the terms of the global order. Instead, decisions are made through a complex and sometimes contentious interplay of power dynamics between the poles.<sup>1</sup>

Regarding the US and China, states (including other poles) generally avoid committing themselves exclusively to one side. Most prioritise the preservation of national sovereignty and value the flexibility to assess each situation independently. They apply a case-by-case assessment when deciding whether to cooperate with the US, China or other major world powers. Russia's unprovoked and illegal invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022 has strengthened Western unity. Polls show a consensus among Europeans and Americans that Ukraine must win the war, with Russia seen as the adversary.<sup>2</sup> These polls also reveal a widespread belief in the West that two rival blocs led by the US and China will define the future world order. But outside the West, including in Russia and China, the view of an increasingly multipolar world order prevails. Most people there have little interest in permanent political ties with China, Europe, or the US. As a result, many countries are preparing for a fragmented world with some degree of certainty.

As a pole in its own right, the EU needs to strengthen its ties with multiple poles beyond the United States in order to thrive in the multipolar world, as it depends on extensive global connections. In other words, the EU needs a foreign policy that recognises its interdependence.<sup>3</sup> Adapting to this new reality also means recognising that the international institutions established after the Second World War do not adequately represent the Global South in global decision-making and need to be revised.

The success of the reform of multilateralism proposed by UN Secretary-General Guterres in his 2021 report "Our Common Agenda" is in the best interest of the EU.<sup>4</sup> Described by the UN as a "once-in-a-generation opportunity", the UN "Summit of the Future" on 22-24 September 2024, during the high-level week of the 79th UN General Assembly, will seek to define the basic features of a reformed multilateralism. These are proposed to be enshrined in a "Pact for the Future".<sup>5</sup> Intergovernmental negotiations on this politically binding text have begun. While there is good international support for the UN reform effort, including from the EU, the preparations for the upcoming Summit have received little public attention. This state of affairs is both surprising and worrying, as the current process may fall short of the outcomes envisioned by the Secretary-General.

Given the relevance of this initiative, the EU must step up its support for the Summit of the Future. In addition, this paper suggests that the EU thoroughly reflect on the implications of a multipolar world, notably the rise of the Global South, for its role in global affairs. The 2016 EU Global Strategy does not address this question and, more generally, does not seem to provide sufficient guidance for responding to today's challenges.<sup>6</sup> Based on this debate, an EU strategy for engagement with the Global South on the reform of multilateralism should be developed and implemented in line with the overall objectives of the Summit. This task will undoubtedly be challenging. But it should facilitate efforts to put global multilateral cooperation on a more solid footing.



## II. A MULTIPOLAR WORLD AFFECTED BY THE EROSION OF MULTILATERALISM

Rarely in recent history has the world faced so many daunting challenges simultaneously as it does today: high tensions and geopolitical competition between major powers, wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, an urgent climate crisis, deeply unsatisfactory progress on the Sustainable Development Goals, a fragile global economy, persistent poverty and growing inequalities, a global backlash on human rights and the spread of dangerous technologies. It is against the backdrop of these interlocking crises, where the imperative is cooperation, but the reality is fragmentation, that UN Secretary-General Guterres calls for a reform of multilateralism. The effectiveness of established frameworks such as the United Nations and the Bretton Woods system is declining. This decline is primarily the result of the transition: from the bipolarity of the Cold War era and the subsequent unipolar interlude to a new multipolar reality in which the Global South seeks a fair share of global decision-making.

There is no universally accepted definition of the Global South. Some criticise the term for presenting a diverse reality as homogeneous by bringing together countries from different continents with very different cultures and economic and political systems. The persistence of the North-South divide in the terminology is seen as a continuation of existing power imbalances which the world has to overcome. For some, the term ‘South’ has the misleading implication that all countries there are uniformly poor. However, an agreed alternative label has yet to be found. For now, the term ‘Global South’ is a suitable placeholder, mainly because of the common characteristics of the countries it encompasses. Despite their differences, these countries collectively express (i) dissatisfaction with the existing international order, which they see as too favourable to Western interests and therefore unjust, coupled with a demand for a fair share of power in global governance; (ii) dissatisfaction with the West’s failure to live up to its commitments; (iii) a preference for balancing between the US and China to avoid bloc-building; (iv) a belief in credible alternatives to the Western paradigm.<sup>7</sup>

Ultimately, what justifies the label Global South is that the South today has global agency. Unlike the traditional South, in the context of globalisation, the South has become a geopolitical actor worldwide, with different countries pursuing similar but not identical strategies. China is part of the Global South in that it shares several key characteristics with the other countries that make up the Global South. But China is a special case within this group because of its weight in world affairs - almost on a par with the US, its only serious rival.

The Global South feels empowered to demand its fair share of power in global governance as its political, economic and demographic weight has increased dramatically in recent decades. Moreover, there has never been a world order in terms of global governance arrangements that would balance the divergent interests of all countries. The existing world order is a Western order imposed on the rest of the world soon after the Second World War. Therefore, global governance reform will inevitably involve transferring some of the power currently held by the main beneficiaries of the existing order to the Global South. The lack of support for this transfer by those whose role will diminish is one of the biggest obstacles to the reform of global governance. Nowhere is this more evident than in the long-running debate on the reform of the UN Security Council. Those who benefit from the current system can cling to existing rights because, under the current arrangements, decisions to change them require their approval. This situation is one of the main reasons why efforts to reform the Security Council and other bodies have stalled. Another is the uncertainty whether key players, notably China, would play by the rules of a reformed multilateralism – otherwise, giving up one’s power is not worth it.

The proliferation of poles on the global stage has brought with it an unprecedented diversity of cultures, political interests, values, perspectives and truths. As the number of poles has grown, the capacity for multilateral action at the global level



has declined sharply. EU High Representative Borrell has gone so far as to describe this situation as ‘multipolarity without multilateralism’.<sup>8</sup> As a result, some challenges of our time have yet to receive the robust collective response they deserve. Examples include the lack of progress in the implementation of the Paris Agreement, the inequitable global distribution of vaccines during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the lack of unity in the international community’s response to Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and the current situation in the Palestinian territories.

### III. THE ENDURING RELEVANCE OF MULTILATERALISM

Consensus on the optimal configuration of a multipolar world remains elusive. Nevertheless, every nation has a vested interest in the functioning of critical global governance organisations, first and foremost the United Nations (UN). Among international organisations, the UN’s legitimacy and convening power are unparalleled. UN Secretary-General Guterres’ call for reform of the leading institutions of global governance is therefore widely supported.

For its part, the EU has overcome centuries of war in Europe by creating a system of multilateral cooperation and integration that has brought peace, prosperity and democracy to the continent. The EU also uses multilateralism to promote peace, security, cooperation, democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms worldwide. It sees the United Nations as the central pillar of a rules-based international order.

At the same time, the EU, with its distinctive setup combining intergovernmental and supranational elements, faces challenges in a world where the actions of nation-state actors shape multilateralism. It was only with the Treaty of Lisbon that the EU acquired legal personality, and even today, it can only exercise the powers in international relations that the EU member states have transferred to it in the treaties. Moreover, the EU’s position in international organisations varies considerably, from full membership to observer status. With some exceptions, EU member states and third countries have been reluctant to accept the EU as a full member of international organisations.

In 2011, after much effort, the EU secured a tailor-made “enhanced observer status” at the UN General Assembly, allowing it to present common positions, intervene, propose initiatives, and participate in the annual General Debate in September. The EU’s added value lies in coordinating its 27 member states to present a common position. The EU’s inability to vote, co-sponsor resolutions, or propose candidates distinguishes it from regular members. Since Brexit, France has been the EU’s only permanent member on the UN Security Council with the associated veto power. The EU itself is not represented on the UN Security Council, but the HRVP can speak there on behalf of the EU. There is no uniform status for the EU in UN agencies.<sup>9</sup>

In the World Bank and the IMF, the EU is less dominant than might be expected, given the interest of EU member states in maintaining governance structures that preserve their predominant influence. In the IMF, EU member states still have a relatively high combined voting power of 26%. This share exceeds that of the US and, if combined, would allow the EU to form a blocking minority on many issues. However, EU coordination could be much more robust. Also, progress towards a single EU seat remains essential. As in the IMF, the EU is over-represented in the World Bank, where EU member states have a combined voting power of around 30 per cent. Here, too, the EU needs a seat, and EU coordination is even weaker than in the IMF.

For EU engagement, the informal formats of the G7 and G20, based on diplomatic practice, have proved more flexible than treaty-based organisations. Although the EU is not formally a member of the G7, it is the only non-state actor (and the eighth) to attend its summits. The EU is also a quasi-member of the G20, but, as with the G7, it does not hold

the rotating presidency. In both formats, the President of the European Council and the President of the Commission represent the EU. This duality calls into question the unity of the EU's presence, at least in the perception of its partners.

The EU has gradually asserted itself as a participant in various multilateral cooperation frameworks. However, the EU's role remains constrained by the reluctance of EU member states to strengthen the EU's common position at the expense of their influence. Crucially, the EU's role in international organisations is also constrained by the legal frameworks of these institutions, which often do not accommodate the EU's distinctive structure.

The EU's internal trade-offs and different formats of multilateral engagement complicate its efforts to contribute to the reform of multilateralism. Moreover, any initiative to reform multilateralism depends on the domestic politics of influential UN Member States and the broader geopolitical situation. Democracies tend to be more open to cooperation, including at the multilateral level, than authoritarian states – but the rise of populism and nationalist sentiment worldwide is challenging this paradigm. The United States is a case in point. Under President Trump's "America first" policy, it has turned its back on critical institutions of global governance. The rise of authoritarian regimes has also undermined multilateral cooperation so that democracy is in retreat around the world. In addition, the geopolitical situation is characterised by competition and confrontation, especially between China and the United States. The potential re-election of Donald Trump in the 2024 Presidential election could present a grave risk to multilateral cooperation. The context for implementing the UN Secretary-General's reform plans for multilateralism is exceptionally challenging.

#### IV. THE SOUTHERNISATION OF THE AGENDA OF GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

Over the past decade, the transformation of global politics has strengthened the voice of the countries of the Global South, enabling them to assert their perspectives on global governance in multilateral cooperation platforms such as the United Nations and the G20. This process has been aptly described as the "Southernisation" of the global governance agenda.<sup>10</sup> It is the result of the growing political weight of the Global South. And it has been driven by the desire of the US and China to co-opt the Global South as a partner. Although the Global South countries are reluctant to take sides, the US and China see them as 'swing states' whose support they need to gain the upper hand in their strategic competition.

The primary demand of the Global South is for a fair share of voice and representation in global governance structures. Its growing influence was evident in the discussions on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development during the High-Level Week of the 78th UN General Assembly in New York in September 2023. This Agenda was adopted by the UN Summit on Sustainable Development in 2015.<sup>11</sup> It comprises 17 Sustainable Development Goals to be achieved by 2030, from ending poverty everywhere (SDG 1) to revitalising the global partnership for sustainable development (SDG 17). They apply to everyone on every continent as a blueprint for the transition to a better world. And they have a powerful resonance in the South, where the distance to the goals is much greater than in the developed world.

Delays in implementing the Agenda have increased over time. The UN Secretary-General has, therefore, repeatedly stressed the need to accelerate dramatically or, as he put it, "turbocharge" implementation. The Summit of the Future, convened for 22-24 September 2024 in New York, is a crucial UN initiative to build global consensus on the reform of multilateralism. But its immediate objective is to ensure the implementation of existing agreements, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Over the past year, key multilateral gatherings have, to varying degrees, sought to foreshadow urgent global governance reforms in line with the aspirations of the Global South. These include bodies such as the BRICS and the G77, which



bring together countries from the Global South, and the (enlarged) G7, the G20 and the UN General Assembly. Unlike the G7, which comprises industrialised countries and occasionally includes others, the G20 and the UN General Assembly comprise North and South countries. In the meetings of the (enlarged) G7, the G20 and the UN General Assembly, the prioritisation of the Global South agenda in global governance has become most evident.

### ***The G7 and the Global South***

Fuelled by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and an increasingly assertive China, the G7 is positioning itself at the forefront of global efforts to defend democratic societies and the rules-based international order.<sup>12</sup> During its G7 presidency last year, Japan sought to strengthen cooperation within the G7 while simultaneously consolidating the G7's influence on key global developments. Accordingly, the G7 Summit held in Hiroshima from 19 to 21 May 2023 under Japan's chairmanship focused on relations with China and the related issue of "economic security", as well as the situation in Ukraine.<sup>13</sup>

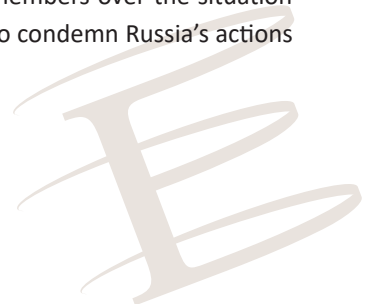
But the Global South also received much attention: Prime Minister Kishida and other G7 leaders repeatedly stressed the growing role of the South and the need to work with Southern partners - even if they are not democratic - on a range of issues, including climate, energy, and public health. Japan invited several leaders from the Global South to the G7 Hiroshima Summit. Together with invitations extended to Australia and South Korea, this made it a G7+ summit, like several other G7 leaders' meetings before it. The Global South was represented by India (G20 chair), Brazil (2024 G20 chair), Comoros (African Union chair), Indonesia (ASEAN chair), Cook Islands (Pacific Islands Forum chair) and Vietnam.<sup>14</sup>

Matters directly relevant to the Global South dominated the 40-page Summit Statement, including aid and debt, investment in infrastructure, climate change, environmental protection, maritime policy, energy, trade and the mobilisation of new resources. G7 leaders expressed strong support for accelerating the implementation of the SDGs.<sup>15</sup> The US pledged a \$250 million contribution to the Pandemic Fund. The G7 underscored the importance of multilateral development banks in addressing global challenges, and reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening public health. They also pledged to mobilise USD 600 billion to support quality infrastructure projects through the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), an initiative launched by the G7 in Hiroshima. Fifty years after its first meeting, the G7's openness to Global South issues could enable it to reach out decisively to emerging economies seeking closer ties with the world's leading group of democracies. And the G7 must also engage constructively and sustainably with less free countries to shape the global order.

Italy, which took over the G7 presidency from Japan on 1 January 2024, has stated that "relations with developing countries and emerging economies will be central. Engagement with Africa will be a key priority".

### ***India's G20 Presidency***

India's G20 presidency, running from the beginning of December 2022 until the end of November 2023, was held under the theme 'One Earth, One Family, One Future', highlighting the need for global cooperation.<sup>16</sup> Its priorities included green development, inclusive growth, SDG progress, technological innovation and modernising multilateral institutions for the 21st century. In preparation for the G20 Summit in New Delhi on 9-10 September, India hosted a virtual summit in February on the theme "The Voice of the Global South", in which 125 countries participated.<sup>17</sup> At the G20 Summit, India successfully facilitated agreement on the Declaration despite sharp divisions among G20 members over the situation in Ukraine. However, unlike the G20 summit declaration in the year before, this text failed to condemn Russia's actions against Ukraine.



One aspect of the Declaration has received little attention despite its importance. It is the commitment by the G20 industrialised countries, including the G7 (since they are all members of the G20), to work with the countries of the Global South to address some of their longstanding demands. An example is their commitment to “better integrate the perspectives of developing countries [...] into future G20 agendas and to strengthen developing countries’ voices in global decision-making”. Other commitments include accelerating action on the SDGs, scaling up related financing, improving the supply and production of medical supplies in developing countries, and reforming multilateral development banks. Furthermore, at the New Delhi Summit, the G20 invited the African Union to join its ranks. This move was a response to the persistent calls from the Global South. Thus, under the Indian Presidency, the G20 has made great strides in supporting the Global South.

Building on the Indian G20 Presidency, Brazil in the same role from the beginning of December 2023 until the end of November 2024 has defined three priorities which are fully supportive of the Global South, namely: (i) fighting hunger, poverty and inequality, (ii) the three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental), (iii) global governance reform.

### ***The UN High-Level week***

Leaders gathered in New York from 19 to 26 September 2023 for the High-Level Week of the 78th Session of the UN General Assembly against a backdrop of multiple crises, ranging from Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, a series of coups in Africa, and ongoing migration movements towards Europe, to climate change-related disasters and the overwhelming debt burden faced by many countries. A prevailing theme throughout the meetings was the Global South’s quest for more influence in global governance.

Opening the General Debate, UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned of growing instability. He lamented the lack of collective action in the face of interconnected crises and stressed the need for both the United Nations and the Bretton Woods system to adapt to today’s realities.<sup>18</sup> The debate focused on the reform of the United Nations, particularly the Security Council, and the sustainable development agenda. The High-Level Week of the 78th General Assembly also included sessions on financing for development, public health, the elimination of nuclear weapons, preparations for the Summit of the Future and ambitious action to combat climate change. In addition, the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) met in summit format to review progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.<sup>19</sup>

## **V. GLOBAL GOVERNANCE ISSUES OF GREAT CONCERN TO THE GLOBAL SOUTH**

The G7 and G20 Summits, the UN General Assembly, the BRICS Summit in August and the G77 Summit in September 2023 have brought to the fore an identifiable set of 7 global governance issues of significant concern to the Global South, namely:

### ***1. Peace and Security***

Leaders expressed deep concern about the failure of the United Nations to ensure global peace and security. They highlighted the ineffectiveness of the UN Security Council, notably due to existing veto arrangements and the imbalance in representation and pointed to a broad range of security threats.



## ***2. Reform of multilateralism/global governance***

Calls to reform multilateral institutions to make them more inclusive, effective, and accountable and to give all regions of the world a fair voice and equitable representation featured prominently in many meetings. Secretary-General Guterres led the way during the High-Level Week of the 78th UN General Assembly, arguing that this meant reforming the Security Council to reflect the world we live in today and transforming the international financial architecture so that it is truly universal and serves as a global safety net for developing countries in need.<sup>20</sup> The prevailing consensus among leaders echoed Guterres's views: multilateralism needs a fundamental overhaul to effectively address the challenges of the 21st century and ensure that institutions adequately reflect realities. Many countries called for the reform of the UN Security Council.

## ***3. Turbocharging the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development***

The holding of the SDG Summit on 18-19 September 2023 as part of the UN High-Level Week underscored the alarm expressed by the UN Secretary-General. This event occurred a year before the Summit of the Future, which will also address the SDGs, highlighting the increasing difficulty of meeting the 2030 target for implementing the SDGs. At the start of the SDG Summit, Guterres issued a stark warning: halfway to the 2030 deadline, the SDGs were at a crisis point, “with only 15 per cent of the targets [...] on track and many [...] going in reverse”. Leaders reaffirmed their unwavering commitment to achieving the 2030 Agenda in their Political Declaration. They called for urgent action to deliver on the UN Secretary-General's March 2023 proposal for an annual stimulus of no less than \$500 billion, a move seen as critical to achieving the SDGs.<sup>21</sup>

## ***4. Financing for Development***

Financing for development was at the forefront of all major global governance meetings. On 20 September 2023, Guterres called for a “global rescue plan” to advance the SDGs at a high-level event in New York right after the SDG Summit. He affirmed the importance he attached to an annual SDG stimulus of no less than \$500 billion and advocated for creating an effective debt relief mechanism. The Secretary-General also called for a fundamental reform of the business models of multilateral development banks to significantly increase their firepower. Moreover, Guterres pleaded for a “new Bretton Woods moment” to overhaul the current international financial architecture, which he described as “deeply skewed in favour of developed countries”. He outlined key challenges: a huge financing gap for the SDGs, estimated at \$3.9 trillion a year; developing countries facing borrowing costs up to eight times higher than developed countries; and around one in three countries worldwide at risk of financial crisis. There was broad support for an overhaul of the financial architecture.<sup>22</sup>

## ***5. Climate, energy, and related financing***

Climate change was a major topic at high-profile meetings, including the G7, G20 and UN summits, the BRICS and G77 meetings, and the COP28. There was broad agreement on accelerating efforts to implement the Paris Agreement. Discussions focused on mitigation, adaptation and securing adequate financial resources for developing countries. In its Summit Declaration, the G20 committed to actively promoting the tripling of global renewable energy capacity by 2030. At the Climate Ambition Summit in September, Guterres insisted that limiting the global temperature increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius remained feasible if the necessary efforts were made.<sup>23</sup> The COP 28 in Dubai in December resulted in pledges in the interest of the Global South, including recognition of the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities in addressing climate change. But no binding commitments were made. Despite an early breakthrough in the launch of a

fund to pay for ‘loss and damage’ from climate change, developing countries were disappointed: There was a lack of new financial commitments for transitioning away from fossil fuels and adapting to the impacts of climate change.<sup>24</sup>

### **6. Public health**

Leaders debating public health during the High-Level Week of the 78th UNGA focused on strengthening health systems, promoting universal health coverage, and preventing, preparing for, and responding to pandemics and health emergencies. Efforts centred on ensuring that lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic would be fully taken into account.<sup>25</sup>

### **7. Technological transformation**

Leaders in various meetings called for technological transformation, including digitalisation and artificial intelligence, to be used as drivers of sustainable development. In his “Our Common Agenda” report, the UN Secretary-General proposed including a Global Digital Compact in the Pact for the Future to provide a framework for digital governance.

Three aspects deserve attention. First, it is worth noting that the seven priorities could all be subsumed under the SDGs, except for the second: SDG16 does aim, among others, to promote “accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels”. However, discussions around this goal have primarily focused on the level of UN member states rather than institutions of global governance. Second, while these seven goals are essential for the Global South, at least some of them are also urgent from the perspective of the North, and a fuller consideration of the views of the global South is, in any case, essential for a functioning world order. Finally, unlike the G7, the G20 and UN meetings refrained from going beyond these priorities to address some of the most pressing challenges facing the North, as reflected in the G7 summit declaration. These encompass China’s assertive geopolitical role and the associated challenges of maintaining economic stability and security, along with the goal of ensuring the Indo-Pacific remains a free, open, and secure region. Discussions on these topics would have been too divisive.

## **VI. WHY THE UN-LED REFORM OF MULTILATERALISM MAY FALL SHORT**

The Global South has succeeded in elevating its primary concerns to a prominent position in major global governance meetings. But there are signs that UN-led efforts to reform multilateralism may fall short of the Global South’s aspirations. There are two main reasons for this:

On the one hand, Guterres never presented detailed proposals for ensuring a more balanced representation of countries in the key institutions of global governance. He confined himself to stressing the importance of progress on this issue in general. Some UN member states have expressed support in principle, but there has been no concerted, determined, and specific effort on their part to bring about change. Nowhere has the need for more progress on voice and representation been more evident than in the protracted debate on the reform of the UN Security Council. There is no sign that it is imminent, despite widespread calls for the Security Council to better reflect the realities of today’s world from the UN Secretary-General and many others, including the US President and the European Council President. Meeting as the G4 in New York on 21 September, the foreign ministers of Brazil, Germany, Japan, and India, all with a special interest in this issue, in a joint press statement expressed “strong concern at the persistent absence of meaningful progress on Security Council reform”.<sup>26</sup>



Another prominent example is the World Bank and IMF, where reform to give the countries of the Global South a more substantial influence remains just as hard to achieve. New efforts are underway to inject fresh capital into the World Bank and the IMF, but a push to address their under-representation is equally needed.

The second major obstacle that could prevent the UN Secretary-General's reform package from achieving its intended goals is the risk of further stalling progress on the SDGs. Guterres' first progress report on the implementation of 'Our Common Agenda' in October 2023, covering the SDGs, could only highlight achievements in a few areas, with work in most of the others 'in progress'.<sup>27</sup> In addition, considerable uncertainty remains about what will be possible by the time of the Summit of the Future. It is unclear whether the Pact for the Future can go beyond the Political Declaration of the SDG Summit in September, which already committed to accelerating the implementation of the SDGs.

In conclusion, the Summit of the Future and its Pact for the Future are unlikely to become a truly transformative moment for multilateralism and global governance. The initiatives presented by Guterres to recalibrate the United Nations in response to new challenges, such as the Digital Compact, a New Agenda for Peace and the modernisation of the UN dubbed "UN 2.0", are promising,<sup>28</sup> but depend on adequate support from UN member states. On their own, however, they will not provide the necessary boost for global multilateral cooperation.

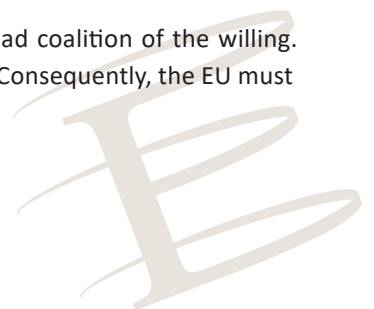
## VII. THE NEED FOR FURTHER ENHANCED EU ENGAGEMENT

European Council President Michel expressed the EU's support for 'Our Common Agenda' at the September General Debate in New York. He called for multilateralism to be put back on track, particularly the UN as the backbone of the global family. Crucially, he also supported reform of the Security Council to strengthen the representation of countries and regions with little or no representation. And he called for the Bretton Woods system to be made fairer, more inclusive, and more effective.<sup>29</sup> At the preparatory Ministerial Meeting for the Summit of the Future, also held during the High-Level Week in New York in September, High Representative Borrell expressed the EU's continued support for the Pact for the Future.<sup>30</sup>

The EU has a long history of cooperation with countries in the Global South, including former European colonies, and is therefore well-placed to reach out to the Global South. Instruments include political dialogue, trade, investment and development assistance. Cooperation covers a wide range of areas. The EU has significantly strengthened relations with countries outside Europe in recent years. EU leaders have met separately with their counterparts from Africa, Central and Latin America and South-East Asia. Launching an Indo-Pacific strategy in 2021 has upgraded the EU's relations with the Indo-Pacific region. In November 2023, a new partnership agreement was signed between the EU and the 79 countries of the Organisation of African, Caribbean, and Pacific States. Provisionally applied since the beginning of 2024, this agreement goes beyond mere development cooperation, marking a significant step in fostering a broader engagement between the EU and ACP countries. Despite recent setbacks, there is still hope for a breakthrough in negotiations on a trade agreement between the EU and the Mercosur countries (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay) before the end of the European Commission's mandate, which would create a market of 780 million people. The EU launched its ambitious Global Gateway Initiative in 2021 to promote global connectivity and help the world meet its infrastructure investment needs.

### *The missing strategy*

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. Consequently, the EU must



reach out to the Global South to find common ground on reforming multilateralism. A vision of how the Union could promote mutual understanding and cooperation with the Global South on multilateral reform must form part of a holistic EU strategy.

However, there needs to be much deeper reflection at the EU level on how to work with other countries to reform multilateralism in the current context. Regrettably, the Foreign Affairs Council's conclusions of 20 July 2023 on the EU's priorities for the 78th UN General Assembly did not elaborate on what the intended priority of "partnership building" would entail. Nor did they provide a strategic rationale.<sup>31</sup> It is unclear why there has not been a thorough internal EU debate, including also a joint communication of the High Representative and the Commission, to prepare for the Summit of the Future. The EU's present position on UN reform sharply differs from its past involvement. Specifically, leading up to the 2005 UN Summit, the EU robustly endorsed the reform plans proposed by then Secretary-General Kofi Annan. The Commission, the European Parliament, and the European Council played vital roles by issuing a Communication, a Resolution, and Conclusions, respectively. This united effort underscored the EU's dedication at that time to advance UN reform.<sup>32</sup>

Tellingly, beyond general words of welcome, there has not been any more detailed EU reaction to the recommendations of the High-Level-Board on Effective Multilateralism of April of 2023.<sup>33</sup> This body, co-chaired by a former Prime Minister of Sweden and a former President of Liberia, comprised ten eminent persons representing various constituencies in global decision-making. Established by the UN Secretary-General to assist UN Member States in preparing for the Summit of the Future, it issued a detailed report in April.<sup>34</sup> It notably called for the reinvigoration of global governance, including through "governance changes at the World Bank and IMF that improve representation and credibility". It also called for the expansion of the UN Security Council "to reflect adequately those regions that are chronically underrepresented".

In developing a strategy, the EU could build on the proposals the High Representative and the Commission put forward in 2021 on strengthening the EU's contribution to rules-based multilateralism.<sup>35</sup> Many remain relevant, including the suggestion that the EU should use its strength as a trading partner, donor and rule-setter to promote its values and interests globally. However, the proposals refrained from discussing what the emergence of a multipolar world means for multilateralism and the EU's role in global affairs in this context.

The critical question is whether the EU, at this point, can swiftly step up its engagement and bring innovative ideas to bear on the design of the Summit of the Future and the Pact for the Future rather than merely endorse proposals that the UN has essentially drafted. The EU should actively pursue an enhanced and leading role in shaping the draft Pact for the Future. This strategic engagement is essential because of the EU's unwavering commitment to multilateralism and its ability to bring a distinctive and valuable perspective to the ongoing discussions. Moreover, the outcome of the forthcoming Summit will significantly impact others' expectations of the EU, thus underscoring the importance of the EU's proactive engagement in the drafting process. Maximising participation in the preparation of the Summit will also lay the groundwork for the EU's engagement with the Global South and other stakeholders in the follow-up to the Summit of the Future and the Pact for the Future. Efforts to develop an EU strategy for engagement with the Global South on the reform of multilateralism should start as soon as possible with a thorough EU internal debate on the implications of a multipolar world, notably the rise of the Global South, for the EU's role in global affairs. Whether or not a strategy is in place by the time of the Summit of the Future, it remains an urgent necessity. Indeed, the forthcoming Summit does not mark the end of the road to reform but rather a milestone in revitalising the multilateral system.



### **Challenges ahead**

The broader political context influences the willingness of UN member states to implement reform commitments. Engaging with the Global South poses particular challenges due to persistent geopolitical competition and a prevailing perception of double standards attributed to the West. Indeed, Global South countries may hesitate to engage fully if they believe the West is merely paying lip service to a more equitable international order while concurrently continuing policies they have long opposed. An illustrative instance of what Southern countries view as duplicity is the strong, seemingly unconditional political support Western leaders provided to Israel during its war in Gaza following the large-scale attack by Hamas on Israel. Initially unmentioned was the fact that international humanitarian law also protects the Palestinians in Gaza. Much of the world thinks that the US cares more about European victims such as Ukrainians than about civilians in the Middle East and elsewhere. Similarly, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has led to a global divide with countries aligning either in support of Ukraine's defence, backing Russia, or, notably, a substantial group – the Global South – expressing support for neither Russia nor Ukraine. Many non-Western elites see this war as a European affair and reject the Western interpretation, framing it as an attack on the UN legal order and, therefore, a global existential threat. A large group of UN member states, representing the majority of the world's population, refrained from condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine.<sup>36</sup>

In the years ahead, the US-China relationship will continue to play an essential role in shaping the broader political context in which the EU's relations with the Global South will unfold. The US and China are actively engaged in the Global South, using various tools to expand their influence and counterbalance each other. When feasible, the EU must adopt a nuanced approach to bolster its strategic autonomy. Simultaneously, it should foster constructive and cooperative engagement with the US, China and other major global power centres. Such a balanced approach does not suggest equidistance between the US and China. Barring substantial shifts in US policy, including as a result of Donald Trump's possible reelection, the transatlantic relationship will persist as a cornerstone of the EU's external relations. This enduring alliance is deeply rooted in a shared historical legacy, a convergence of values, and common interests across various areas.

Then there is the delicate question: How can the EU engage effectively with partners whose values diverge from its own? As a values-driven actor in foreign policy, the EU champions human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. It has aligned with foundational documents such as the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which advocate global human rights. However, the interpretation and application of these universal norms vary across countries due to political, cultural, and historical differences.

In its pursuit of more profound engagement with countries in the Global South to revitalise multilateral cooperation, managing the divergence of value systems becomes a crucial issue. The EU fully understands that it must uphold its core values in multilateral cooperation. It, therefore, has to determine where and whether collaboration is possible with countries that do not share the EU's values. Perhaps we can rely on a distinction: while democratic governance may not be a prerequisite, adherence to international law, human rights and agreed rules is essential. It should also be possible to find common ground on issues like climate change, where values are not directly at stake.

The EU's long history of engagement with countries that do not share its values demonstrates the need for a nuanced approach. Chancellor Olaf Scholz explicitly endorsed the US National Security Strategy, which recognises the need to work with states that do not share democratic values but that support a rules-based order.<sup>37</sup> However, the EU will want to stick to multilateral or bilateral cooperation with like-minded countries on matters of paramount value, such as migration or security. In a best-case scenario, the EU's outreach to the Global South will help ensure that universal values exist in practice, not just on paper.



## CONCLUSION

The EU's foreign policy objectives require more significant and sustained involvement of the countries of the Global South in multilateral cooperation. The EU, therefore, has every interest in engaging with them to promote a common understanding of shared responsibilities and genuine solidarity in a multipolar world as the basis for effective multilateralism. While it is crucial to intensify the EU's contribution to the preparation of the Summit of the Future, there is also an urgent need for a thorough reflection of the EU internally on the implications of a multipolar world, notably the rise of the Global South, for its role in global affairs. On this basis, an EU strategy for engagement with the Global South on the reform of multilateralism should be developed and implemented in line with the overall objectives of the Summit of the Future. Initially, it would focus on critical countries of the Global South, while in a second step, it would seek to involve as many countries as possible at the earliest possible stage. Jointly implementing the outcomes of the Summit of the Future and sustaining exchanges while building on the many existing achievements and instruments could help the EU build a long-term constructive relationship with the Global South.

The EU's maximised support for the Summit of the Future and its proactive commitment to sustainable cooperation with the Global South enhance the chances of the UN initiative's success. At the same time, the EU's support helps advance the establishment of common principles for multilateral cooperation. Such principles can promote fairness and inclusion in line with the overarching goals of the Summit and create a more balanced and mutually beneficial world order. This strategic approach aligns with the collective interests of countries and positions the EU as a key architect in shaping a world order grounded in cooperation, fairness, and sustainable development, thereby securing its long-term influence.

At all times, Global South countries should see EU engagement as devoid of any attempt to draw them into an anti-China alliance, as any such perception could exacerbate existing global divisions. The EU should maintain a realistic perspective and recognise that the evolving US-China relationship will continue to weigh on its engagement with the Global South and that Global South countries want to keep their options open.





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