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Faulty but Irreplaceable: Multilateralism in German Foreign Policy

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Multilateralism remains one of the key elements of Germany's foreign policy as a means to implement German economic and security interests. This applies to, among other areas, cooperation with Russia and China. However, Germany will increasingly use multilateralism as a tool of pressure on authoritarian regimes to respect human rights and international law.

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The Role of Multilateralism in German Foreign Policy

[The German Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) sees multilateralism as a form of international cooperation composed of three elements:

1. cooperation of many countries on an equal basis;
2. the belief that ultimately all states benefit most from such cooperation;
3. values recognised by all parties are the basis of this cooperation.

The international order understood in this way, which has underpinned Germany's foreign policy since World War II,¹ enabled the country to gradually overcome its post-war political isolation. Thanks to "multilateral integration", consisting of joining new international institutions and Western structures, Germany returned not only as a member of the international community but also as an architect of the post-war world order, the best example of which is Germany's co-creation of the European Coal and Steel Community, the forerunner to the EU, and its role in deepening European integration.

The normative nature of multilateralism also aligns with the ethical dimension of Germany's foreign policy as stated by German authorities. The first aspect is the reference to the United Nations Charter as an interpretation of the use of force in international relations, as well as to regional and interstate agreements guaranteeing the sovereignty of individual states. The second aspect of this respect of universally recognised values is Germany's demand that nations respect human rights, expressed both in international forums and in bilateral relations.

Multilateralism also played a role in Germany's becoming one of the world's leading economies. Parallel to joining Western security structures, Germany joined organisations building the global free-trade system (such as the International Monetary Fund in 1952) and used European integration to unlock the economic potential rebuilt after the World War II. In addition, successive German governments favoured proposals to remove barriers to international trade: the current CDU/CSU-SPD government supports a return to talks on the abandoned Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and the conclusion of similar agreements with Asian countries, for example, with Indonesia. Another factor contributing to German exports is freedom of navigation, legally secured, backed by international agreements guaranteeing the safe use of sea trade routes.

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Multilateralism, understood as a system based on adherence to common rules, is seen as key to reducing the risk of competition between superpowers, which could adversely affect the interests of smaller states. In this way, Germany not only aims to protect its security but also, through diplomatic instruments and its economic potential, influences the most important security issues (e.g., the Iran nuclear deal, the peace process in Libya), even though it does not sit on the UN Security Council (although it expresses ambitions for a seat) and does not have military

capabilities similar to the U.S., China, or Russia.

Multilateralism is also an element of the discussion on the direction of German foreign policy in Germany itself. Combined with calls for dialogue and pacifism, a kind of triple argument is used by supporters of reducing military spending and not allowing the Bundeswehr in foreign missions, as well as against tightening policies towards China and Russia. However, multilateralism is also used by

¹ First as West Germany, then as a united Germany.

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those who favour increasing Germany's military activity citing international agreements (e.g., the North Atlantic Treaty) that require greater military involvement from Germany.

Challenges for Germany's Promotion of Multilateralism

The role of multilateralism in the implementation of German security and economic interests makes protecting it a key part of foreign policy. The events and global processes of the last two decades have increasingly undermined the effectiveness of multilateralism as a model of international relations. One of the most serious challenges to it in the last decade was the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump. Under the president, the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement, the World Health Organisation, and UNESCO, and undermining of allied guarantees in Art. 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty were signals that the centre of gravity of the American administration was shifting towards bilateral relations and competition with China and Russia. Although after Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 presidential election, strengthening multilateral cooperation and American leadership within the framework of U.S. alliances returned as priorities of U.S. foreign policy, the Trump presidency negatively altered Germany's perception of the U.S. as an ally in the promotion of multilateralism.

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Another factor Germany perceives as a threat to multilateralism is the increasingly aggressive policy of Russia and China. In the last decade, both countries have repeatedly violated human rights and international law, including breaking agreements guaranteeing the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other states. Examples include the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by Russia, which is not recognised by Germany, [and China's claim of "historical rights" to the maritime areas of the](#)

[South China Sea, which Germany rejects](#). The lack of effective accountability mechanisms for China and Russia also encourages smaller states to break international law, as indicated by [the military actions of Turkey in Syria](#) and [Saudi Arabia in Yemen](#).

An additional problem is the growing popularity around the world of the belief in the weakness of the multilateral cooperation model. In 2019, during Germany's term of office as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC), the Council adopted the fewest resolutions (52) since 2013, as permanent members blocked many proposals. The system's weakness is also seen in slow responses to global problems. An example here is the failure of all UN members to join the Global Pact on Migration or the initial problems of the WHO or the EU and other large organisations in countering the outbreak of COVID-19. These phenomena to a large extent comprise arguments for critics of multilateralism, who respond that nation-states are more effective in managing crises. Other challenges for multilateralism are seen in the growing importance in international relations of non-state actors, such as international corporations, which greatly shape global processes and influence state decisions.

German Multilateralism in Practice

Germany's activities involving multilateral instruments in foreign policy can be divided into two levels. The first is the United Nations. Among European countries, Germany is the fourth-largest contributor to foreign missions (557 people in 2021), and globally the fourth-largest donor to the UN budget with a share of 6%. For Germany, the best opportunity to use diplomatic instruments at the UN was its non-permanent membership of the UNSC in 2019-2020. In that period, Germany was involved in drafting resolutions on the situation in Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, and Sudan. However, only the work on a resolution on Sudan in which the UNSC agreed to establish a new peace mission

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(headed by German political scientist Volker Perthes) was successful. The balance sheet remains ambiguous concerning the global goals of the German term. Although Germany succeeded in passing UNSC Resolution 2467 on violence against women in armed conflicts, the adoption of which was one of Germany's priorities, the attempt for a resolution creating a system for monitoring armed conflicts caused by climate change ended in failure in the same period.

An important global initiative implemented within the framework of the UN and in response to its deficits is the Alliance for Multilateralism (AfM), launched in April 2019. Although the main architects of the initiative are Germany and France, Canada was among the countries most supportive of the creation of the AfM, along with Japan and South Korea—states that, like Germany, expressed concern about the U.S. turn from multilateralism during Trump's presidency. The initiative, which now has 87 members, is a response to the criticism of the model of multilateral international cooperation and its weaknesses: it is intended to enable interested states to form coalitions focused on projects concerning global issues, such as cybersecurity, climate protection, or human rights.

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The second level is Germany's cooperation within regional formats. The main ones are the EU and NATO, membership of which underpins Germany's foreign policy. The initiatives undertaken by both the EU and NATO not only strengthen Germany's security but also make it easier for it to respond to violations of international law, as evidenced by the EU imposing sanctions on Russia over the annexation of Crimea and its continued involvement in the conflict in Donbas. Belonging to NATO, in turn, [enables closer cooperation with Japan and Australia in the face of China's aggressive policy in the South China Sea](#). In the economic dimension, membership of the EU and free market rules allow Germany to develop its economic potential. For Germany, the EU market remains the most important export destination and source of goods (65% and 60%, respectively, in 2019). Additionally, as the largest exporter in the EU, Germany benefits to the greatest extent from free trade agreements with non-European partners.

At the same time, Germany continues to cooperate with such regional groupings as ASEAN, postulating, for example, to transfer the level of cooperation with the organisation from a "partnership in development" to a "partnership in dialogue", which would allow for regular meetings of high-level representatives to discuss regional and global situations. An important element is also the participation of German representatives in economic forums such as the G20 and G7, which guarantees Germany influence on the shape of the global economy. The country also uses cooperation formulas limited to a few countries, such as the Weimar Triangle and the Normandy Format, or the so-far-informal meetings of defence ministers of the "E3", which, besides Germany, includes France and the UK.

However, the German authorities' reference to multilateralism is often selective, which in effect undermines the idea of multilateralism and renders it an instrument of self-interest. For example, although the German authorities refer to cooperation with Russia as an element to create interdependence between Russia and Europe, Germany's support of [the construction of the Nord Stream 2 \(NS2\) gas pipeline](#) over the objections of Poland, Ukraine, and the Baltic states reflects a departure from a multilateral resolution of international problems that takes into account and respects the opinion of other states. The discrepancy between its values related to multilateralism and its economic interests were visible also in December 2020 when Germany, as the presiding state of the EU Council, sought to finalise negotiations on [the EU-China Investment Agreement \(CAI\)](#) despite China's ongoing violations of international law in Hong Kong (National Security Act) and Xinjiang.

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Conclusions and Recommendations

In the coming years, multilateralism will remain a key element of German foreign policy. This is indicated by the consensus among major German political parties that this method of international cooperation is the most beneficial for the advancement of Germany's interests, as well as the Biden administration's greater inclination towards international organisations and multilateral activities. Germany's promotion of multilateralism is also fostered by its support for countries such as Japan and Australia, which are equally concerned about the risk of a revival of the global power model of competition.

This does not mean, however, that the problems of multilateralism will disappear. The integrity of this model, as well as Germany's position as a defender of it, would be more credible, especially in the context of observing the rights of smaller states, if it took tougher stances on violations of international law by China and Russia. A chance to do this may come from a new government with [the Greens](#) after this year's elections to the Bundestag. This could mark the beginning of a recovery of Germany's dilemma of maintaining good relations with important economic states at the expense of security interests. It cannot be ruled out that in view of the problems with the functioning of the UN and the lack of prospects for Germany's accession to the UNSC, the country will increasingly focus on expanding formats such as the Alliance for Multilateralism. This is indicated in the Germany

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government's ["White Book of Multilateralism"](#), published this year. In it, the foreign ministry suggests creating flexible models of cooperation that could include non-state actors. From the German perspective, cooperation with the U.S. will be key to the protection of multilateralism. Therefore, it is possible that the new German government will use the improved relations with the U.S. to intensify cooperation on global challenges, such as climate protection.

Considering both the improvement in relations with the U.S. and the growing threat from China, changes in the perception of multilateralism by Germany can be expected. The concept will be presented to a greater extent as an instrument in a global competition between liberal democracies and authoritarian states, serving as an element of German pressure on countries such as Russia and China to respect human rights and international law. In addition, in the case of China, Germany will in the future use forums such as the G7 to formulate strategies that would make it possible to counteract the global expansion of its economic influence. Poland's membership in the Alliance enables it to use its experience to date and to present new initiatives, for example, regarding the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. By invoking elements of multilateralism such as compliance with international law, Poland may convince Germany to adopt a stronger stance on violations of international law by Russia and China, and encourage Germany to increase its military and financial involvement within NATO, referring to allied commitments. Thanks to active participation in international forums, as well as the creation of coalitions around specific initiatives, Poland also has the ability to prevent the strongest members from subordinating the activities of the organisation to their national interests.