



● European Power

Multilateral changes: Turn and face the strange

Russia's war on Ukraine has exposed the weaknesses of the already creaking multilateral system. Europeans need to accept the radical changes that are under way and adapt their approach to international cooperation



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Commentary · 12 July 2023 · 6 minute read

Legend has it that, in 1787, Russia's Prince Potemkin – in an attempt to spare Catherine the Great the grim realities of the recently annexed Crimean peninsula – ordered entire villages consisting only of cheerfully painted facades to be built along the route of her inspection. In many respects, the institutions and organisations of multilateralism are Potemkin villages of today. The buildings exist and host diplomats from all over the world for meetings and negotiations. But, more often than not, they draw a blank when faced with the world's most pressing problems.

A glaring example of this was when the Russian Federation took over the presidency of the United Nations Security Council in April 2023. The very country that has flagrantly violated the most fundamental principles of the UN charter – and whose president is subject to an International Criminal Court arrest warrant for war crimes – now led a body whose core mission is to maintain international peace and security. In a further descent into parody, Russia even organised a debate on “effective multilateralism through the defence of the principles of the charter of the United Nations”.

The multilateral system, with the UN and its various subsidiary bodies at its heart, failed to deter Russia from attacking its neighbour and is now unable to put an end to the aggression. But Russia's invasion is only accelerating a pre-existing deterioration of the UN's ability to play a decisive role in conflict resolution.

Moreover, the conflict is serving as a multiplier for a series of crises that have tested the system. International institutions have coped poorly in a world of pandemics, deglobalisation, climate change, economic turbulence, and great power confrontation. The multilateral system has become increasingly fragmented, with countries turning more and more towards exclusive regional or ideological clubs. Europeans need to respond to these radical changes. If they do not, they run the risk of becoming the defenders of last resort for the world of yesterday. Instead, and to shape the future, they need to develop a greater willingness to adapt their approach towards their partners – both within the collective institutions and in other more flexible formats.

A moment of clarity

Developing countries cannot relate to the Western call to “jointly defend the rules-based international order” against Russia’s aggression. They claim that the order has not delivered for them, that it is “unequal, discriminatory and unrepresentative”. They point out that the United States and European countries have themselves undermined the rules on many occasions, from the invasion of Iraq to executions by drone in the context of the “war on terror”. In turn, although these states mostly vote to condemn Russia’s aggression at the UN General Assembly, few follow this up by joining Western-led sanctions or providing military support for Ukraine.

India’s minister of external affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, emphasised in June 2022 that “Europe has to grow out of the mindset that Europe’s problems are the world’s problems, but the world’s problems are not Europe’s problems.” European policymakers should note that this is not (or at least not predominantly) a problem of “a battle of narratives”, in which the countries of the global south meekly succumb to Russian and Chinese anti-Western messages. The developing world wants a new approach – not just new words. In fact, many non-Western countries see the war against Ukraine as an expression of a transition to a post-Western world.

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Already before Russia’s war, increasing unilateralism and great-power rivalry between the US and China had paralysed global institutions like the World Health Organization and the World Trade Organization or turned them into arenas of national power politics. Europeans responded to these developments by doubling down on trying to keep the system running. Now, the war is affecting cooperation in all international forums – even the most

technocratic.

Europeans face a double challenge. In my interviews with them, representatives from EU countries have made clear that, on the one hand, they see maintaining the functioning of international institutions (however deficient their results) as an absolute priority, which is why they want to prevent Russia's war on Ukraine petrifying all processes of institutional coordination. They are also aware that the countries of Africa, Latin America, and Asia want to stop their policy priorities becoming collateral damage of the war. On the other hand, they want to isolate Russia internationally and to forge the broadest possible alliance against the country, as well as prevent impunity. So, the task is to demonstrate that aggression in the UN system comes at a price while keeping the system functional as best as possible.

Europeans' focus on defending the existing system is only too understandable. They have benefited excessively from the existing order. Europe's growth, prosperity, and economic stability depend to a large extent on a functioning multilateral trading system. In the past, Europeans have been successful in advancing their global agenda through multilateral processes and institutions, for example, on combatting climate change or advancing global health cooperation. Multilateralism is not only a cornerstone of the European Union's external policy, as expressed in the bloc's Strategic Compass, but part of its own identity. The EU sees itself as both a result and a champion of the idea that the spoils of international cooperation are divisible, that international politics is not about who benefits most, but everyone being better off when they cooperate.

Indeed, many institutions are still performing a meaningful role. The norms, practices, and institutions that underpin the established nuclear order remain largely as they were before the war, and have so far helped to deter Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, from using nuclear weapons. The climate convention is a significant achievement that is still evolving. And, despite strategic competition, formats such as the "open-ended working group on reducing space threats through norms, rules and principles of responsible behaviors", established by the UN General Assembly in 2021, has been advancing discussions among members to protect outer space as a global common.

Global problems such as these will always require some degree of coordination across ideological lines to resolve, even if just on the more technical side. But European hopes that the shortcomings of international institutions can be fixed through the mantra of "reform" tend to be largely delusional. The system has so far proved extremely resistant to fundamental change, as can be seen in the seemingly endless debate over security council reform.

A response to reality

International cooperation is increasingly organised through various clubs of like-minded countries. Informal formats such as the G7 have become more important. An growing number of countries have expressed interest in joining the BRICS group of emerging economies. US treasury secretary Janet Yellen and Canada's finance minister Chrystia Freeland are talking about reorienting trade policy towards "friend-shoring", aiming to deepen the social and political ties among democracies. China, meanwhile, hopes to attract friendly states and establish an alternative post-Western system of international governance through, among other things, three new diplomatic initiatives: the Global Security Initiative, the Global Development Initiative, and Global Civilization Initiative. Coalitions of the willing have also emerged between various governments and the private sector, for example in the GAVI vaccine alliance.

This 'clubbism' risks exacerbating the global trend towards fragmentation. Equally, coalitions of the willing can play an important role when traditional channels are blocked, or slow-moving bureaucracy hinders progress. The main divide is not comprehensive institutions v clubs, but collective institutions v like-minded ones – so the G20 is precisely the kind of organisation that could play a useful role in a more multipolar world, but that is often held back by the divergent views of its members.

As Anthony Dworkin has previously argued, Europeans should follow a twin-track strategy: seeking to revitalise institutions that include rival powers but also promote deeper cooperation with like-minded countries. They should evaluate individual policy areas according to whether the established institutions and organisations are producing effective results – and press for reforms where these promise to be successful. At the same time, they should consider new formats that effectively complement the existing system or even replace it where it fails to deliver any results. Informal cooperation with a group of actors in specific areas can be an opportunity to advance cooperation and forge new alliances.

In doing so, Europeans need to signal to the countries in the global south that they want to create new and sustainable partnerships in ways that create value addition for all. To build Europe's credibility, these partnerships need to go beyond traditional aid and lending programmes. Europe's energy transition offers a chance to do this if it functions a means of economic transformation, as does climate finance and technology cooperation or facilitating greater inclusion in internet governance.

If those initiatives really support the needs of developing countries, Europeans will find that they are still attractive partners for the many actors that share a common interest in a workable international system. And only through such credible deeds can Europeans succeed

in developing an equally credible narrative about the “common base” of international cooperation with broad international appeal – based, for example, on commitments to defending states’ sovereignty, advancing international economic development, and embracing a pluralistic multilateral system in which states with differing value systems can still work together.

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Anthony Dworkin, Rafael Loss, Jana Puglierin (eds.)

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