

THE EU'S STRATEGIC MULTILATERALISM
GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT IN AN ERA OF GREAT-POWER COMPETITION

Niklas Helwig



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- The crises of previous years and the rise of strategic competition have put the EU's traditional approach to multilateralism under pressure. The EU's pledge for "a more stringent and strategic approach to multilateralism" has become even more relevant with Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.
- Three adjustments to the EU's approach to multilateralism signify a more strategic approach. In a move towards a more instrumental engagement, the EU is using international cooperation as an avenue to protect its interests in the global competition.
- The EU is displaying more willingness than before to leverage its power bilaterally and through its work in international organisations.
- It is also more willing to focus on ad hoc frameworks in order to preserve the effectiveness of global cooperation and extend it to new areas of governance.
- Strategic multilateralism comes with certain risks attached. It can undermine the legitimacy of the formal multilateral system and the global protection of fundamental rights. The EU needs to weigh the benefits of a more strategic approach against the risks of global fragmentation.



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INTRODUCTION

The 2003 European Security Strategy defined “effective multilateralism” as one of the top priorities of the EU’s external action. Guided by its own experience as a regional integration project, the EU aims to “promote multilateral solutions to common problems, in particular in the framework of the United Nations”, as Article 21 of the Treaty on European Union states. Whether promoting human rights, ensuring rules-based international trade, fighting climate change, or securing the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the EU’s first course of action is to work closely with partners in the multilateral system. Thereby, the EU attempts – with varying degrees of success – not only to be represented through its member states, but also to present a common position behind an EU flag.

Almost twenty years later, the recently published Strategic Compass admits that this approach to multilateralism “has come under strong questioning”.¹ Great-power politics and a stricter interpretation of national sovereignty are on the rise. International principles, such as the territorial integrity of states or respect of human rights, are under pressure, as the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and the suffering of the local population shows. At the same time, the multilateral system is struggling to stay effective in the face of a power balance shift towards Asia and the Global South. In and outside the EU, governments increasingly highlight national sovereignty, further complicating cooperation.

Faced with these challenges, the EU is adjusting its approach to multilateralism. In a joint communication in 2021, the European Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy laid out a strategy for the EU’s multilateral engagement by calling for a “more stringent and strategic approach”.² This Briefing Paper analyses the central elements of this emerging strategic multilateralism.

Under the weight of global competition and the contestation of international norms, the EU is adopting a multilateralism that is less apologetic in the promotion of its interests, is increasingly ready to put its economic and diplomatic resources to use, and more problem-solving oriented when choosing frameworks for cooperation. However, the risks of this strategic approach to multilateralism also highlight the need for the EU to keep pressing for reforms of the formal multilateral system, as led by the UN for example.

KEY CHALLENGES FACING THE EU

The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine also signifies a historical juncture for the EU in multilateralism. The invasion marks the second time after the annexation of Crimea that Russia has violated the principle of territorial integrity enshrined in Article 2(4) of the UN Charter and in the OSCE founding principles of the Helsinki Accords. The aggression puts the credibility of the rules-based global and European security order under pressure. The war also reveals the ineffectiveness of the UN Security Council, in which Russia can veto any resolution condemning its actions. While the UN General Assembly’s vote on the resolution condemning the Russian invasion passed with 141 votes in favour, the more neutral stance of some countries is a sign that the Global South looks at the war in Ukraine from a different perspective and is particularly concerned about the looming food crisis and economic ripple effects. Since 24 February 2022, the EU has thus been faced with a new set of challenges in multilateralism to sustain rules-based cooperation and in seeking partners for its agenda.

The new situation comes at a time when the outlook for the EU in multilateralism has been in decline for years. The Brexit referendum in the UK and the election of Donald Trump as US president in 2016 already put pressure on the EU. As a direct consequence of Brexit, the EU lost a permanent member of the UN Security Council and an influential power in the G7/20 formats. Trump’s presidency highlighted the currents in US politics that perceive multilateralism as a constraint on national power and sovereignty

1 Council of the EU (2022) A Strategic Compass for a stronger EU security and defence in the next decade. Press release, 21 March. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/21/a-strategic-compass-for-a-stronger-eu-security-and-defence-in-the-next-decade/>.

2 European Commission/High Representative of the EU (2021) Joint communication to the European Parliament and the Council on strengthening the EU’s contribution to rules-based multilateralism. Brussels, 17 February, p. 2. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/joint-communication-european-parliament-and-council-strengthening-eu%E2%80%99s-contribution-rules_en.

rather than as an enabler of global cooperation. The US decision to leave the Iran nuclear agreement and to wage a maximum pressure campaign against Teheran, including extraterritorial sanctions on European firms, threatened to destroy what the EU saw as one of the major achievements of its effective multilateralism. While the Biden administration returned to US foreign policy traditions, the growing competition between the US and China means that global rules of cooperation, for example within the WTO, remain contested. While China adheres to many principles of multilateral cooperation and the functioning of the UN system, there is no denying that a deeper commitment to the values enshrined in the UN Charter is lacking.

At the same time, the EU is also faced with internal challenges. The EU is a special case in the multilateral system, as it is represented not only by its individual member states, but also as a collective actor. The 2009 Lisbon Treaty introduced the biggest upgrade to the EU's multilateral representation. For the first time, the EU gained legal personality, which paved the way for an "enhanced observer status" in the UN. The EU delegations – another Lisbon Treaty novelty – are generally seen to have offered a big improvement to the EU's multilateral representation. Looking beyond the UN to the wider multilateral landscape, the representation of the EU remains murky.³ Frequently, one will find both EU representatives and national delegates in the room working in parallel, for example in the Food and Agricultural Organisation. Other organisations, for example the International Monetary Fund, exclude the EU and member states speak on its behalf.

A joint voice is also worth little without a joint message. When it comes to the EU's position under the framework of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the EU's effectiveness as a multilateral actor is still constrained by the unanimity principle. In recent years, Hungary has caused frustration amongst its fellow EU member states by blocking statements on human rights or with regard to the peace process between Israel and Palestine. As a remedy, the European Commission has frequently proposed – without success – to use the legal options in the Lisbon Treaty in order to introduce qualified majority voting on some aspects of the CFSP.

FROM EFFECTIVE TO STRATEGIC MULTILATERALISM

Even before 24 February 2022, the EU had announced a more strategic approach to multilateralism. However, the need for a more stringent effort to ensure global solutions and rules-based cooperation has only increased with Russia's repeated violation of international law. It is possible to discern three recent adjustments to the EU's handling of international cooperation.

A more functional and interest-based approach

The EU and its member states have in recent years developed a more functional approach to global cooperation that sees multilateralism not as a goal in itself, but as a tool to reach objectives. In particular, France and Germany have been active in pushing for new formats that could be instrumental in achieving results on specific challenges ranging from international taxation and climate change to coping with pandemics. Examples include the German-led 'Alliance for Multilateralism' (later co-sponsored by France) that brings together mid-size countries from around the world to work on issues of common interest, such as cyber security and freedom of information, or the Paris Peace Forum, instituted by French President Emmanuel Macron in order to foster bottom-up initiatives and solutions to global challenges. The German Government's white paper on multilateralism (2021) and the EU's recent communication on multilateralism both reflect this goal-oriented approach and highlight international cooperation as a means of tackling the most important issues, which include new challenges in the health, digital and environmental spheres.

At first sight, the newfound focus on results seems to be a continuation of the EU's "effective multilateralism" from the early 2000s. However, back then the EU conceived effective multilateralism as an alternative to the more interest-based approach of the US after the Bush administration had used false evidence in an attempt to secure support from the UN Security Council for its invasion of Iraq. While not as brazen, US presidents representing the Democratic Party also had a more instrumental take on global cooperation. In contrast, the EU's effective multilateralism had a stronger emphasis on values and even hoped to foster an "international society" through multilateral engagement, as expressed in the 2003 European Security Strategy.

3 Gatti, Mauro (2021) "The EEAS in multilateral fora: Impact on EU coherence at the UN General Assembly". *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 26(1): 157–276.

The EU's idealistic ambition has now been dialled down, as the Union has developed a more hard-nosed approach to global cooperation. In the multilateral context, the recent Global Gateway initiative is a case in point. With the help of public and private infrastructure investments and technical assistance, the EU seeks to rival the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative and deepen its partnerships with countries in Africa and Asia. This geopolitical reinterpretation of EU assistance is part of a larger overhaul of the EU's development cooperation policy. The current EU multi-year budget already incorporated the distinct budget for development cooperation into one financial instrument for all third countries. While experts welcome the more coherent and strategic engagement with partner countries, they are concerned that a repurposing of financial assistance for political objectives might undercut the sustainable development goals and the EU's values and principles.⁴ There are signs that the EU sees international cooperation increasingly as a tool to respond to competition with China and Russia, rather than as a benevolent vehicle for value promotion.

Leveraging the EU's power

It is an often-repeated notion that the EU's influence in the multilateral system is minor considering its economic, regulatory, financial, and diplomatic resources. The EU's influence at the UN is a case in point. The EU delegation to the UN has about 60 staff members in addition to hundreds of member states' diplomats in national representations. However, despite its sizeable diplomatic presence, the EU has often struggled to translate this power into votes. After all, EU member states make up only 14 per cent of the UN membership, making them dependent on winning over partners for their initiatives globally.⁵

Previous announcements of a more concerted approach are now starting to bear fruit. A concrete example of how forces can be joined more effectively was the French-German shared presidency of the UN Security Council in early 2019. Instead of chairing the highest body of the UN for one month each, the largest EU member states presented a joint working programme.

It was also due to a concentrated effort of EU diplomacy that the UN General Assembly condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 2 March 2022 with an overwhelming majority of 141 votes with 5 against and 35 abstentions. In close cooperation with the US, EU diplomats put in extra hours to collect the votes, also using the bilateral embassies around the world to increase pressure on holdouts.⁶ While one cannot confirm that serious 'arm twisting' was part of the EU's efforts, it is safe to say that governments on the fence about how to vote also had to consider the implications that an abstention or vote against the motion would have for their financial and diplomatic relations with the EU. The breakdown of the vote shows that some of the countries that walked a fine line with regard to the conflict and were in general more cautious about openly criticising Russia, such as Indonesia or Israel, voted for the resolution. However, reservations about the resolution proved strong in Asian and African countries with many abstaining, including South Africa and India, which had previously been courted in the Alliance for Multilateralism (see Figure 1). Despite the large majority, the votes condemning the Russian invasion only represented 41 per cent of the world's population.

Another way for the EU to leverage its power is with a more coordinated approach to fill high-level positions in multilateral organisations with European candidates. The idea is to present joint candidates instead of sparking intra-European competition between several member state candidates who see their individual chances diminished. Indeed, EU member states have increased this cooperation. Other efforts include coordinating and supporting member states' bids for a non-permanent seat in the UN Security Council, with Slovenia having put in the 2024 candidacy. The EU also uses more direct ways to leverage its economic clout internationally. The most obvious example is the EU's sanctions policy. Other examples of coercive norm promotion include the idea of a Carbon Border Adjustments Mechanism (CBAM) to promote the greening of the global economy, or due diligence legislation that aims to protect human rights throughout global value chains.

4 Teevan, Chloe et al. (2022) The Global Gateway: A Recipe for EU Geopolitical Relevance? ECDPM Discussion Paper 323. <https://ecdpm.org/wp-content/uploads/Global-Gateway-recipe-EU-geopolitical-relevance-ECDPM-Discussion-Paper-323-2022.pdf>.

5 Borchmeyer, Sebastian & Mir, Wasim (2021) Increasing the Impact of the European Union at the United Nations in New York. Konrad Adenauer Foundation. <https://www.kas.de/en/web/newyork/single-title/-/content/increasing-the-impact-of-the-european-union-at-the-united-nations-in-new-york>.

6 See recording of the FIIA seminar 'Multilateralism and the state of the international order after Russia's invasion of Ukraine'. 17 June 2022. https://youtu.be/D4oA_OOB8QA.

Country votes on the UNGA resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, 2 March 2022

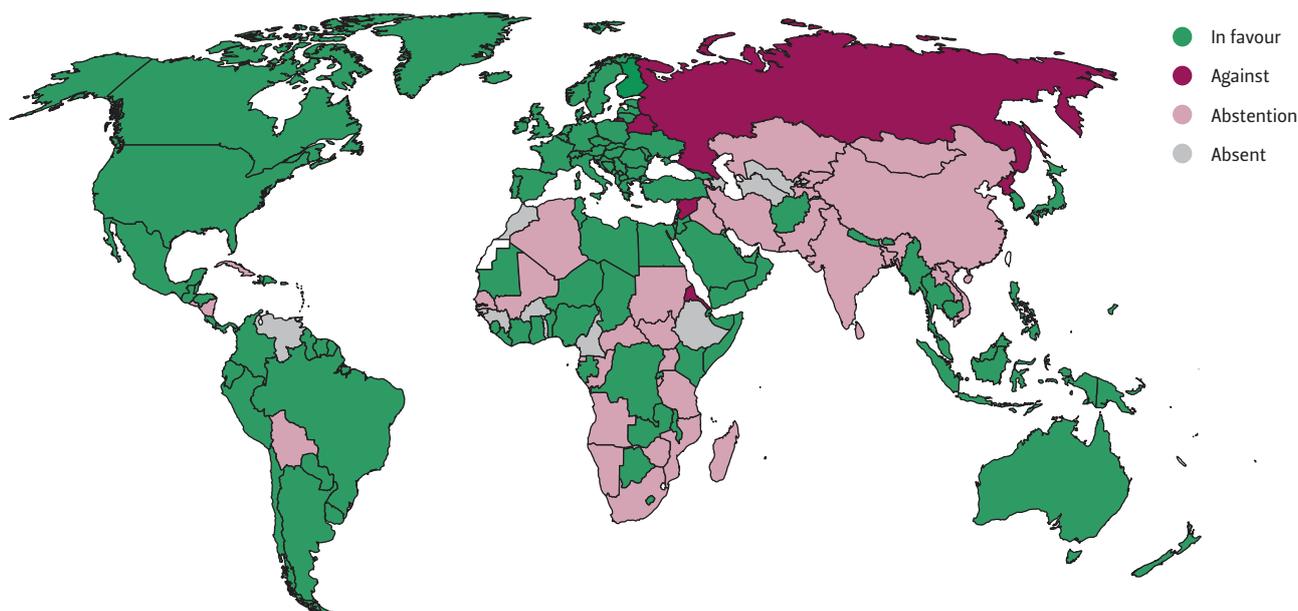


Figure 1. Map of UN General Assembly vote on Resolution ES-11/1 (Ukraine), 2 March 2022
Source: Own compilation based on UNGA Resolution ES-11/1

Ad hoc and issue-based multilateralism

Much of the EU's focus in its international diplomacy has been on formal multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations or the World Trade Organisation. As the reaction to the Russian invasion showcases, these institutionalised forms of global cooperation are still the most important avenues for the EU. However, adjacent to these major multilateral structures, the EU and its member states have long been engaged in issue-specific formats. Some of these, such as the P5+1 negotiations on Iran's nuclear programme, have been closely tied to the United Nations, while others, such as the Global Alliance on Vaccines and Immunisation (GAVI) that the EU supports, are built around public-private partnerships. In the EU's quest to extend multilateral governance to new issue areas, ad hoc formats play a key role.⁷

Ad hoc or issue-based formats are seen as more efficient in addressing specific challenges when a multilateral route is either too slow or blocked by national interests. With regard to defence and security issues, the use of "coalitions of the willing" (e.g. interventions in Iraq or Syria) or exclusive alliances (e.g. the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between Australia, India, Japan, and the US, or more recently

the AUKUS pact between Australia, the UK, and the US) is a frequent tool used by the US and others to ensure interventions and project global power. However, ad hoc formats are also increasingly becoming a tool of choice for the EU to face the growing complexity of international crises and the increase in global economic and technological competition.

New and informal constellations often emerge when the EU and other players attempt to expand multilateralism to as yet ungoverned areas.⁸ The EU was, for example, the driving force behind the Global Compact for Migration that was set on track by the UN in 2016. However, after the US Trump administration and some EU member states, including Hungary, Austria and the Czech Republic, withdrew their support from the process, the compact was redesigned as a non-binding, intergovernmental agreement. The Global Compact for Migration is an example of how the EU may fail as a multilateral actor because of the sovereignty concerns of its own member states. At the same time, it represents a first step in governing a crucial and transnational challenge.

A more successful example in recent years is the EU's support for the COVAX programme, which supports global COVID-19 vaccination efforts in low- and

⁷ Expert interview by author, Brussels, 20 June 2022.

⁸ Schuette, Leonard & Dijkstra, Hylke (2022) The show must go on: The EU's quest to sustain the multilateral order since 2016. Paper prepared for the EUSA Conference, Miami, 19-21 May 2022. <https://www.eustudies.org/conference/papers/download/812>.

middle-income countries. The EU played a pivotal role in setting up a multilateral framework for vaccine donations after the Trump administration became embroiled in a blame game with China and did not show particular signs of leadership on the issue. Bilateral and uncoordinated donations risked being impractical. The EU and its member states eventually provided a third of the vaccine funding for the initiative.

In its 2021 multilateralism paper, the EU vowed to promote multilateral cooperation on other as yet un-governed issues, including Artificial Intelligence (AI) and cyber security. A host of initiatives to regulate the ethical, sustainable and security aspects of AI have been put forward in the form of bilateral proposals, as part of the informal G7 and within the formal OECD framework.⁹ The nascent and fragmented governance illustrates the downsides of ad hoc multilateralism and the lack of an inclusive and encompassing UN process.

The expansion of multilateralism into new policy areas often takes place in the G7 or G20 frameworks. The format is attractive in allowing its members to take quick and coordinated action on pertinent issues. The latest G7 summit in June 2022 in Germany serves as a good example, as the leaders put forward a Global Alliance for Food Security together with the World Bank. While these kinds of coordinated responses can be efficient in addressing the crisis of the moment and can spur further multilateral engagement, they are not necessarily intended to provide sustainable solutions for long-term challenges. Another issue with regard to the Gx system concerns representation. While smaller EU member states are represented through the EU as a full member of the G20 and as a non-enumerated member of the G7, the spotlight still remains on the big member states in the room that have to consider their own interests. However, the recent G7 summit in Germany showed that following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the issue of representation of the Global South has been recognised. The German government had invited five guest countries – India, South Africa, Senegal, Indonesia, and Argentina – to join three out of the seven working sessions.

CONCLUSIONS: THE RISKS OF STRATEGIC MULTILATERALISM

The EU's shift towards strategic multilateralism comes with potential downsides and risks attached. Critics warn of an emerging "multilateralism à la carte"¹⁰ in which the blockage of reforms of international governance institutions leads to a fragmentation of global cooperation. By engaging in strategic competition, the EU risks contributing to the splintering of global governance and the negative effects it produces. One of the biggest risks is that the legitimacy of the formal multilateral frameworks will be further undermined. The Chinese and American sovereignty-focused and interest-based approach towards the UN and the WTO has already damaged the formal multilateral system. The EU has focused on keeping the multilateral status quo afloat, for example through its 2020 initiative to institute an alternative to the paralysed Appellate Body of the WTO, or by lobbying for a powerful UN General Assembly resolution to trump the dysfunctional UN Security Council. However, when it comes to reforming or deepening multilateral organisations, its efforts have focused more often than not on informal formats.

A second risk is that ad hoc constellations are less efficient in the management of challenges related to the global commons, such as the climate, natural resources and biodiversity, which profit from binding and widely-shared commitments. This is connected to the third risk, which is that strategic multilateralism might promote solutions that lack accountability and global representation. The recent experiences in relation to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and its economic fallout have shown that a broad representation of the Global South in multilateral affairs is important for the EU to stay relevant.

Fourth, connecting multilateral initiatives with the institutional framework of the UN also guarantees that principles of human rights, rule of law, transparency and sustainability are monitored in the implementation. Strategic multilateralism thus requires a constant check that it does not undermine the main objectives of the EU's foreign policy that put universal values and formal multilateralism at the centre of action. Towards that end, strategic multilateralism can only work when combined with the EU's engagement in the formal multilateral arena. In practice, this means that even if multilateral cooperation is pursued outside the

9 Garcia, Eugenio (2022) "Multilateralism and Artificial Intelligence: What Role for the United Nations?" In Tinnirello M. (ed.) *Global Politics of Artificial Intelligence*. Routledge.

10 Patrick, Stewart (2015) *Multilateralism à la Carte: The New World of Global Governance*. Valdai Papers 22. <https://valdaiclub.com/files/11399/>.

UN framework, for example as part of the G7 or G20, the EU and its member states should seek ways of co-operation with UN actors and processes. The recent Secretary-General's report "Our Common Agenda" (2021) shows that the UN is also opening to new ways of international cooperation and, for example, engages in the COVAX framework and G7 infrastructure initiatives.

The EU and its member states have to be prepared for setbacks in multilateral governance. The growing tensions between the US and China might make formal multilateral cooperation even more difficult in the future, which will force the EU to stay nimble and come up with quick-fix solutions to ensure the status quo of multilateral cooperation. The 2024 US presidential

elections loom large in this regard and might bring (back) a more unilateralist leader to the White House. At the same time, EU governments need to be prepared for the fact that the Global South might not share its priorities and values and will be increasingly difficult to bring on board when it comes to joint initiatives.

Given the declining share of Europe's population and economic power in the world, multilateral co-operation is of immense value for EU member states and can in no way be disregarded even by the largest member states. The competitive international environment makes a more strategic EU approach to multilateralism necessary to leverage the EU's powers and interests. Yet it cannot come at the expense of the formal multilateral system. /