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### Multilateralism Reloaded: the EU's way

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#### *Abstract*

*The EU is a multilateral animal. Ever since inception, it has lived on, and promoted multilateralism as the way of ordering global politics. In the post-COVID-19 world, it is well positioned to advance cooperative patterns of dealing with the many global challenges at hand. Yet, to succeed, it must climb a number of obstacles both internal and external.*

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#### Introduction: the Multilateral code

By its founding treaty, it is a part of EU's genetic code to 'promote multilateral solutions to common problems, in particular in the framework of the United Nations.'<sup>1</sup> As multipolarism started to unsettle the liberal hegemony, the EU responded, in the first security strategy (2003), by making an appeal

for 'effective multilateralism'<sup>2</sup>. With its comprehensive Global Strategy (2016), it doubled down on its ambition to transform rather than just preserve the existing system based on rules and multilateralism to 'contain power politics and contribute to a peaceful, fair and prosperous world.'<sup>3</sup> The EUGS previewed many current concerns, including those with EU's visibility and coordination necessary to reform and efficiently invest in multilateralism, contribute to enacting globally coordinated responses to sustainable development goals (SDGs) or climate but also deepening and widening the process of making norms, rules and devising multilateral cooperative patterns in areas spanning human rights, social justice or disarmament, nonproliferation and arms control to digital governance. In 2019, the Council Conclusions on multilateralism committed the EU to a strategic action to uphold international norms, extend global governance to new areas and

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<sup>1</sup> Treaty on European Union, Art. 21, General Provisions on the Union's External Action, available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12008M021>

<sup>2</sup> Council of the European Union, *A Security Europe in a Better World: European Security Strategy* (2003), available at [https://www.europeansources.info/record/a-](https://www.europeansources.info/record/a-secure-europe-in-a-better-world-european-security-strategy-brussels-12-december-2003/)

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<sup>3</sup> *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe* (2016), available at [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top\\_stories/pdf/eugs\\_review\\_web.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf).

reform multilateral institutions to make them 'fit for purpose' of protecting global commons and promoting shared public goods. Facing the rising challenge of populism, EU Member States urged that nothing advances both national and collective interests better than multilateralism<sup>4</sup>. France and Germany have in the meantime spearheaded the Alliance for Multilateralism, an informal network promoting the view that states benefit more from cooperation than competition. Practical collaboration between the EU and the United Nations has also flourished on the ground where, for example, the EU fields 13 out of 17 missions along the UN and agrees with the organisation on common priorities of peace and crisis management operations.

## Enter COVID-19

The covid pandemic, in the words of António Guterres, 'laid bare world's fragilities.'<sup>5</sup> At the macrostructural level, in the interconnected global economy's circuits operating at unprecedented speed, it showed the cost of missing systemic breaks. The strategic rivalry resulting from an unstable multipolarism featuring one established (United States), one

rising (China), one declining (Russia) and one reluctant power (EU) – which incidentally lists among the key challenges and risks identified by Member States –,<sup>6</sup> moreover means the global normative order is ever more contested and fragmented. Multilateralism is untended by custodians that it needs to operate smoothly. Instead, multilateral institutions are turned into battle sites, with the UN Security Council – currently dealing with matters from cybersecurity norms to humanitarian assistance and averting famine in the Tigray region in Ethiopia –, increasingly paralysed. The price of this paralysis, in the words of HR/VP Josep Borell, is conflicts not solved, humanitarian aid not delivered and lives lost<sup>7</sup>. At the lower level, the pandemic has further exposed the dark powers of nationalism and parochialism while reinforcing the vicious cycle identified by Thomas Hale and David Held in which unmanaged globalisation produces nationalist backlash, and the resulting reduced scope for international cooperation only contributes to the gridlock that makes meeting global challenges more difficult<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Council of the European Union, *EU Action to Strengthen Rules-Based Multilateralism: Council Conclusions* (17 Jun. 2019), available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10341-2019-INIT/en/pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> *Remarks at General Assembly Ceremony* (21 Sept. 2020), available at: <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2020-09-21/remarks-general-assembly-ceremony-marking-the-75th-anniversary-of-the-united-nations>.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Fiott, *Uncharted Territory? Towards a Common Threat Analysis and a Strategic Compass for EU Security and Defence* (Paris:

EUISS, 2020), available at: [https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/uncharted-territory-towards-common-threat-analysis-and-strategic-compass-eu-security-and#\\_introduction](https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/uncharted-territory-towards-common-threat-analysis-and-strategic-compass-eu-security-and#_introduction).

<sup>7</sup> Speech at the UN Security Council (10 Jun. 2021), available at: [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/99887/un-security-council-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-cooperation\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/99887/un-security-council-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-cooperation_en).

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Hale and David Held, Breaking the Cycle of Gridlock, *Global Policy* 9(1): 129-137.

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## The way out?

It is against this backdrop that the UN General Assembly has called for reinvigorated multilateralism, building back better and upgraded multilateral institutions<sup>9</sup>, and the EU has sought to make advances to defend multilateralism, reforming it by design rather than destruction<sup>10</sup>. The latest thought about how to go about this from the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Commission is included in the joint communication issued earlier this year<sup>11</sup>.

Multilateralism is defined here as the cardinal principle to govern global relations that must be effective, fair and inclusive. Renewed multilateralism, unhampered by the geopolitical competition, is of intrinsic value; it is also identified as a policy arena where the EU can advance its own strategic priorities. These priorities include defending values, international law and human rights as 'universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated' and promoting reform of the

multilateral architecture including WTO and WHO to make it fit for purpose of dealing with global challenges. They also entail spearheading new norms to tackle the 'existential climate and biodiversity crisis', global inequalities (including through open and fair rule-based trade and taxation rules), or digital and green transitions. Rules are needed also to govern the outer space (increasingly crowded and severely underregulated), new technologies – including AI to make it 'human-centric', and the disruptive effects of digital technologies as the number of internet users reaches 4.6 billion and the scope of malign actions in the cyberspace increases –, and the post pandemic recovery to ensure it is green, digital, inclusive, just and sustainable.

To do so, the EU should leverage its financial and regulatory strength as a trading superpower and a major funder of multilateralism – ca. 25 % of the UN's regular and peacekeeping funding comes from the Member States, who also cover more than 30 % of the organisation's development, peacebuilding and humanitarian activities<sup>12</sup>. It should also, the communication argues, exercise more leadership through coherence, unity and clarification and upgrade of EU's status in international bodies, while seeking deeper and diversified alliances with partners who share the same norms (the 'multilateral acquis') but also coalitions of convenience with others related to global public goods.

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<sup>9</sup> A/RES/75/1 (28 Sept. 2020), available at: <https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/A/RES/75/1>

<sup>10</sup> European External Action Service, *Global Challenges Call for Global Responses*, a press statement (25 Sept. 2020), available at: [https://eeas.europa.eu/topics/eu-global-strategy/85811/unga75---global-challenges-call-global-responses\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/topics/eu-global-strategy/85811/unga75---global-challenges-call-global-responses_en).

<sup>11</sup> *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council on Strengthening the EU's Contribution to Rules-Based Multilateralism*, JOIN(2021) 3 (17 Feb. 2021), available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52021JC0003&from=EN>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion: Towards the politics of limits

The EU's proclaimed 'interest-based' approach to multilateralism aligns with the realism championed by HR/VP Josep Borrell, who has called for dealing with the world as it is, relearning the language of power and the better use of EU's geopolitical leverages<sup>13</sup>. It is a reasonable perspective. Yet, while realism is not opposed to values, they tend to be conflated with interests in the communication. The value set to be promoted is extensive – declared a comprehensive strategy, the communication is perhaps too comprehensive –, and the values are uncompromisingly universalistic. The order based on agreed rules is, in effect, a liberal order, reloaded and made more expansive.

In principle, there is nothing wrong with such vision. It only raises obstacles of internal and external consensus that may prove difficult to overcome for the EU. Not only the illiberal powers advancing alternative normative frameworks but also many others in the international community are not convinced of the intrinsic value of the universal and progressive norms and principles that the EU promotes – in particular as it proclaims to do so out of interest and remains silent on how the unwavering commitment to universalism is to be streamlined with the ambition of open strategic autonomy (including reducing strategic dependencies) or technological sovereignty; or the vaccine and global health politics where nationalist politics of the global

North threaten to escalate inequalities and prolong the time needed to get the pandemic under control.

Indeed, the EU has resources and capacity to do more even as it shakes off the erstwhile technocratic illusion of 'neutrality'. It can better exploit, as the communication suggests, alliances of convenience with the illiberals to push certain agendas forward, such as climate action. However, such compartmentalisation aiming at cooperation with systemic rivals (China) or those engaged in a dirty war with the EU (Russia) may easily result in an internal controversy; as may the 'diversification' of alliances proposed in the communication that seems to look beyond the transatlantic partnership even as in view of the EU, the geopolitical landscape has improved with the Biden administration. The EU should recognise that the U.S. remains its best choice of ally to resist exploitation and manipulation of multilateral bodies from WHO to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), one of the oldest international organizations alive, now headed by China and with a leadership election forthcoming later this year.

The lack of internal consensus to succeed in EU's global agenda may be the most significant obstacle the Union needs to surmount as European societies are divided on many relevant issues (with LGBTQI and gender perhaps most outstanding at the moment) along progressive / traditionalist lines. The communication issues a passionate call, even referencing founding treaties, to ensure consistency between external actions and internal policies to speak and deliver as one.

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<sup>13</sup> Josep Borrell, *Embracing Europe's Power*, *Project Syndicate* (8 Feb. 2020), available at: [https://www.project-](https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/embracing-europe-s-power-by-josep-borrell-2020-02)

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However, it leaves out how the current normative divergence inside the liberal political order and the opposition to global cooperation is to be overcome to provide the necessary bottom-up support for reloading multilateralism along the admittedly ambitious lines it favours.

Renewing multilateralism in the current crisis of the global normative order is key. The EU may not evolve into a credible custodian of the fundamental multilateral rules and institutions. It may, on the other hand, be a competent and credible champion of

normative innovation and adaptation in some specific yet groundbreaking areas (such as the governance of new technologies). It also has the potential of becoming more visible and receiving more recognition for all current efforts in norm entrepreneurship, contribution to peace and stability, sustainable development and removing causes of global social injustice. Realism is a necessary path to success, but true realism is not only about interests and leverages. It is also about the politics of limits.

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