



● European Power

## Multilateral values: European ideals under pressure

The West no longer has a monopoly on values at the UN. But Europeans can shape a new narrative in the changing multilateral system by emphasising their commitment to sovereignty, development, and openness



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After a recent trip to India, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell blogged that while he understood “in a multipolar world everyone wants to express his or her own truth,” this needs to be underpinned by “a common base of values and principles on which we agree.” From a European perspective, at least in the context of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, it seems self-evident that such a “common base” would include respect for national sovereignty and international law.

Yet, European representatives at the United Nations and their US counterparts have been unable to persuade big non-Western democracies, such as India and South Africa, to back Western positions over Ukraine. Brazil has also begun to tilt towards Russia, offering to mediate peace while blaming NATO members for fuelling the war by arming Kyiv.

Many other Asian, African, and Latin American states have backed Ukraine. But diplomats from these regions are demanding that richer countries invest more in the developing world’s economic growth and response to climate change. Although these demands are not new, Western officials are suddenly listening more attentively as they aim to rally the rest of the world against Moscow. And non-Western officials insist that their countries’ economic needs – and their broader conceptions of economic and social rights – require at least as much attention as Ukraine.

There are several possible explanations for this new era of friction at the UN. Many members are waiting for a stronger indication of the trajectory of the war before they decide how to

deal with Russia and the West. Short-term crises, such as inflation and last year's spike in global food prices, have also motivated non-Western nations to unite in demanding more attention from the West. Moreover, these nations have not forgotten Western countries' decision to hoard covid-19 vaccines when they first became available.

Even so, deeper questions of 'values' still underpin debates about the specific dimensions of multilateralism. European countries have promoted a liberal vision of political and civil rights through frameworks such as the UN – and should continue to do so. But they also need to develop a narrative about the “common base” of international cooperation with broad international appeal. Such a narrative could rest on three commitments: defending states' sovereignty; advancing international economic development; and embracing a pluralistic multilateral system in which states with differing value systems can still work together.

## Contested values in a changing multilateral system

Since the beginning of Russia's all-out war, many Western observers have framed the conflict as a clash between democracy and autocracy on a global scale. By contrast, non-Western observers have tended to frame frictions over development and climate change in “north-south” terms.

Neither of these framings is sufficient on its own to explain the international response to Russia's war. In major votes on the war at the UN General Assembly, democracies from all regions mainly side with Kyiv against Moscow. Yet, roughly 20 of the 55 countries that Freedom House classed as “Not Free” in 2022 (such as the Gulf Arab monarchies) have also sided with Ukraine in key votes – even if they have not imposed sanctions on Russia and their votes have little substantive impact. Meanwhile, some major non-Western G20 democracies such as Brazil and Indonesia have offered only tepid support to the West over Ukraine, and South Africa and India have striven to stay neutral. But, given that majorities of countries from all regions have sided with Ukraine, there is no inevitable north-south split at work either.

These features of diplomacy echo longer-standing patterns in multilateral debates over values at the UN. Human rights-related voting patterns covering both regional and thematic issues in the UN General Assembly in 2021-22 reveal that democracies from outside Europe tended to have higher “voting coincidence” (that is, common voting records) with EU member states than with autocracies. But countries' regional loyalties also play a big part in their voting behaviour. African democracies are, for example, more likely to vote with African autocracies on human rights issues than side with the West.

Overall, states' positioning on values issues at the UN cannot be explained in simple democracy-autocracy or north-south terms. To take one example, the United States and European members of the Security Council have recently set up an informal coordination mechanism with a broad slate of other members – ranging from Brazil and Mexico to Ghana and the United Arab Emirates – to push for more regular discussions on “Women, Peace, and Security”, despite Chinese and Russian scepticism towards the agenda. The European Union was also able to work with the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) to raise concerns about the abuse of Muslims in Myanmar, even though EU and OIC members often disagree profoundly on human rights in UN debates.

States thus continue to juggle their commitments, interests, and principles case-by-case rather than cleave to common ideological positions, allowing for selective forms of cooperation in multilateral institutions between states with differing value systems. This sort of thin cooperation is imperfect, but it gives the EU space to build coalitions on a variety of issues.

Beyond case-by-case cooperation, European diplomats and their allies need to adapt to some fundamental challenges to their vision of political and civil rights at the UN. A range of non-Western members articulate stances on basic multilateral values and principles, with an emphasis on economics. Most notably, China has tabled resolutions in the Human Rights Council setting out a vision of ‘rights’ that centres on state sovereignty and development rather than individual freedoms. These resolutions are part of a broader Chinese effort to use the UN as platform to promote its Belt and Road initiative and more recent Global Development Initiative, positioning itself at the centre of multilateral discussions about navigating global turbulence. By contrast, many non-Western states assume that the EU will cut its

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development assistance in the years ahead. In private, European officials are frustrated by the difficulty of explaining the bloc's continued aid expenditure to their non-Western counterparts.

Small states are in the game too. Mia Mottley, the prime minister of Barbados, has been especially effective in pushing for reforms to International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and Western reparations for slavery and global warming, using values-heavy language: "When citizens in the developed world believe that they have no obligation to help developing nations," Mottley told a UN audience last September, "it is because they do not know and may not wish not to know that it was the slave trade and the gun that built empires, it was empires that financed industrialisation, and that colonisation allowed their countries to thrive and become wealthy." This focus on social and economic rights puts the EU on the spot by challenging its traditional emphasis on political rights. Non-Western observers reach back into history to reframe European countries as sources of international problems – slavery, deprivation, climate change – rather than leaders on values issues.

## How Europeans can shape a new narrative

European officials form case-specific coalitions to pursue values issues in specific UN forums. But, in continuing to advance international law and universal rights, they should try to find an effective counter-narrative that can answer the various critiques that these are tools of Western domination. The narrative of global competition between democracy and autocracy can backfire. The EU and its friends should therefore focus on three issues in ways that engage with critiques from the global south:

The first of these issues is sovereignty.

In the past, non-Western countries have often suspected that European countries want to use multilateral forums as platforms to interfere in the affairs of their former colonies. Sentiments like these are still strong in regions such as the Sahel. But the US and the EU have quite effectively cast their support for Ukraine as the defence of a sovereign state against imperialism. It would be smart to expand this narrative, emphasising Western countries' commitment to defending the sovereign rights of developing states. This means not only rejecting wars of aggression and annexation, but also helping poorer countries deal with non-military threats to their ability to exercise their sovereignty, for instance, overwhelming international debt and foreign actors' efforts to harvest citizens' data.

The second issue to emphasise is development.

European governments need to reassert (and perhaps better communicate) their continued commitment to assisting developing nations. They should not only to maintain aid spending as far as possible, but also identify ways to accelerate development – such as by helping poor countries raise finance climate adaptation projects – that may be more useful than classic aid. France is attempting to lead this debate with a “Summit for a New Global Financial Pact” this June, with a focus on unlocking new financing streams for needy states. Paris made a point of asking Mia Mottley and other critics of existing arrangements to headline this event.

The final issue to embrace is openness.

Many African, Asian, and Latin American diplomats now worry less about European neo-colonialism and more about the idea that China could dominate multilateralism (reducing their own freedom of manoeuvre) or that Sino-American competition will paralyse the international system. Europeans should engage with countries from other regions on options – including governance reforms to the UN and IFIs – that could reduce the risks of these outcomes. This does not mean that European and non-Western counterparts will easily agree on either values or the mechanisms underpinning multilateral cooperation. But it is in Europe’s interest to encourage a pluralist multilateral system that one or two major powers cannot dominate.

Recent experiences at the UN imply that the new multipolar world will have a more pluralistic concept of values, with different factions emphasising different categories of rights. This presents a challenge for Europeans who are comfortable with a narrow focus on political rights. It would be morally and politically inadmissible for European states to give up on promoting the liberal values rooted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – which reaches its seventy-fifth birthday this year. Although advancing political and civil rights is often an uphill struggle, that should not stop European states from emphasising their commitment to the concepts of sovereignty, development, and openness – ideals that appeal to UN members with differing conceptions of right but a common interest in a workable international system.

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