T7 Task Force International cooperation for the global common good

POLICY BRIEF

THE G7 AND MULTILATERALISM IN TIMES OF AGGRESSION: MAINTAINING AND STRENGTHENING COOPERATIVE AND INCLUSIVE APPROACHES FOR THE GLOBAL COMMON GOOD

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Abstract

President Putin’s aggression against Ukraine is, in the first place, a disaster for the people of Ukraine. At the same time, it is an attack on peace and security, international law, and a cooperative world order. Russia’s war in many ways also jeopardizes the efforts to maintain and strengthen other global public goods and to address humanity’s common and collective challenges, which have been growing over the past years with a steep rise during the ongoing pandemic. It will also affect international forums that are needed to facilitate cooperative action. Other concerns and the concerns of others are in danger of being massively overshadowed – to the detriment of global solidarity in times of aggression. Preventing this is a core task of the G7 in 2022. The G7 under the German Presidency should position itself in a way that responds to Russia’s aggression without throwing its medium- and long-term priority agenda overboard as the addressed challenges remain equally pressing. While the summit and the ministers’ meetings will very likely show a strong focus on the response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the G7 should overall stick to the five priority areas rolled out by the German Presidency – sustainable planet, economic stability and transformation, healthy lives, investment in a better future and stronger together. It should at the same time supplement, adapt, and link them to the evolving situation and necessities, including by supporting measures that address the negative economic and social impacts of the war and the sanctions on third countries. When implementing its policy initiatives, we recommend that the G7 takes an extra effort and invests its political and economic clout in intensified international cooperation for the global common good. The G7 should do so by linking up its activities with other partners, by bolstering inclusive global governance institutions, and through tethering plurilateral and multi-stakeholder formats to a strengthened United Nations and other multilateral organisations.
Challenge

President Putin’s aggression against Ukraine is, in the first place, a disaster for the people of Ukraine – and also for many others not directly involved in the war. It is an attack on the global public goods of peace and security, international law, and a cooperative world order. Its immediate and mid-term consequences augur ill for multilateral efforts to maintain and strengthen other global public goods and address humanity’s common and collective challenges, from halting climate change to overcoming the pandemic and its socio-economic aftermath to ending poverty and building equitable societies. After all, Putin’s Russia, alone or with a small number of ‘like-minded’ states, may be able to throw a spanner in the works of multilateral diplomacy and the international cooperation architecture. Putin openly displayed his disregard for the United Nations (UN), the UN Charter, and UN Secretary-General Guterres. At the moment of writing, it seems impossible to foresee how disruptive and polarizing the Russian aggression will turn out for multilateral structures, be it UN processes, the World Trade Organization (WTO) or the G20, all of which Russia is a member to. Russia’s withdrawal from the Council of Europe, pre-empting a vote by the organisation to expel it, is a case in point. Whether other institutions will follow suit is still up in the air.¹

The emergency meeting of the UN General Assembly on 2 March 2022 made very clear that the large majority of states stands united against Putin’s blatant breach of international law.² There are, however, also voices that speak of double standards vis-a-vis other crises or question economic and other sanctions.³ As of today, it seems plausible that multilateral processes will be negatively affected, from climate change or trade negotiations to the ongoing discussion of the UN General Assembly about how to future-proof the UN in the context of its 75th anniversary and the Secretary-General’s proposals in his report “Our Common Agenda”.⁴ An immediate end of the aggression and, a return to peaceful conflict resolution is crucial for allowing effective global collective action to address pressing transnational challenges. Already before the invasion of Ukraine, existing multilateral governance structures seemed too ponderous to keep pace with the challenges and a fast-changing international environment. There is great danger that the Russian aggression and the necessity to respond will further polarise international relations and also takes away political attention as well as political and economic capital from addressing humanity’s common and collective problems with the urgency they deserve.

The G7 under the German Presidency needs to position itself in a way that helps maintaining and strengthening cooperative and inclusive approaches for the global common good despite the security crisis in Europe. Club governance has long been heralded as a remedy to cumbersome, albeit more inclusive governance structures because of its perceived agility and efficiency. The G7 is a prime example as a group of wealthy and powerful states, proclaiming to be united by a common values base. Due to their narrow membership and therefore limited legitimacy, however, it has been questioned how clubs like the G7 benefit the international system at large. Especially in light of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the G7 must not make the mistake of misinterpreting itself as the apex of the international community. Instead, now more than ever it is important that the G7 puts its future activities to the service of reinvigorating inclusive forms of multilateralism, for them to be able to better deal with global crises.⁵ Mutual global solidarity in times of a severe crisis in Europe critically depends on how other concerns and the concerns of others are listened to and addressed by the G7, in particular as the negative socio-
economic repercussions of the crisis in Europe on the poorer parts of the world are very likely to become significant.

**Proposals**

Although the G7 would be ill advised if it turned itself into a key player in the field of security, it undoubtedly should formulate a firm response to the aggression and address the impact of the crisis on others. In parallel, it is crucial that the G7 maintains and strengthens multilateral approaches to solving those global problems which now risk falling behind on national and international lists of priorities. To this end, the G7 should stick to the medium- and long-term priority areas rolled out by the German Presidency (sustainable planet, economic stability and transformation, healthy lives, investment in a better future and stronger together) while supplementing, adapting, and linking them according to the evolving situation and necessities, including by supporting measures that address the negative economic and social impacts of the war and the sanctions on third countries. Against this backdrop, we present two broad proposals and specify their implementation in the following section:

1) **Invest in multilateral cooperation and strengthen inclusive global governance institutions**

The German G7 Presidency of 2022 vowed “to further strengthen the G7’s responsibility for the global common good and, to this end, to be open to cooperating with all partners, especially within the framework of the United Nations and the G20, on the basis of a fair and rules-based multilateralism”. Only by sticking to this commitment in both form and substance, the G7 will be able to help maintaining and strengthening the global solidarity with Ukraine and its people.

When pushing for solutions to global challenges, the G7 should invest its political and economic clout in intensifying international cooperation for the global common good and link up its activities across the priority areas with multilateral institutions and other partners. The G7 should strongly support the Indonesian G20 Presidency and its leitmotif “Recover together, recover stronger”. As a values-based group that feels on the right side of history today, the G7 should not rely too much on its moral high ground but actively reach out to other countries. The Alliance for Multilateralism could be a promising platform for such an outreach as it represents a highly diverse spectrum of countries that is bound together by a shared belief in effective multilateralism and a rules-based international order. The unifying momentum of the crisis needs to be strengthened by underpinning it with intensified cooperation beyond the security realm in other fields of major concern to partners.

2) **Improve plurilateral and multi-stakeholder formats**

Plurilateral and multi-stakeholder initiatives, in particular partnerships with non-governmental stakeholders, might be needed more than ever, now that UN and other multilateral processes could be obstructed once again. With a view to plurilateral formats, the WTO, for example, initiated a reform
process that focused on so called Joint Statement Initiatives that allowed sub-groups of members to launch plurilateral negotiations in specific areas (e-commerce, investment and services). This agenda and the upcoming Ministerial Conference in summer could however be jeopardised by discussions to revoke Russia’s most-favoured nation (MFN) status. Regarding multi-stakeholder initiatives, both the G7 Presidency’s programme and the UN Secretary General’s report “Our Common Agenda” are opting for pioneer projects and partnerships with non-governmental stakeholders, referring to the COVAX vaccination initiative or the G7 initiative for infrastructure projects in poorer countries. The G7 Presidency highlights that private stakeholders should be increasingly involved, especially when it comes to financing global public goods. At the same time, even though many UN member states support these advances, there is no broad agreement for pursuing stronger partnerships with non-state actors not least because of legitimacy and sovereignty concerns. For such initiatives to have relevant impact, however, they need the broad support by as many countries and societies across the globe as possible. The Secretary-General’s report “Our Common Agenda” may provide an important opening as the Secretary-General advocates for a greater use of these formats in order to implement global goals, most notably those of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Climate Agreement. For the G7, this means that it should reach out to the UN in its efforts to promote multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Implementations

To implement the two broader proposals, we specify a number of concrete recommendations in the following:

**Ad Proposal 1) Invest in international cooperation and strengthen inclusive global governance institutions**

**Recommendation: Invest in making the UN future-proof**

Investments in a better future are a priority of the UN Secretary-General’s recent report “Our Common Agenda”. Given its central role for rules-based multilateralism, the UN has a special role to play. Proposals aim at enabling it to respond faster to future transnational crises and to do so in a more inclusive and just manner. Developing greater strategic foresight, taking increased account of the interests of young people and future generations, and bringing key players together quickly in the event of the outbreak of new crises – these are the Secretary General’s ambitious proposals for placing the UN further into the centre of global problem-solving. The G7 committed in the Cornwall Consensus in 2021 to make crisis management more effective and fairer in future. This year, the G7 should discuss the role of the UN in this. UN member states are divided when it comes to the associated increase in authority and knowledge for the UN that would go hand in hand with these measures. The issue of upgrading the UN is also contested within the G7 due to concerns about effectiveness and sovereignty, as well as given the influence of states such as China and Russia within the intergovernmental negotiations and the international bureaucracy. Nonetheless, since the G7 and the UN Secretary General have common interests with regard to major concerns for the future, the group should support the targeted development of the UN’s strategic capacities, and do so...
politically and financially.13 The G7 could agree early on which proposals they want to support with a view to the ‘Summit of the Future’ planned to take place during the UN General Assembly’s high-level week in September 2023. They could raise the level of ambition within their groups at the UN and beyond.

**Recommendation: Invest in WTO reform**

The global trade system is threatened at a fundamental level, with ongoing trade wars and surging protectionism as well as a global pandemic that has fuelled the weaponisation of interdependencies in the trade realm. Amid this dismal background, WTO reform has dragged on for years, with little success in sight. The impact of the war in Ukraine and the ensuing economic and financial sanctions on global trade can only be guessed at present. Furthermore, the revoking of Russia’s MFN status by the G7, which would lead to higher tariffs on Russian products, risks to intensify controversies and deepen existing trenches among WTO members. Any reform efforts need to be linked to the objectives of the Paris Climate Agreement and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and vice versa. The controversial discussion on a European carbon border adjustment tax14 and its potential conflict with the global trade regime are a case in point. The link to sustainability issues intended by the G7 is commendable and aligns with the ‘green transformation’ as a golden thread of the priorities of the Germany Presidency.

The G7’s approach to WTO reform should hence be two-fold: First, its members should put their weight behind holding the WTO Ministerial Conference in summer 2022 that had to be postponed because of the ongoing pandemic. A number of urgent issues require immediate attention by WTO Members – including the use of trade policy to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic, the conclusion of the negotiations on fisheries subsidies and trade-related reactions to Russia’s invasion in Ukraine – and the G7 should commit to supporting a successful Ministerial Conference.15 This way, G7 countries can demonstrate that they are serious about WTO reform and blow some fresh air in to a process that seems to have come to a halt. Second, the G7 should support plurilateral approaches, the so called Joint Statement Initiatives, that take into account not only the interests of industrialized countries but also of the developing world to make sure the (updated) global trade system is not only robust but also inclusive. The negotiations on an Investment Facilitation for Development, promoted mainly by developing countries, is a promising example in this respect as it includes substantive rules promoting sustainable development and aims at strengthening developing countries’ capacities to effectively implement the agreements they have signed.

**Recommendation: Invest in equitable recovery and global solidarity in times of crises**

The Presidency pledges to safeguard economic recovery and financial stability in the aftermath of the COVID pandemic. Whatever shape the initiatives will take, it will be essential that the G7 reaches out to partners beyond the narrow confines of its industrialized countries’ club. After all, recovery from the COVID crisis is proceeding at strikingly different pace, with many poorer countries still far behind. The G7 must not forget that developing countries only can deploy fractions compared to what the members of the G7 can mobilize to boost their economies. Ignoring this unequal playing field runs the risk of a “two-track recovery”, as global institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have warned.
The Russian war against Ukraine will likely lead to an even more challenging environment for many countries, from rising food and energy prices to disrupted value chains to the effects of economic and financial sanctions. In particular, if interest rates are raised in the US and the EU to tame inflationary pressure, this will lead to a further worsening of the debt situation in many developing countries. The G7 should therefore put a strong emphasis, inter alia, on helping developing countries to overcome their immediate challenges to service their debt by orchestrating a debt relief that also involves private creditors and China. Coordination with the G20 seems advisable in this context.

Furthermore, the G7 should make sure that economic and financial sanctions are designed in a way that capitalises on the strengths and rules of multilateral institutions instead of undermining them, and minimises negative impacts on third countries. We recommend that efforts of economic recovery and crisis response need to be closely tied to wider transformations in the economic systems towards more sustainable and socially just practices. Meaningful links to multilateral and multi-stakeholder initiatives should be used to reap synergies and avoid duplication. For example, the UN Secretary General has established a ‘Global Crisis Response Group on Food, Energy and Finance’ in the UN Secretariat. He started consulting with Member States willing to champion the actions needed to carry forward a global emergency response in those areas. The G7 countries should coordinate their response to this. The G7 Presidency itself mentions the EU’s Global Gateway initiative and the G20’s Compact with Africa, without however spelling out how it seeks to tie into these initiatives. It is important not to create yet another competing or overlapping response to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), but rather to complement and support existing initiatives like the ones above in a meaningful way.

Recommendation: Invest in digital cooperation

The G7’s focus on “digital progress in an inclusive global order” offers great potential to tie into related activities at UN level, most notably on the Secretary-General’s High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation led by Melinda Gates and Jack Ma including the subsequent Roadmap for Digital Cooperation as well as the section on “Improving Digital Cooperation” of the report on “Our Common Agenda”. All these documents expose striking similarities with the objectives of the G7 presidency, including the focus on achieving digital equality, the protection of digital rights, and creating an effective and values-based global digital order. Especially on the latter point, dense collaboration with like-minded partners seems more promising whereas issues-based cooperation, e.g. on cybercrime or (digital) economic development, must by nature be pursued in a more inclusive setting. Tying the G7’s efforts to the global level seems mutually beneficial: their initiatives will gain legitimacy and in turn become more sustainable if linked with procedures that extend beyond the richer world. As industrialized countries and hubs for (digital) innovation, the G7 can make precedents in developing digital standards. At the same time, they should create momentum for more inclusive efforts, for more integration of the Global South, and for further developing international multi-stakeholder governance (for example the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers or the Internet Governance Forum).
Recommendation: Re-initiate discussion about Security Council reform

Amid the ongoing war in Ukraine, there is already a lively debate on how the UN’s core institutions will be affected by the crisis. The UN General Assembly should remain the place where states can talk to each other in the last resort. The inability of the Security Council to condemn Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, however, once again highlighted the urgent need for reforming this body. The vast majority of UN member states agrees: If the Security Council is to retain authority and legitimacy, both its composition as well as its working methods have to be adapted to the realities of the 21st century. For roughly two decades, the G4 (Brazil, Germany, India and Japan, spanning G7, G20 and BRICS) have been active in developing proposals for Security Council reforms that would increase participation, particularly by developing countries, political diversity and the capacity of the UN system to address global problems more effectively. These reform initiatives have not been successful so far, due to opposition from the Council’s permanent five members and divisions among member states about who should be elevated to which status in the UNSC. The G7 could serve as a platform for re-evaluating UNSC reform proposals in light of the Council’s obvious failings. By reaching out to the G20 countries that are open to UNSC reform, such an initiative might develop momentum, particularly if it is carefully connected to other players and more procedural ideas on reforming working methods.

Ad Proposal 2) Improve plurilateral and multi-stakeholder formats

Recommendation: Making the Climate Club effective and legitimate

Making use of partnerships in plurilateral formats is also essential for the Presidency’s first priority: Under the heading “A sustainable planet” the G7 Presidency emphasizes the creation of “strong alliances”. The alliance spelled out most clearly is the foundation of a climate club with the aim of advancing the implementation of the Paris Climate Agreement, for instance by agreeing on uniform standards for CO2 emissions and pricing or by supporting countries that implement ambitious climate protection measures. The expected turmoil on the gas market notwithstanding, advances in combatting climate change are too urgent to be left for later. For the success of this climate club, it will be essential that the G7 takes its own pledge about “creating strong alliances” seriously. The club needs to be open to partners from outside the G7, from poorer to richer countries, particularly emerging economies, and also non-state and sub-state actors that pledge towards achieving the Paris Goals. We strongly recommend that these partners should be invited early in the conceptualization phase. Otherwise, the climate club runs the risk of becoming a climate bloc.

Recommendation: Booster COVAX

As pledged in the Presidency’s programme, the G7 must contribute to the further vaccine rollout in order to achieve – or at least come closer to – the World Health Organization’s (WHO) goal of vaccinating 70 per cent of the population by mid-2022. The reference to the multi-stakeholder ACT Accelerator including COVAX, its vaccination component, seems an obvious and useful step in this regard. Thus far, the success of the initiative has been limited. More than two years into the pandemic, COVAX still struggles to secure
funding and to live up to its promise of providing vaccines for the whole world. As of today, only 10 percent of the population in low-income countries have received at least one vaccine shot, compared to 77 per cent in the industrialised world. The G7’s words will be measured against its members’ deeds here, i.e. whether wealthy countries will significantly ramp up their contributions to the ACT Accelerator to close the vaccination gap between the developed and the developing world. This includes the challenge to strengthen health systems so that vaccinations can actually be delivered. The G7 should also take seriously the criticism by the UN’s Economic and Social Council that called for technology transfers and amendments to the property rights regime for closing the vaccine gap in a more sustainable manner.

**Recommendation: Activate the Alliance for Multilateralism**

Informal networks of countries that support effective global cooperation based on the rule of law, the UN Charter, and international law can serve as important complements to more institutionalized governance clubs such as the G7 or G20. The Alliance for Multilateralism is such a network. The partners within the Alliance share the conviction that global problems can only be tackled by the broadest cooperation possible, including all those concerned by these problems (stakeholders) as well as all those responsible for addressing the problems politically. Initiated in 2019 by France and Germany together with Canada, Mexico, Chile, Singapore and Ghana at the opening of the 74th UNGA, the network serves as a hub: Like-minded countries and non-governmental stakeholders in varying cross-regional constellations rally around specific action areas, with a focus on achieving concrete policy outcomes. The G7 could pledge support for existing or new initiatives in the seven action areas of the Alliance (human rights, international law/accountability, disarmament and arms control, cyberspace, global public goods, climate, and strengthening institutions).

**Recommendation: Carefully navigate the interrelation and interlinkages between the G7 and the G20**

The G7 would be well advised to strongly support the Indonesian G20 Presidency and its leitmotif “Recover together, recover stronger”. In this context it is particularly relevant to carefully navigate the interrelation and interlinkages between the G7 and the G20. It is crucial to muster diplomatic efforts not only to neutralize a destructive role of Russia in the group but also to constructively engage the other G20 countries in the many G20 work streams throughout the year. Thereby the G20 could also help shift the political dynamics in relations with China, leading to professionalise relations, foster mutual respect and priority on results, amidst all (necessary) divergent positions. The G20 must not become a collateral damage of the Russian war in Ukraine, also with a view of the incoming Indian (2023), Brazilian (2024) and South African (2025) Presidencies.

**Recommendation: Support an effective UN hub for partnerships**

The G7 Presidency pledges to intensify cooperation with private actors in meeting its goals. It would be useful for the G7 to tether its respective initiatives to the UN system institutionally. This could address existing criticisms and garner broader support. To avoid “blue-washing”, however, the UN would need to credibly ensure that these and other multi-stakeholder partnerships meet human rights standards, are transparent in their design, monitored on an ongoing basis, and further developed in line with the needs of the target groups. By subjecting partnerships to this kind of quality control, the UN could strengthen its
central role in fostering pro-active global governance and more countries would gain ownership. As the existing UN Office for Partnerships is currently not in a position to carry out the aforementioned tasks, the G7 should support, as proposed in the “Our Common Agenda” report, the development of an effective UN hub for partnerships and, as a good example, link its own initiatives through this hub.

**Stronger together**

It is understandable that Russia’s war in Ukraine currently dominates public opinion and policymaking (not only) in G7 countries. After the COVID-19 pandemic, yet another situation is now arising in which the G7 countries are responding with a “whatever it takes” approach to a crisis that primarily directly affects them. However, other concerns and the concerns of others are in danger of being massively overshadowed (even though many of them are exacerbated by the current situation) – to the detriment of global solidarity in times of aggression. Preventing this from happening is a core task of the G7 in 2022.
Endnotes

1 The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) Executive Council has decided to hold an extraordinary UNWTO General Assembly to suspend Russia’s membership, which was however met with criticism, e.g. on behalf of UN Secretary-General Guterres.


3 At the 11th Emergency Special Session of the General Assembly on Ukraine, 141 countries supported the resolution. But we also need to further analyse the explanations of vote of those who abstained (35), did not vote (12), or voted against (4, plus Russia). See https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1b/k1bnr4ntp.


5 It might be wise to also self-critically evaluate one’s past engagement in the world, see also Federal Foreign Office of Germany. (2022, 01 March). Speech by Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock at the Emergency Special Session of the UN General Assembly on Ukraine. https://www.auswaertiges-Amt.de/en/newsroom/news/-/2514706.


7 Together with 16 other G20 members Indonesia voted in favour of the General Assembly resolution on the aggression against Ukraine (China, India, and South Africa abstained).


29 Alliance for Multilateralism: *Action Areas,* https://multilateralism.org/actionareas/.


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