

# The show must go on: The EU's quest to sustain multilateral institutions since 2016

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# The show must go on: The EU's quest to sustain multilateral institutions since 2016

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## Abstract

Multilateralism is in crisis. States increasingly contest, undermine and even withdraw from international organisations and other multilateral institutions. Challenges emanate not only from emerging powers but also from established Western states and civil society. No other actor but the EU is more intimately entangled with multilateralism. This article therefore reviews to what extent and how the EU has actively sustained multilateral institutions since 2016. It identifies three types of mechanisms: the defence, reform and extension of multilateral institutions. Based on interviews with senior officials in the EU institutions and the member states, the article finds that the EU has proven to be rather successful in temporarily defending existing institutions. However, it largely failed to reform multilateral institutions and extend multilateral institutions to new areas. In doing so, the article contributes to our understanding of the EU as a foreign policy actor and the processes of the crisis of multilateralism.

**Keywords:** crisis; European Union; international organisations; multilateralism; reform

## Introduction

Multilateralism is in crisis (Lake et al. 2021). Russia's attack on Ukraine reflects not only a flagrant disregard for multilateral norms, such as the peaceful settlement of disputes, but it has also intensified great power competition and undermined multilateral cooperation. Meanwhile, China continues to pursue mercantilist trade policies, while eroding human rights law and building alternative institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. But threats to the multilateralism also emanate from the West. Donald Trump's America First exemplified unilateralism with severe consequences for specific multilateral institutions, including NATO, the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Paris Climate Agreement. The United Kingdom left the European Union (EU) and Japan the International Whaling Commission. Almost inevitably, multilateral institutions are increasingly 'gridlocked' (Hale et al. 2013), thus unable to produce adequate solutions to pressing global problems.

Multilateralism means that three or more states cooperate based on 'generalised principles' that should apply to all states regardless of their particularistic interests (Ruggie 1992, p. 571). In the long term, successful multilateralism should generate 'diffuse reciprocity' (Keohane 1986), whereby states mutually benefit and more than had they engaged in ad hoc bilateralism or hierarchical forms of coordination. The contemporary crisis of multilateralism pertains both to its substantive and procedural nature (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and

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Hofmann 2020). For one, states no longer agree on the generalised principles that should undergird cooperation. Liberal principles, such as open trade, cooperative security and universal human rights, are heavily contested as a result of greater ideological diversity and power shifts away from the West (Ikenberry 2020, 33ff; Voeten 2020). For another, amid growing nationalist tendencies in many established democracies and great power competition, rules-based cooperation across regions as such is in jeopardy.

The crisis of multilateralism is critical for the EU. As the most advanced multilateral institution itself, the EU is the main beneficiary of the limited multilateral post-1945 order and particularly the more extensive post-1989 multilateral order. Protected by the US security umbrella, the military feeble but economically liberal EU profited from the growing interconnectedness and legalisation of international relations based on the generalised principles of open trade and cooperative security (Ikenberry 2020). The crisis of multilateralism is therefore of critical consequence for the EU as its very existence is bound up with the multilateral order. The EU has long recognised this in its various strategies including the 2016 Global Strategy, the 2021 Joint Communication on multilateralism and the 2022 Strategic Compass (e.g., Barbé and Morillas 2019; Biscop 2005; Dijkstra 2016; Sus 2021; Tocci 2016). As the 2019 final review of the EU Global Strategy aptly notes '[f]or the EU the stakes are sky high [...] our Union has a vital interest in being the centre of gravity of the work to promote and protect multilateralism globally' (2019, p. 15).

Preserving multilateralism therefore represents a key strategy for the EU to prosper and survive, yet scholarly analyses of the EU and the crisis of multilateralism remain surprisingly limited. Scholars have studied extensively how the EU routinely participates and performs in multilateral institutions (Da Conceição-Heldt and Meunier 2014; Jørgensen et al. 2011; Laatikainen and Smith 2006; Marx and Westerwinter 2022; Wessel and Odermatt 2019) and how it projects its internal standards to the rest of the world (Bradford 2020). Research has therefore focused on how the EU has carved out a multilateral role for itself, but the present crisis requires the EU to change strategy and sustain multilateralism and its institutions.

This article analyses empirically to what extent the EU has actively tried to sustain key multilateral institutions since 2016. The focus is thus on the institutions that underpin multilateralism rather than multilateral norms or principles more generally. Although individual member states' initiatives are touched upon, the article concentrates on the EU's collective actions, that is, the efforts initiated by or channelled through the EU institutions such as the European External Action Service. This follows the logic that the EU as a multilateral institution not only has more potential to lose from the crisis of multilateralism than individual member states but also that European initiatives are more likely to be effective when undertaken collectively. The year 2016 offers a suitable starting point because it marked an inflection point in global governance. Following the successful adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran all in 2015, the Brexit referendum and election of Donald Trump in 2016 as well as China's increasingly visible assertive efforts to change the multilateral status quo hailed a new era. The article relies on a review of the literature, publicly available sources, including official documents, complemented by 10 interviews with senior EU and member state officials to trace the EU's perceptions of and responses to the crisis of multilateralism.

The article finds that although senior EU policymakers felt the need to proactively sustain multilateral institutions, it nevertheless was not until the spring of 2019 that the EU started adopting keynote strategies on multilateralism. Thenceforth, the EU was in 'survival mode' (Interview #3) to *defend* existing multilateral institutions to maintain the institutional status quo. In doing so, the EU emancipated itself from previous constraints and engaged in extraordinary behaviour compared with its usual routines in IOs, including openly challenging its erstwhile patron the United States and partnering with a variety of other states. The EU has been less active, however, in *reforming* multilateral institutions and *extending* multilateral institutions to new areas. The EU entered a survival mode, not a transformation mode. The article starts with the mechanisms of how the EU can sustain multilateral institutions before discussing the empirical evidence and reflecting upon the wider implications.

### Sustaining multilateral institutions: Three mechanisms

The crisis of multilateralism is an expression of the broader crisis of liberal international order, which is intensely debated by scholars. Although there is disagreement on how deep this crisis runs (e.g., Ferguson and Zakaria 2017; Ikenberry 2018; Mearsheimer 2019; Rose 2017), even the optimist Ikenberry (2018) notes that '[t]hese are not happy times for liberal internationalists' (abstract). In a special issue of the journal *International Organization*, Lake et al. (2021) similarly write that although the liberal international order 'has proven resilient in the past ... this time might be different' (p. 225). For them, internal threats, resulting from domestic actors contesting the authority of international institutions, and external threats, such as the rise of China and other authoritarian states, 'come together in a major challenge to the principle of multilateralism and to core multilateral institutions' (p. 243). Although the scholarship on the crisis of the liberal international order is impressive, it pays limited attention to the protagonists of multilateralism. By studying to what extent the EU has actively tried to sustain key multilateral institutions, this article therefore contributes to this much larger debate in International Relations.

So what can the EU do to sustain multilateral institutions? There is no shortage of literature on how the EU and its member states coordinate and perform within multilateral institutions. As the EU gradually developed its external relations profile, scholars have focused on 'intersecting multilateralism' (Laatikainen and Smith 2006) where the EU interacts with and participates in multilateral institutions (e.g., Da Conceição-Heldt and Meunier 2014; Jørgensen et al. 2011; Marx and Westerwinter 2022; Wessel and Odermatt 2019). Research is extensive, yet it largely concentrates on how the EU has tried to progressively develop multilateralism as well as on its efforts and constraints to develop into a foreign policy actor. Although the study of 'actorness' is useful to understand routine EU behaviour, the crisis of the multilateralism has forced the EU into an exceptional survival mode in which different logics apply. With notable exceptions of think tank reports (e.g., Dworkin and Gowan 2019), scholars have not studied these efforts. Combining recent advances in the literature on the resilience of international institutions with our longer-standing knowledge about EU actorness in those institutions, this article identifies three mechanisms through which the EU may sustain multilateral institutions.

The first mechanism for the EU is to *defend* existing multilateral institutions. This mechanism builds on the understanding that multilateral institutions have a degree of

agency separate from their member states (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Hawkins et al. 2006; Pollack 2003). As they are actors in their own right, multilateral institutions can try to resist (or ignore) external pressures, particularly when they come under direct contestation by a key member state(s) (e.g., Debre and Dijkstra 2021; Hirschmann 2021; Schuette 2021a; Dijkstra et al. 2022). Multilateral institutions are not alone when trying to resist such challenges (Dijkstra 2017): They can rely on like-minded actors, including other member states, NGOs and also the EU. The EU, as a key stakeholder, can support other multilateral institutions in fending off such pressures. Manifestations include plugging budgetary gaps, establishing provisional arrangements to overcome momentary blockades, resisting attempts to capture the institution, using coercive means to deter or sanction violations of key multilateral norms, making side payments to dissatisfied members and launching a public diplomacy campaign to defend the institution. Defending multilateral institutions, for the EU, thus implies a short-term, tangible response to maintain the institutional status quo.

The second mechanism for the EU is to help *reform* existing multilateral institutions to adapt them to a changing environment. This builds on a general insight in organisational theory that organisations ultimately need to adjust to survive, as they draw upon their environment for essential resources (Aldrich 1999, p. 194). Compared with defending institutions, reforming them is a more complex and longer-term undertaking (e.g., Nielson and Tierney 2003; Barnett and Coleman 2005; Lipsy 2017). Reform may help multilateral institutions overcome gridlock and become more effective. It may also be a way to strategically coopt emerging powers (Kruck and Zangl 2020) and satisfy challengers (Hirschmann 2021) resulting in the survival of multilateral institutions. Although reform initiatives can come from multilateral institutions themselves, the EU, once again as a key stakeholder, has the ability to spearhead and support multilateral reform efforts (cf. Brooks and Wohlforth 2009, on the US support for reform efforts of multilateral institutions in a previous decade). To drive reform efforts, the EU can provide support to the leadership of key multilateral institutions, build coalitions with new partners, support appointees from underrepresented parts of the world, engage in public diplomacy to make the case for institutional reforms or provide necessary resources to replace a former key member state. However, such efforts place the EU in a reform dilemma. On the one hand, the EU cannot risk that challenger states become permanently alienated and engage in counter-institutionalisation or systematic non-compliance. On the other, the EU disproportionately benefits from the institutional status quo. Reforms are likely to entail concessions of previously enjoyed privileges and also risk incentivising others to challenge multilateral institutions (see Jurado et al., 2022).

Third, the EU can also help to *extend* multilateral institutions to previously ungoverned areas. Part of the crisis concerns the general perception that the multilateral institutions are not keeping up with growing global problems (Hale et al. 2013), which fuels calls to resort to unilateralism or strategic bilateralism instead. Given the emergence of a plethora of new global governance challenges—such as pandemic responses and vaccine distribution, digital taxation, regulation of AI, digital currencies and cyber security or the prohibition of lethal autonomous weapons—providing effective multilateral answers can therefore reinforce the principles of multilateralism (e.g., Haner and Garcia 2019; Cihon et al., 2020; Wenham et al. 2022). Indeed, states have to make key institutional choices when new issues arrive on the international agenda (Jupille et al. 2013). This includes expanding the mandate and scope of existing multilateral institutions (Hall 2016;



Hooghe et al. 2019; Koremenos et al. 2001) and establishing new institutions. Stagnation in light of new challenges effectively implies a decline of multilateral institutions (Debre and Dijkstra 2022). The EU has an intrinsic interest in showcasing the benefits of multilateral institutions to counteract trends towards competitive multipolarity at the expense of principled cooperation. Manifestations of extending multilateral institutions spearheaded by the EU include launching new initiatives to close governance gaps within or outside existing institutions and building new coalitions with states or non-state actors. It also involves providing diplomatic capital and public diplomacy to make such new governance arrangements realities.

Defending, reforming and extending multilateral institutions are therefore three mechanisms. Although logically distinct, the EU can use them in parallel, for instance, by framing reforms as necessary to 'save' a multilateral institution. The EU and its member states possess, in this respect, important levers to pursue these mechanisms in support of multilateral institutions including through the collective EU institutions in Brussels and EU delegations. Europeans have long been central actors in the multilateral institutions and occupy central positions in an array of IOs, including the UN Security Council or the IMF (see Wessel and Odermatt 2019, for an overview). Member state diplomatic services tend to be well resourced and connected in the world, whereas the EEAS has strong networks in IOs and has increased the coherence of EU foreign policy writ large (see Blockmans and Wessels 2021; Spence and Bátorá 2015). The EU and its member states are also pivotal funders of IOs' regular budgets and extra-budgetary activities (see below), which grants them outsized influence. And the size of the EU's internal market and the concomitant market power gives the EU enormous leverage in shaping global regulatory governance and foreign policies of dependent states (Bradford 2020; Velluti 2020).

At the same time, however, internal and external factors can constrain the EU's strategic capacity to sustain multilateral institutions. Internally, the EU needs to forge an internal consensus on most external actions not only among heterogeneous member states, in which EU external action is increasingly politicised (Biedenkopf et al., 2021), but also among the array of EU institutions involved in foreign policymaking. Doing so requires effective leadership either by senior institutional actors in the Commission or EEAS or key member states (Amadio Viceré et al. 2020; Helwig and Siddi 2020; Koops and Tercovich 2020). Especially in crises, when normal constraints are likely to be relaxed, such informal activities should be crucial. Nonetheless, the EU still needs a legal basis to act. Although the Union enjoys exclusive competences on trade policy, it shares competences with the member states on relevant foreign policy issues such as energy policy or humanitarian aid, and its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) is subject to special, intergovernmental decision-making procedures (Gstöhl and Schunz 2022; Keukeleire and Delreux 2022). In addition, the EU needs to have access to adequate resources to fund its external activities. The EU's 7-year budget from 2014 to 2020 included 66 billion EUR for 'Global Europe' activities.

Externally, the EU's ability to sustain multilateral institutions is shaped by the extent to which it can attract followers among other influential actors and its varying legal statuses within multilateral institutions (Torney 2019). The EU is no hegemon, and it relies on support from other stakeholders. The constellation of preferences among other powers thus shapes the EU's ability to build necessary coalitions. Furthermore, the EU's ability to exercise formal and informal influence over decision-making within institutions varies.

Because the EU is not a state but, de jure, an IO itself, its status within IOs is often ambiguous (see De Baere 2018). Although it possesses full membership in some IOs like the WTO, it only enjoys enhanced permanent observer status at the UN General Assembly and most specialised agencies, and it has no formal status at the UN Security Council.

### **The EU's efforts to sustain multilateral institutions since 2016**

This section analyses the extent to which the EU has actively tried to sustain key multilateral institutions since 2016. As the purpose is to better understand which of the mechanisms the EU has used and how, this article focuses on key examples of EU actions in support of multilateral institutions. This is also in line with the empirical strategy where we rely on publicly available documents and interviews. EU documents, such as the 2021 Joint Communication, are a starting point in identifying instances of the EU trying to sustain multilateral institutions. These documents highlight areas where the EU and its member states have been particularly active. This information is triangulated with 10 interviews with senior officials, who have recounted their experiences and perceptions of the crisis of multilateralism. We have spoken to senior civil servants familiar with the thinking of key EU officials such as European Council President Donald Tusk, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and High Representative Federica Mogherini. We have also spoken to interviewees with first-hand knowledge of Council policy-making and those based in major multilateral institutions and powerful states. All interviewees were selected on the basis of their formal positions in their organisations, and we had a high response rate (71%). All interviews were largely unstructured allowing interviewees to recall instances they thought were most important for the EU's effort of sustaining multilateral institutions.

We have verified all the official EU documents and the interview data with the extensive public sources and secondary literature. For many individual multilateral institutions, there is a wealth of publicly available sources, and our task was to trace how the EU responded to the variety of challenges to individual institutions. This research strategy does risk creating a bias to EU action as opposed to multilateral challenges to which the EU did not respond. Nevertheless, by comparing the different available mechanisms that the EU has used, variation across different multilateral institutions, the degree of success across domains and considering cases of non-action, it is possible to draw meaningful conclusions about the EU's approach in general. This empirical section of the article starts by analysing the crisis of multilateralism as perceived by the EU before zooming in on each of the mechanisms.

#### *Perceptions of crisis at the top: Better late than never*

With hindsight, 2016 was a turning point for multilateralism. It was the year of the Brexit referendum, the election of Donald Trump and that the EEAS adopted for the first time a strategic document on China reflecting its troublesome rise. Senior EU officials, however, only partially recognised its momentous nature, and it took at least until 2019 for the EU to develop an overall strategic response to sustain multilateral institutions.

EU officials immediately understood the twin shock of Brexit and Trump, but it was mostly considered a challenge of populism rather than a challenge for multilateral

institutions. The response to the Brexit referendum was swift. Fearing a domino effect with further member states leaving, the Commission responded decisively to forge unity among the member states and to protect the EU polity (see Schuette 2021a). The election of President Trump, on the other hand, stunned European policymakers into initial ostrichism. They convinced themselves that Trump's rhetoric would not match his action and that the 'adults in the room' would sufficiently constrain him on foreign policy. French President Macron tried to court Trump, and UK Prime Minister May sought to revive the special relationship. At the EU level, too, senior officials initially hoped that they could merely 'wait out' Trump (Interviews #7 and #9).

Evidence to the contrary mounted quickly throughout Trump's first year in office. In line with his fierce criticism of the Alliance, Trump refused to explicitly endorse NATO's Article 5 collective defence clause at the summit in May. In June 2017, he announced that the United States would cease participation in the Paris Climate Agreement. In October 2017, he declared that the United States would exit from UNESCO and decided not to re-certify Iran's compliance with the JCPOA (he abrogated the deal in May 2018). In December 2017, he recognised Jerusalem as Israel's capital in a rupture with long-term US policy and international law. And the Trump Administration reduced, or even halted, funding of several UN agencies and the UN's operating and peacekeeping budget.

Many EU officials continued to harbour hopes of the return of traditional US leadership. One EU interviewee describes how it required 'a big psychological shift' (Interview #7) to stop denying the new reality that the United States had gone rogue. According to another official, the 'awareness set in to do things differently' (Interview #9) only in the second half of 2018 after Trump withdrew the United States from the JCPOA in May and the UN Human Rights Council in June, refused to sign the G7 summit communique in June ('the' rules-based international order was changed into 'a' rules-based international order), and came to the verge of announcing US withdrawal from NATO in July (Schuette 2021b).

The Trump Presidency clearly was not the only challenge. China had equally started to actively undermine the principles of multilateralism. And it took the EU, once again, some time to understand this challenge. Notwithstanding evidence of China's intensified mercantilist approach to international trade and attempts to reinterpret the UN charter (Foot 2020), the EU still considered China a crucial partner as late as 2015 (Interview #6). For some officials, China's refusal to recognise the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration on the territorial dispute with the Philippines in the South China Sea was 'a game changer' (Interview #6). The EEAS pushed for, and eventually adopted, a new joint strategic document on China (European Commission 2016). However, the EEAS strategy never enjoyed significant political ownership in the Commission and capitals (Interview #6; Biscop 2021). It was only in 2018 that views in the upper echelons in Brussels on China tangibly changed (Interview #9). This followed two failed EU–China summits, the deteriorating human rights situation in Xinjiang, and intensified Chinese attempts to capture key UN agencies.

Thus, the EU belatedly woke up to the profound challenge of multilateralism. But in 2019, it produced three major policy documents. In March, the Commission and EEAS published the EU–China Strategic Outlook, in which they defined China no longer only as a 'cooperation partner' and 'economic competitor', but crucially also as a 'systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance' (European Commission 2019). Unlike



in 2016, the initiative came from the top from Commission President Juncker and Secretary-General Selmayr (Interview #6). In June, the Council set out concrete conclusions to strengthen multilateralism by ‘upholding international norms and agreement’, ‘extending multilateralism to new global realities’ and ‘making multilateral organisations fit for purpose’ (Council of the European Union 2019). Also in June, the EEAS published the third annual review of the EUGS, in which it dedicated much attention to how to ‘preserve, promote, and strengthen multilateralism’ (EEAS 2019). A key change involved what one interviewee (Interview #1) called ‘strategic partnering’, that is, to go beyond partnerships with traditional allies and reach out to other actors to build new, issue-specific cooperation. The centrality of the EU institutions in all of this was also clear compared with the limited response of the individual member states. Germany and France notably spearheaded efforts to create an Alliance for Multilateralism, launched in September 2019, to uphold and adapt multilateral principles. But it quickly became apparent that the Alliance was largely symbolic (Interviews #4 and 5).

Together, the three EU documents signalled strategic change. The EU at last recognised the return of power politics and profound danger for the multilateral institutions. According to one interviewee, the EU finally entered ‘survival mode’ (Interview #3). Strategies adopted by the EU since 2019 have further consolidated this new mindset. The 2021 Joint Communication on strengthening the EU’s contribution to rules-based multilateralism provides an overall strategy document, and the 2021 Trade Policy Review called for an ‘An Open, Sustainable and *Assertive* Trade Policy’ (emphasis added). The 2022 Strategic Compass notes that multilateralism ‘has come under strong questioning’ (p. 7), and an internal document on China in 2022 urged member states to be even tougher on China (Financial Times 2022). The next section examines the extent to which this change in strategic discourse ushered in concrete policy changes to sustain the multilateral institutions.

### *Defending multilateral institutions*

When multilateral institutions come under direct contestation, for instance, by Trump or China, the EU can provide support in helping those institutions in maintaining the status quo. Since 2016, the EU has regularly resorted to defending multilateral institutions, and this section provides three key examples: the WTO, UN and Paris Agreement. To start with an area where the EU has some of the strongest powers (trade), the WTO and its Appellate Body faced considerable contestation. Although the United States’s growing frustration with the WTO’s dispute settlement system was longer-standing, the Trump Administration started blocking appointments of judges to the Appellate Body in mid-2017, thus rendering it defunct by December 2019 (Zaccaria 2022). For the open and deeply interconnected EU economy, the impending collapse of the WTO’s dispute settlement mechanism—the ‘crown jewel of the multilateral trading system’ (Hopewell 2021, p. 1026)—presented a grave challenge. When compromise negotiations with the United States failed in late 2018, the EU took the initiative and started building coalitions to devise an alternative dispute settlement mechanism (Multi-Party Interim Arbitration Arrangement, MPIA). By December 2020, most major economies bar the United States had agreed to participate in the MPIA.

The MPIA is a remarkable case in point of the EU's attempts to sustain multilateral trading amidst US contestation. The EU not only exhibited strong leadership in the WTO. It also protected its core interests by building followership beyond its natural partners, including China, and openly acting against the declared interests of the Trump Administration. The success in setting up this backstop institution was enabled by a combination of internal and external factors. The EU managed to speak with one voice because it had exclusive competences on trade and its member states, despite some qualms about divergence from the United States, shared the fundamental interest in protecting the multilateral trading system. Moreover, the EU enjoyed credibility among WTO members and its proactive initiative resonated with the interests of most other members (Hopewell 2021, pp. 1036–1040). At the same time, the MPIA was considered a short-term interim and status quo solution to sit out Trump, yet President Biden has hitherto refused to rejuvenate the Appellate Body. This backstop, which was initiated by the EU to keep the WTO dispute settlement mechanism alive, has therefore not yet resulted in profound WTO reforms.

President Trump, however, not only took aim at the WTO. The UN also drew his ire. The US administration exerted pressure via rhetorical attacks on these institutions as well as cutting funding and, in the case of the Human Rights Council (HRC) and the World Health Organization (WHO), withdrawing membership altogether. Although the totality of funding increased over Trump's tenure largely due to budgetary decisions taken by Congress (CFR 2022), the contributions to peacekeeping and selected agencies decreased, in part drastically. Indeed, the United States defunded the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in 2018 and 2019, leading the agency to the brink of collapse and the substantially reduced contributions to the WHO for 2020–2021. The Trump administration also withdrew funding for the UN Population Fund in 2017. Finally, the United States lowered its contributions to the UN peacekeeping budget by almost USD 1bn. For the EU, together with its member states, the budgetary pressure on key UN agencies and peacekeeping operations was thus a litmus test for its ability to defend multilateral institutions. Its response was to unilaterally plug some of the gravest funding gaps where feasible (Interview #1). The EU increased its overall contributions to the UN, UNRWA, WHO and UNFPA. However, because the EU is not a UN member and therefore does not fund UN peacekeeping operations, it was more constrained in this area and rather had to rely on its member states (Interviews #1, #2 and #4). The EU and its member states stepping up by making additional budgetary resources available was nonetheless a clear manifestation of the defence mechanism outlined in the conceptual section above.

The Trump Administration and especially China also increasingly sought to redefine essential principles of the UN Charter. The United States wanted to revise UN language on gender inclusivity and also violated international law by recognising Jerusalem as Israel's capital. China, in turn, intensified its efforts to undermine the normative foundation of the UN by championing a hierarchical, sovereigntist view, whereby notions of peace and security as well as economic development enjoyed priority over human rights (Foot 2020; Interviews #2 and #6). These efforts were manifested in Chinese discourse in the various committees, its attempts to defund UN programmes and agencies that focus on human rights, and its active efforts to introduce Chinese language such as the 'a community with a shared future for mankind' and references to the Belt and Road Initiative into

official UN documents (Interview #10). To advance its vision of the UN, China also began to adopt a more strategic approach to elect Chinese nationals to senior positions within the UN agencies. By 2020, 4 out of the 15 UN agencies were led by Chinese nationals, and China campaigned for its fifth position with a candidate for Director-General of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO).

These normative challenges to the UN met a twofold EU response. First, the EU stepped up its strategic communication efforts. One official conceded that in the past, EU communication on multilateralism had been ‘a sleeping domain’ (Interview #7) where the tacit assumption prevailed that the benefits of the multilateral order were self-evident. Driven by the EEAS’s Strategic Communications division, the EU began a public diplomacy #MultilateralismMatters campaign to showcase its achievements (Interview #7). At the same time, the EU also started to actively push back against United States and particularly Chinese discursive challenges in the various UN committees (Interview #6). One official described how the EU delegation at the UN is ‘fighting battles with China on language every day’ (Interview #8). This also entailed calling out violations of international law more forcefully, even when committed by the United States, as for instance in the case of the recognition of Jerusalem (Interview #5). Second, the EU eventually started pushing back against Chinese strategic candidatures. The Chinese efforts to take over senior leadership positions had initially remained beneath the radar (Interviews #6, #7 and #8). A lack of coordination between the United States and the EU had further meant that as late as 2019, the Chinese candidate became head of the Food and Agriculture Organization (Interview #4). During the elections of the next head for the increasingly politicised WIPO, the United States and EU coordinated their efforts to prevent a Chinese national from winning the contest (Interview #4). A more strategic EU approach to diplomacy to maintain the status quo in multilateral institutions was thus apparent.

Climate change mitigation has also been a central objective for EU external action. Trump’s decision in June 2017 to exit from the Paris Agreement was therefore another critical challenge to the multilateral order and the EU’s core interests. And it was not without precedent; President Bush had withdrawn the United States from the 1998 Kyoto Protocol and thereby unleashed a domino effect of declining participation and commitment by key emitters. The EU’s aim was thus to prevent another Kyoto. But the EU is no hegemonic power on environmental politics, and its decreasing share of global carbon emissions nominally reduces its influence. Declaring that the EU was ‘ready to lead the fight’ (Sefcovic cited in Toplenksy 2017) to safeguard the Paris Agreement and prevent an exodus of other states, the EU therefore resorted to what Oberthür and Dupont (2021) call exemplary and diplomatic leadership to help the Paris Agreement survive.

To gain credibility and diffuse ambitious environmental policies, the EU set out to lead by example. The European Green Deal, agreed in 2019, enshrined new emissions reduction targets of 55% by 2030 and Net Zero by 2050 and launched a set of policy initiatives on a variety of environmental legislation. The EU also sought to engage other key actors to comply with Paris and ratchet up their commitments. For instance, it includes in its trade negotiations the condition to comply with the Paris Agreement. The EU and its member states are with 23.3 billion EUR in 2020 also the largest climate finance contributors to developing countries (EC 2022). The EU launched a diplomatic offensive to keep especially China in the Agreement (e.g., Keating 2018). The EU also circumvented the White House to engage with sub-state actors such as the State of California. On the

rhetorical level, too, the EU engaged in containment of the US contestation of multilateral climate policy (Petri and Biedenkopf 2020). The EU's initial response to the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement has thus been largely successful. No domino effect of other leading emitters exiting ensued, and states have continuously, if insufficiently, ratcheted up their carbon reduction targets (Dijkstra et al. 2022). The EU's defence of the Paris Agreement drew on the mobilisation of enormous domestic resources and widespread support among other states. Despite energy and climate being mixed competences, the EU has largely acted as a unified actor in international climate policy.

### *Reforming multilateral institutions*

The EU has thus set up backstop institutions to address the crisis at the WTO, provided additional funds to UN agencies, fought back against Chinese influence at the UN and dealt with non-state actors to keep the Paris Agreement alive—all with the purpose of defending multilateral institutions. In turn, this section analyses the most prominent attempts by the EU to reform IOs under contestation. Reforming challenged multilateral institutions is normally a longer-term process than defending the status quo. The focus is on the UN system, the WHO and the IMF. As the linchpin of the multilateral system, the UN is regularly subject to demands for reform. Where many developed states criticise the UN's inefficiencies and overspending and prefer greater executive power of the Secretary-General, developing states often press for greater development spending and further empowerment of the General Assembly (e.g., Baumann 2018). Moreover, non-permanent members of the Security Council have long sought to reform and enlarge the highest decision-making body to better reflect the power distribution of the 21st century (e.g., Binder and Heupel 2020). Upon his appointment in 2017, UN Secretary-General Guterres set out to address some of those criticisms via a comprehensive reform of the development system, management of the organisation, and the peace and security architecture (see Mueller 2021).

The EU has reflexively supported Guterres's reform agenda across the three pillars. There is widespread consensus among officials that the EU has even been the 'most consistent' driver of reforms among the key members (Interviews #1, #2 and #7). One official also emphasised that, unlike the United States, for the EU, it was not only about increasing efficiency and cutting costs but also about a better integration of development policy into overall political direction of the UN and enhancing accountability (Interview #7). The EU has therefore been a key supporter of a more central role for the UN resident coordinators in the implementation of UN programmes across the world. Previously, officials of the UN Development Programme (UNDP) coordinated the work of the other UN agencies. Since 2019, the resident coordinators report directly to the UN Secretary-General, and they lead the UN country teams thereby providing much more political direction with a view of implementing the SDGs. The EU has not just supported this major administrative overhaul but has also provided financial support to the newly empowered resident coordinators through the Joint Fund for the 2030 Agenda.

The EU has missed no chances to publicly declare its support for Guterres (Interview #7). This has also been true for the most recent initiative 'Our Common Agenda' launched by the Secretary-General in 2021, which represents an ambitious agenda on the 'future of



global cooperation through an inclusive, networked, and effective multilateralism' (Guterres 2021) and will result in a UN Summit of the Future in September 2024. Guterres, however, has shied away from Charter reforms and addressing some of the holy cows of the UN system such as the Security Council or the functioning of the General Assembly. The EU's attempt to allow the UN Secretary-General greater budgetary discretion has hitherto also failed to garner sufficient support (Interview #7; Mueller 2021). In light of internal divisions, however, over Security Council reforms (Interview #1), the EU never even tried advocating for 'a top to bottom recast of the multilateral blueprint' at the UN (Interview #2). Due to its limited role in peacekeeping, the EU could also not play an active role on peace and security reforms (Interview #1). As a result, the EU's role in driving UN reforms has been constrained.

Another UN agency that has faced heavy criticism and demands for change is the World Health Organization (WHO). Not only the United States but also countries from across the world lamented the performance of the organisation especially in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic in January and February 2020. Prior to the pandemic, the EU was not a major player in the WHO despite being a major funder; as merely an observer, the EU cannot fully participate in governing body meetings, and global health was low on the agenda in Brussels despite blatant failures of the WHO during the Ebola outbreak in 2014 (Svendsen 2021). However, the WHO's impotence in face of Chinese suppression of vital information about the virus and its subservient behaviour vis-à-vis the Chinese government, the US withdrawal from the organisation, and the initially national scrambles to secure Personal Protective Equipment highlighted the need for substantial WHO reforms (Interview #2).

The EU has been at the forefront of such efforts. In response to Trump suspending US funding for the organisation, the EU and its member states pledged more than 50% of the emergency funding to combat Covid-19 as part of the WHO's Strategic Preparedness Plan in 2020, with the EU accounting for 20% of it (WHO 2020). The Council Conclusions of October 2020 also spelled out several reform proposals, including 'a revision of the alert system for declaration of a Public Health Emergency of International Concern', the creation of 'an independent epidemiological assessment on-site in high-risk zones' and 'increased transparency' mechanisms (Council of the European Union 2020). With the Biden Administration's decision to return to the WHO, the EU has since allied with the United States to push for these changes, but it has hitherto faced strong opposition from China and Russia in particular, and no WHO reforms, such as reducing the heavy reliance on voluntary contributions, have yet materialised. The EU has also led efforts to start negotiating a new pandemic treaty or related instrument to complement or succeed the 2005 International Health Regulations. European Council President Charles Michel called for such an international pandemic treaty in November 2020 that was followed by a G7 endorsement in February 2021 and a joint statement of many EU leaders, partner countries ranging from Kenya to South Korea and Indonesia, and the WHO Director-General in March 2021 (European Council n.d.), prior to the start of negotiations in 2022.

In contrast to the EU's attempts to propel some reforms of the UN system and WHO, key economic and financial multilateral institutions have received less attention. The IMF continues to be defined by institutionalised inequality in terms of its voting structure that heavily favours the West. The 14th Quota Review, based on economic indicators in 2008, was only implemented in 2016, at which point the high growth rates among emerging



powers and stalling growth among European states meant the new quotas remained detached from economic realities. In turn, the 15th review concluded in 2019 without changes. As a result, the EU's (including the United Kingdom) current quota share of 30% is almost twice as high as its share of global GDP (Mohan 2020). The EU appears satisfied with the status quo; compounding matters, it continued to insist on its monopoly over the IMF's top job when it ensured that Bulgarian Kristalina Georgieva would be appointed as managing director in 2019. One former official conceded that the 'EU is doing little to act on' awareness that emerging countries, particularly China, be better represented in IOs like the IMF (Interview #3).

In sum, the EU's impact on reforms of multilateral institutions has been significantly lower than on their defence. Although the Union made some attempts at reforming the UN system and the WHO, the results were limited at best. As demonstrated by the example of the IMF or UN Security Council, the EU member states have also been unwilling to concede historical privileges to address the central underlying grievances of emerging powers with the result that the legitimacy crisis of many multilateral institutions has become exacerbated. For the EU, there is a clear reform dilemma between the status quo that it favours and changes required for multilateral institutions to adapt to a changing environment.

### *Extending multilateral institutions*

The crisis of multilateralism stems not only from dissatisfaction with the performance of existing institutions on day-to-day issues but also from a general perception that multilateral institutions insufficiently addresses pressing collective action problems. Technological developments and external shocks reveal governance gaps. As the reflexive supporter of multilateralism, the EU is thus expected to propel new multilateral initiatives. This final section provides three brief examples on attempts to establish new multilateral institutions in the areas of migration, vaccines and cyber security. Although the logic of extending multilateral institutions sometimes overlaps with reforming multilateral institutions, the focus here is on new multilateral institutions as opposed to already existing ones.

One of the lessons of the European refugee crisis of 2015 was the need for an international framework on migration, highlighting a clear gap in global governance. Although it began as a UN process in 2016, the EU was the primary driver throughout the negotiation and drafting process of the UN Global Compact for Migration (GCM), a non-binding framework to better manage migration from the local to the global level (Badell 2020). However, the initial EU unity began to crumble after President Trump pulled the United States out of the agreement in late 2017. Hungary soon followed suit. Although the EU found an innovative way to maintain a common EU-minus-Hungary negotiation position by appointing Austria as speaker (Interview #1), Austria itself and other increasingly sovereigntists member states joined the chorus of critical voices in the autumn of 2018. In the end, only 18 EU member states signed the GCM. What had started as an EU-supported initiative to extend multilateralism ended as a disaster for the EU's credibility (Interviews #2, #4 and #8). Although the GCM is likely to be considered legally relevant over time (Interview #1), the increasing internal divisions prevented the EU from effectively extending multilateral institutions.

The second major new multilateral initiative, during the study period 2016–2021, was the Covax Facility to ensure equitable distribution of Covid-19 vaccinations to developing

countries. Launched in 2020 by the WHO, Gavi and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, Covax pursued the declared ambition of delivering two billion vaccinations by the end of 2021 to combat the pandemic. Here, too, the EU was a major diplomatic player and central donor. Although the United States and China quickly descended into a bilateral conflict, the EU spearheaded diplomatic negotiations to find a multilateral response rather than relying on bilateral donations (Interview #8). One observer notes that ‘nobody else was doing anything’ on vaccine distributions (Interview #4). The EU institutions have also pledged in 1 billion USD in funding with the individual EU member states adding another 2.5 billion USD (European Council 2022). At the same time, the EU’s leadership suffered from what was widely perceived as vaccine nationalism by especially the wealthy member states, who bought up and hoarded a disproportional number of vaccines (e.g., Watkins 2021). Germany furthermore spoke out against a Covid-19 vaccine patent waiver at the WTO. A so-called TRIPS waiver was ultimately agreed in the WTO, but only in June 2022, almost 2 years after the proposal had been suggested by India and South Africa and therefore essentially after much of the world had already been vaccinated.

Although the EU recently committed to extend multilateral institutions to fields such as AI or biodiversity (European Commission 2021, p. 8) and initiated a treaty on pandemic prevention, these initiatives are yet to bear fruit. The same goes for several other initiatives to extend global governance, for instance, over lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS) or cyber warfare in the context of the United Nations Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) and the Open-Ended Working Group (OEWG). Here, the EU faces a combination of internal divisions, a primacy of member states (such as France and Germany) in negotiation forums and a few opportunities to provide leadership (e.g., Badell and Schmitt 2022; Douzet et al. 2022). Covax and GCM therefore constitute the most notable EU attempts since 2016. In both cases, the EU initially drove negotiations but internal factors—vaccine nationalism and anti-migration sentiments respectively—undermined the EU’s multilateral efforts.

## Conclusion

This article has analysed the extent to which the EU has actively tried to sustain key multilateral institutions since 2016. The EU has long punched below its weight in multilateral affairs. But the episode from mid-2018 onward marks both an awakening to the existential crisis and an emancipation from previous *modus operandi*. Upon belatedly realising the existential crisis to multilateralism, survival instincts kicked in, and the EU entered ‘survival mode’ (Interview #3) by setting out to defend critical institutions under pressure. In doing so, the EU not only acted with unprecedented urgency but also pursued hitherto unthinkable strategies. The EU made common cause with China against the United States to establish the MPIA as a temporary remedy for the blockade of the WTO’s Appellate Body; it plugged significant funding gaps of UN institutions and engaged in strategic communications efforts to confront both American and Chinese normative challenges to the UN system, and it provided diplomatic leadership to keep the Paris Climate Agreement intact.

The relatively successful attempts to defend specific institutions under pressure is only one side of the coin, however. The other is that the EU has proven less willing and able to reform or extend multilateral institutions. The EU made some attempts at reforming the UN system and the WHO and produced limited results as the emerging schisms between the United States and China, and also democracies and autocracies generally, have

hardened fronts and rendered compromises on significant reforms very difficult. Internal factors, however, also carry responsibilities. The EU's unwillingness to concede what especially developing states consider unjustified institutional privileges has exacerbated resentments in the Global South and undermined the EU's credibility as a defender of multilateral institutions. Compounding matters, the parochialism demonstrated by member states in questions of vaccine distributions and the GCM prevented more effective multilateral solutions to new problems.

To understand how the EU has tried to sustain multilateral institutions, this article has empirically discussed a large number of EU efforts across different institutions. Given the space constraints, further research on the details of each case is warranted. Nevertheless, from this overview of efforts, a clear picture emerges: The period from 2016 to 2021 was one of the EU survival politics of 'saving the savable' (Interview #3) rather than a reinvention of multilateralism. The EU did prevent the collapse of the multilateral order, but many of the profound challenges besetting the order remain. Preventing regression from the status quo has thus proven easier than forging a positive change thereof. To sustain multilateralism in the long term, the EU will have to shift from survival mode to transformation mode. With the arrival of the Biden Administration, the EU once again has a key ally in launching new multilateral initiatives such as on global corporate tax or on climate financing. In the past, the EU had complacently relied on US leadership. But in light of the domestic turbulences in the United States, this is not a viable strategy going forward. Although the EU cannot replace the US hegemony, it will have to assume greater multilateral leadership responsibilities and also intensify its efforts to build partnerships beyond the G7 by working with the likes of Mexico, South Africa or the African Union. Indeed, the EU will have to recognise that without conceding of some of its institutional privileges, reforms of key IOs will be impossible, which is likely to fuel outright opposition towards to the very multilateral order by dissatisfied states.

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## Interviews

**Interview 1:** Former EU Official (October 21, 2021).

**Interview 2:** EU Official (November 15, 2021).

**Interview 3:** Former EU Official (November 24, 2021).

**Interview 4:** Expert (December 16, 2021).

**Interview 5:** Former National Official (November 30, 2021).

**Interview 6:** Former EU Official (February 15, 2022).

**Interview 7:** EU Official (February 15, 2022).

**Interview 8:** EU Official (February 17, 2022).

**Interview 9:** EU Official (February 17, 2022).

**Interview 10:** EU Official (May 13, 2022).