

Task Force 4: Peace, Security, and Global Governance



Toward a New Age of Multilateralism*

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Abstract

This policy brief urges the Group of Seven (G7) to defend, expand, and re-invent multilateral structures capable of coping with the global challenges of the 21st century. It outlines how global challenges make a comprehensive, strategically long-lasting, and inclusive international order now more urgent than ever. It also argues that the G7 is well advised to contribute to the call of the United Nations Secretary-General to forge a new global consensus with its upcoming Summit of the Future. Finally, any G7 effort to strengthen multilateralism cannot be successful if it lacks a full understanding of the views and issues beyond the G7 countries and the so-called Global South.

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In the first section, the policy brief tries to clear up the misunderstanding that nationalism begets sovereignty and security, or that like-minded international coalitions achieve a better global dynamic in problem solving. On the contrary, the policy brief argues that sovereignty in the 21st century depends largely on effective multilateralism and whether *multilateral* coalitions can more effectively solve global problems than *multipolar* coalitions. A truly global approach toward global problem solving is needed, keeping in mind that environmental damage, poverty, economic failure and injustice, the disempowerment of people, and resource scarcity are the rising causes for conflicts. Therefore, the G7 is now called upon to work on a comprehensive risk report and align its policies and institutional structures with the analysis of global threats, and additionally to organize an inclusive process with all stakeholders to elaborate its proposal for the future of multilateralism.

Finally, if we want to achieve a sustainable, resilient, and just economy and society on all government levels, then the G7 should involve local actors and gain the support of the international community.

Proposal: A Call to Strengthen Universal and Inclusive Multilateralism

United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres has called for a Summit of the Future to begin an open dialogue on the future of the UN and the multilateral system by 2024. *The G7 together with the T7 should actively participate in this discussion and make proposals for this process to overcome blockades in the discussion.*

Safety in Numbers: Turning the Tide of the Decoupling Trend in International Relations

An increasing number of think tanks, politicians, and analysts now advocate for a “national and regional strategic autonomy.”¹ This trend has been triggered by (i) the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, which exposed the fragility of trade chains and (ii) the Russian Federation’s war on Ukraine, which weaponized trade and natural resources. Following these events, some observers noted an inherent vulnerability in an interconnected world and subsequently called for de-globalization (Cowan 2023).

Proponents of “strategic autonomy” argue that it can provide a higher degree of “sovereignty,” which will in turn strengthen security both in terms of defense and trade. This discussion is mirrored by a concept intended to challenge multilateralism: plurilateralism. While this paper

¹ “The European Union’s quest of open strategic autonomy is a necessary response to our rapidly changing and increasingly transactional world of intensifying great power rivalry, producing complex, multidimensional and fluid challenges” (Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament 2023).

defines multilateralism as the comprehensive international cooperation of numerous states that includes permanent institutions and a rule-based order, plurilateralism focuses on the cooperation between nation states and emphasizes their sovereignty.² In line with the plurilateral concept, adherents maintain that the great powers ought to take care of the international system, be it in keeping the peace, defending trade chains, or ensuring the effective work of international institutions. In line with this concept, there are proposals under consideration to establish a new global governance system based around a “G3” or “G4,” composed of the United States, the People’s Republic of China, India, and the European Union.

Another example challenging this kind of universal, multilateral approach is a “club building approach” for addressing global challenges. At the G7 Summit in Elmau, Germany, in June 2022, the G7 announced the “climate club” (G7 2022). The “club idea” can easily be understood in response to the unsatisfactory results of international climate negotiations and the glacial pace of such global endeavors (Liboreiro 2022). Therefore, the club idea aims to bring a new dynamism into a process that works too slowly, by bringing like-minded actors to the table, including from the nation-state level and the private sector.³

Although the founders of the G7 climate club emphasize the openness and inclusiveness of the process (Euronews 2022), the current trends we are now seeing of club building, plurilateralism, and strategic autonomy are detrimental to a comprehensive, multilateral approach. *The G7 should, wherever possible, strengthen the multilateral approach and always seek to closely coordinate proposals with the G20, the UN bodies, development and international financial institutions, and countries affected by the issues at hand.* As a result of this process, the G7 members can show their ability to focus on global problem-solving and not just in defending their own privileged positions.⁴ An important precondition for this is to make a clear prioritization of challenges that can only be solved internationally and where a common value base is not a mandatory prerequisite for global action. The Paris Climate Agreement and the Agenda 2030—both signed in 2015—give a clear indication of common global priorities.

In a connected world where challenges, risks, and security issues are often global, we argue that the retreat into national, bilateral, or plurilateral problem-solving is doomed to fail in the long run.⁵ After all, studies have shown that nation states embedded in international institutions gain more agency for taking action and finding solutions (Engels and Schwartz 1985), and even the most powerful economies cannot solve global crises like health, climate, loss of biodiversity, or growing global poverty on their own (UN 2023a). That is why we need international agreements that factor in the complexity of challenges and the interdependent nature of crises and give voice to those who are most affected by the decision-making process.

² The exaggeration of sovereignty was the extreme emphasis on national self-interest (“me-first approach”), as found in the rhetoric of United States President Trump and many right-wing political movements (NBC News 2019; Zakaria 2020).

³ In an excellent report on the climate club, the authors recommend including more than G7 countries and “acknowledging differences in countries’ rationale for joining, their climate policy mix” (London School of Economics 2022).

⁴ In its latest human rights report, Amnesty International criticized the so-called West’s robust response to the Russian Federation’s aggression against Ukraine, which contrasts sharply with a deplorable lack of meaningful action on grave violations by some of their allies (Amnesty International 2023).

⁵ The 2023 Munich Security Report is a recent example for sticking with the national and just geopolitical logic of the 20th century (Munich Security Conference 2023).

Revamping International Fora for Today's Global Challenges and Security Risks

Founded in the aftermath of World War II, the composition, tasks, and working methods of the UN reflect the world that gave rise to it. After the shock of World War II, the clear focus at its inception was on preventing war. While the dangers of war, nuclear attack, and inhumane regimes still persist, in the 21st century we face global risks on a different plane. While the danger caused by the climate crisis has been widely acknowledged, additional problems—like pandemics, poverty, and the loss of biodiversity—could prove to be equally catastrophic. New risks require new risk assessments and responses that include reforming the institutional make up of fora like the UN and the UN Security Council to reflect more accurately—and cope with—the risks we now face.

Much has been written about these future risks (e.g., WHO [n.d.]; WEF [2023]; GCF [2023]; Funke Group [n.d.]). A common thread among these assessments is that no single state, economy, or business can solve these challenges alone; instead, we need to act in concert with other sectors, such as the business community, to face threats that threaten our collective security. When the UN was founded, the primary concern was to prevent nuclear Armageddon; now, however, challenges are much more complex and interrelated. The image of a flap of a butterfly's wings that can trigger a hurricane on the other side of the world—which is meant to illustrate the world's interdependencies and vulnerabilities—remains true today.

Therefore, this policy brief urges the G7 to (i) establish more comprehensive risk and security assessments in line with the hazards now faced, including but not limited to environmental and social aspects as a top priority,⁶ and (ii) earmark financial resources in line with this new assessment.⁷ At a later stage, we also urge the G7 to recognize the need for a system change for a sustainable and resilient future. Such a system change obviously includes an entire new economic and financial paradigm⁸ and cooperation in a multi-stakeholder format.

Revitalizing Multilateralism for an Inclusive and Sustainable International System

Some institutions can no longer solve the problems for which they were created.⁹ It is now our task to install a new, equitable, and functioning institutional structure capable of quickly and credibly addressing this century's most urgent challenges. For example, the permanent members of the UN Security Council reflect postwar priorities, and now we see that this and similar bodies fail to solve current conflicts. Although it is beyond the scope of this brief, over the long term, we argue for

⁶ Compare the related research calling for a new paradigm in economics (Fleurbaey, Kanbour, and Snower 2021).

⁷ The debate on reforming the World Bank signals the need to restructure financial and policy thinking to improve sustainability and resilience. The global narrative needs to be changed from a perception of how costly measures are to how costly it would be if action is not taken (World Bank 2023).

⁸ Dennis Snower and David Slone Wilson proposed such a system change (Snower and Wilson 2023).

⁹ The reluctance to discuss a reform of the UN Security Council in the UN future forum debate points to an absent willingness to reform on behalf of the permanent members. The G7 can send a powerful signal if they accept reforms for the UN Security Council.

rethinking the composition of the Security Council to better reflect criteria besides the avoidance of nuclear conflict.

Updating the structures of international institutions will necessarily include strengthening the role of the so-called “Global South,” in particular African voices. *In concrete terms, an easy step for the G7 is to invite the African Union as a regular guest to the G7 summits and involve African ministers in G7 ministerial meetings. This proposal is also valid for the Group of Twenty (G20) presidencies, and the G7 should make the case in the G20 for a permanent seat for the African Union. In addition, at the Summit of the Future, the G7 ought to campaign to include of the global civil community in the debate and decision-making process.*

Besides a fair representation of all regions, continents, Weltanschauungen (world views), and religions, global institutions gain legitimacy as more people see inclusive and diverse participation. Therefore, we should strive to have not only nation states in international fora but also representatives of parliaments, local entities,¹⁰ and most-vulnerable groups. The influence of entities in a new global stakeholder system should follow new criteria of assessing the influence of states not solely based on economic, political, and military power but also on “softer” aspects like humanitarian commitments, ecological footprint, engagement in international institutions, the ability to generate and share goods, and the development of new concepts that promote global well-being.¹¹

Having said this, an international body composed of hundreds of members will not work efficiently. To address this, the number of participants can be limited by clustering groups. For example, the European Union could gain a seat to represent the European perspective, and this proposal can work for the African Union as well. Another example is the Vulnerable Twenty (V20) Group which is composed of 58 nation states. The mechanism in the G7 and G20 of including engagement groups is also an instrument for better representation, insights from different groups of society, and increased legitimacy. For this kind of multilateral forum, it makes sense to have a general assembly, a board and presidium, and a permanent bureau.¹² The chance of being involved in this kind of multilateral institution has the power to motivate countries and other potential stakeholders to join forces internationally. This can help forge a new global identity in the face of planetary challenges.

Any effective reform of the international system to address global challenges will require broad acceptance—or worldwide approval, in other words—to be successful. *To establish a trustful relationship with international civil society, the G7 ought to establish roundtables and townhall meetings (in their member states and beyond) to open the debate on the future multilateral*

¹⁰ The fact that the G7 and G20 established the “urban track” acknowledges that regional and local perspectives need to be represented in global problem solving. Regional entities do not only know how to implement necessary measures and work closely with citizens, but in the 21st century there is a visible trend that non-state regional authorities play a crucial role for the acceptance of governance (Hüsken and Obeidi 2022).

¹¹ There are numerous reports and studies about the problem of measuring soft power aspects and its impact in foreign policies. (See British Council 2021; Chan 2020; Yun 2018; Gallarotti 2022; Scheler and Knüpfer 2021). This paper calls for a normative approach

¹² There should be consensus that the selection process for representatives in multilateral bodies follows strict ethical guidelines. For example, the fact that the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28) is chaired by a businessperson from an oil company is extremely damaging to the cause of the climate conference.

system at the local, regional, and national levels and prepare proposals for the UN Summit of the Future. It would be wise to request that the established G7 engagement groups then transpose these dialogues in all G7 countries. This kind of dialogue could help to prioritize positions and overcome government-centric views, thus opening up options for compromise.

Closing

A new institutional architecture will not be enough to solve global challenges: There is a need to think about how to foster and finance progressive change in communities, with the goal of making societies and economies more just, sustainable, and resilient. The international community needs to prove that the multilateral system serves all people and regions. This will require allocating “fresh resources” as a sign of this commitment, be it through direct financial funding from the “Global North” to “Global South” or through other reforms. The world made a commitment in 2015 when a large majority agreed on the Sustainable Development Goals and on the Paris Climate Agreement. It is now time to act on an institutional and financial level.¹³

¹³ See the dramatic appeal of the United Nations Secretary-General (UN 2023b).

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