

Editorial

Beyond Rupture: Strategic Choices for the EU in an Era of Global Disorder

1 INTRODUCTION

In a widely praised speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2026, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney gave clear and defiant voice to conclusions that many observers of the global governance system's slow-motion collapse have been reaching for years.¹ The speech captured a growing sense that the foundations of international cooperation are no longer merely under strain, but actively breaking: the international order established after the Second World War, rooted in US economic primacy and political leadership, has now been 'ruptured'.

While Carney's intervention dominated headlines, politicians, policymakers, and analysts have long been grappling with this unsettling period in global politics and with what, if anything, can be done to arrest or reshape it. Writing recently in *Foreign Affairs*, Finnish President Alexander Stubb described a 'dying' liberal rules-based order and a 'shift from multilateralism to multipolarity', urging Western leaders to work with emerging powers to 'fix' institutions like the United Nations (UN).²

The current global disorder is not solely the consequence of the second Trump administration's iconoclastic behaviour, even if it has accelerated the demise of the old order. All three self-proclaimed great powers – the US, China, and Russia – rely on force and coercion to prove that 'might makes right'. Intensifying G2 rivalry has eroded shared norms, weakened international institutions, and diluted consensus on global rules. Emerging powers, notably China, have long held expectations of multilateralism that diverge from the democratic 'West', while competition among geopolitical blocs further constrains cooperation. As a result, multilateral rulemaking has slowed and, in some areas, stalled altogether.

¹ World Economic Forum, *Davos 2026: Special Address by Mark Carney, Prime Minister of Canada* (20 Jan. 2026).

² A. Stubb, *The West's Last Chance: How to Build a New Global Order Before It's Too Late* (Foreign Affairs Jan./Feb. 2026).

Several structural weaknesses in institutional multilateralism compound these pressures. Consensus-based decision-making in institutions such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) slow reform, while weak membership criteria (e.g., the UN Human Rights Council) and limited enforcement mechanisms undermine credibility. Efforts to create new institutions (e.g., China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank) risk creating duplication and fragmentation rather than coordination. An extreme example is Trump's attempt to take a sledgehammer to the foundations of the UN – and the emergent BRICS alliance – by erecting a so-called 'International Board of Peace'.

Beyond institutions, the uneven distribution of globalization's benefits and the rise of nationalism have fuelled public and political distrust in global institutions, reducing support for international cooperation. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in global 'just-in-time' supply chains and accelerated the turn toward more antagonistic geoeconomic strategies, most visibly in competition over vaccines and critical raw materials (e.g., the US-led Pax Silica and the Forum for Strategic Resource Cooperation).

Across multiple policy domains, Trump withdrew US participation in and funding for numerous UN entities (e.g., the UN Human Rights Council and the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees [UNRWA]) and non-UN organizations,³ conventions, and treaties – the WHO and the Paris Climate Agreement being two of the most prominent examples – while actively obstructed others (e.g., sanctions on judges and prosecutors of the International Criminal Court). These actions have further weakened multilateral institutions and left substantial governance gaps. As a result, international commitments consistently fall short of what is needed to address global crises. Climate targets exceed current national contributions; pandemic preparedness remains inadequate; refugee protection mechanisms are overstretched; and human rights enforcement is weak. Across these and other domains, persistent bottlenecks include unpredictable funding, under-resourced secretariats, and limited technical capacity.

The EU cannot insulate itself from these developments, nor from intensifying competition with authoritarian regimes. At the same time, the EU and its Member States lack the political clout and financial resources to compensate for the withdrawal or obstruction of major powers. Internal divisions among Member States further complicate efforts to formulate a coherent EU approach. Maintaining the status quo, therefore, is neither realistic nor desirable.

³ White House, *Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Withdraws the United States from International Organizations that Are Contrary to the Interests of the United States* (7 Jan. 2026).

Multilateralism is at the core of the EU's identity – without it, the bloc cannot function. To navigate the rupture of the old order that has long served it well, the EU must adopt a more strategic approach, making clear prioritization and difficult choices. In particular, it must answer these questions:

- Which policy areas warrant concentrated EU investment to defend or reform global governance?
- Which institutional formats are most appropriate: global or regional, open or selective, formal or informal?
- Which governance functions – rule-setting, financing, implementation, enforcement – best match the EU's capabilities and comparative advantages?
- Which like-minded actors should be prioritized for action in different policy areas?

Failure to make timely and coherent strategic choices risks relegating the EU from its long-standing role as a rule-maker to that of a rule-taker. Without shoring up its strategic autonomy in the short term, the EU would face greater exposure to military threats from Russia, economic coercion from China and the United States, and potential destabilization of humanitarian and refugee systems if global support structures collapse. A deliberate, prioritized strategy for global governance reform is therefore a core European interest.

2 THE EU'S APPROACH THUS FAR

Empirical research undertaken as part of the ENSURED project highlights several key findings about how the EU has engaged with multilateral governance to date:

Trade: The EU defends the relevance of the WTO while promoting plurilateral and informal solutions for trade-related issues (e.g., the environment, development), recognizing that reform of the global rulebook and institutional framework for trade liberalization is blocked by geopolitical splits. Flexible mechanisms are employed to preserve the system from the outside-in.

Climate: The EU treats the Paris framework as the central node because of its broad participation, despite slow consensus-building hampering the UNFCCC's level of ambition. The EU generally pushes for implementation, finance, and coalition-building. However, without stronger financing and procedural fixes, the pledge-and-review design and transparency of the Paris architecture risk under-delivery.

Health: The EU has actively sponsored multilateral reform (as exemplified by the Pandemic Agreement), demonstrating a willingness to lead treaty-level change. Yet the multilateral system suffers from limited financing, operational detail, and risks of fragmentation with existing international health regulatory mechanisms.

Human rights promotion: The UN Human Rights Council suffers from weak enforceability, flawed membership practices, constrained civil society participation, and under-resourced special procedures. The EU remains a normative actor in UN human rights fora but geopolitical polarization, limited enforcement tools, and resource constraints reduce institutional effectiveness. Targeted UN Human Rights Council reforms are recommended rather than wholesale redesign.

Migration and refugees: The Global Compacts for Migration and on Refugees are non-binding and underfunded, with weak accountability and limited political will for reform. Bilateral and minilateral arrangements are growing, weakening global norms. The EU's approach is best characterized as 'selective multilateralism' – sustaining the Global Compacts as soft normative anchors while prioritizing flexible, interest-driven cooperation formats. This reflects limited political will and capacity to revitalize global refugee and migration governance, rather than a rejection of it outright.

Digitalization: The EU's internal regulatory activism (e.g., cryptocurrency rules, Digital Markets and Services Acts) is matched by efforts to bolster global standards through international bodies and by strengthening soft-law mechanisms, but success hinges on bridging techno-political divides and securing US engagement. EU participation in multilateral standard-setting bodies could go deeper. Multilateral bodies (FATF, FSB, BCBS; UN processes like OEWG, IGF) struggle to keep pace with product-level change, standards remain fragmented, geopolitical rivalry disrupts consensus, and many norms remain soft law without binding enforcement or clarity.

Taxation: The EU supports global taxation initiatives (e.g., UN, OECD, and G20 discussions of wealth taxes and tax justice; scrutiny of offshore finance) but faces structural limits: tax reform requires broad political consensus and reform of international financial governance, which remains contested.

Overall, the EU has been positioning itself as a principled defender and pragmatic steward of multilateral solutions. It sponsors and shapes new multilateral instruments and seeks to anchor rule-making where possible, while also relying on soft-law, club-style, and informal arrangements when formal consensus is blocked. The EU's capacity to lead, however, is uneven. Decades of de-industrialization and growing dependencies have left it strong in regulatory agenda-setting in a diminishing set of domains (e.g., internal digital and financial rules) but weaker where domestic politics and supply chain security are decisive (e.g., migration and critical raw materials) and where US inconsistency or geopolitical competition undercuts universal processes.

2.1 STRENGTHS

The EU enters debates on global governance with a distinctive set of strengths, positioning it as one of the few actors capable of bridging rifts and advancing

reform across multiple policy domains. At the core of this capacity is its strong regulatory and standard-setting power, underpinned by well-developed internal norms in areas such as human rights, market regulation, and digital governance. This internal *acquis* provides the EU with both technical expertise and practical experience that can be projected externally.

The EU also retains significant normative credibility as a defender of multilateral rules and institutions, particularly when compared with actors whose engagement is more selective or transactional. While this credibility is not universal, it resonates in many international fora and gives the EU agenda-setting leverage. Its dense diplomatic networks and institutional know-how further reinforce its ability to act as a broker, convener and coalition-builder.

Importantly, the EU is embedded in, and helps shape, a range of existing multilateral frameworks and treaties – such as the WHO system, the Paris Agreement, and emerging global digital governance processes – which offer concrete entry points for reform. Its willingness to sponsor and promote new instruments, exemplified by its leadership on climate diplomacy and support for a pandemic treaty, demonstrates an ability to translate normative ambition into institutional initiatives.

Finally, the EU's experience with internal monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, along with relatively inclusive governance models, provides a repertoire of practices that can serve as reference points for international reform efforts. Taken together, these assets do not guarantee success, but give the EU a comparative advantage in shaping the evolution of global governance at a time of geopolitical rupture.

2.2 WEAKNESSES

The EU's current approach to transforming global governance is constrained by structural and political shortcomings that limit its overall impact. First, the EU lacks the hard power and security leverage of major geopolitical actors that can veto, bypass, or reshape multilateral outcomes when it suits their interests. As great-power rivalry intensifies – with shifting US engagement and the assertiveness of authoritarian regimes – consensus-based, multilateral rule-making is increasingly diluted by bloc competition and divergent expectations among emerging powers. This environment reduces the EU's ability to translate normative leadership into decisive outcomes – to act as a great power in the protection and promotion of global public goods.

Second, the EU relies heavily on informal arrangements and soft-law instruments such as transparency mechanisms, peer review, and voluntary commitments.

While sometimes effective, these often suffer from weak implementation, limited accountability, and the absence of sanctions. Many reforms therefore remain procedural or normative rather than binding. This challenge is compounded by persistent financing gaps, under-resourced secretariats, and weak technical capacities across key governance domains, including climate, health, refugee protection, and human rights enforcement, undermining the operational effectiveness of multilateral institutions the EU seeks to strengthen.

Third, representation deficits further blunt EU influence. Emerging powers and smaller states in the ‘Plural South’⁴ increasingly criticize existing multilateral forums for insufficient voice and responsiveness and are more willing to pursue alternative alignments, such as China’s Global Development Initiative. Civil society participation is frequently marginal, tokenistic or excluded altogether, with actors from the Plural South underrepresented and governance formats still overwhelmingly state-centric, despite formal commitments to inclusivity.

Finally, internal EU incoherence at times weakens its negotiating position and agility. Divergent Member State priorities slow decision-making and dilute external positions, limiting the EU’s capacity to act strategically and consistently. This, in turn, undermines the EU’s credibility as a global actor (see the outcry in the Plural South over inconsistent EU policies on the wars in Ukraine and Gaza). Together, these constraints mean that while the EU remains an important multilateral actor, its ability to shape global governance transformation is often reactive and incremental rather than decisive.

3 THE NEED FOR CHANGE

Evidence from across policy domains indicates that maintaining the status quo – a combination of procedurally sophisticated multilateral frameworks with weak delivery, alongside increasingly fragmented plurilateral and bilateral arrangements – will be insufficient to address today’s accelerating global challenges. Climate tipping points are approaching faster than current commitments can overcome, pandemic preparedness remains structurally weak, financial stability is exposed to cross-border shocks, and digital externalities continue to outpace governance responses. In this context, fragmentation, resource constraints, and deepening political polarization directly undermine both the effectiveness of global governance and the EU’s own treaty objectives and strategic ambitions.

The urgency of these challenges magnifies the costs of inaction. Delayed or diluted responses to pandemics, climate breakdown, or systemic digital risks

⁴ See S. Patrick & A. Huggins, *The Term ‘Global South’ Is Surging. It Should Be Retired* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 15 Aug. 2023).

compound over time, locking in higher economic, social, and security costs. Weak multilateral outcomes today, therefore, translate into heightened instability tomorrow. Without meaningful reform, multilateralism risks becoming hollowed out: norms without enforcement and procedural compliance without impact – a ‘rules-based order’ in name only.

At the same time, the turn toward fragmentation through bilateral deals, minilateral clubs, and ad hoc coalitions tends to privilege powerful actors while marginalizing smaller and more vulnerable states. This erosion of inclusivity undermines global equity and weakens the legitimacy of international cooperation. Over time, such dynamics risk entrenching parallel governance structures that dilute shared norms rather than reinforce them.

For the EU, the stakes are existential. Failure to lead in preserving and strengthening credible multilateral governance would erode its normative authority, soft power, and diplomatic influence, leaving it increasingly reactive and prey to great-power competition. Conversely, effective and reformed multilateralism aligns directly with the EU’s long-term interests: enhancing security, supporting sustainable development, stabilizing markets, and promoting its core values. The evidence thus points clearly to the need for a more decisive EU role in shaping governance systems that can move beyond procedure and deliver tangible outcomes. Encouragingly, the US and China remain active proponents of multilateral solutions, albeit not often in the same domains and mostly on technical issues.

Barring a total collapse or full-scale reboot of the global governance system, only a limited number of plausible trajectories exist for the future of multilateralism. The EU would do well to develop a flexible response adaptable to each of these scenarios.

4 STRATEGIC CHOICES, RISKS, AND TRADE-OFFS

One possibility is informal *adaptive multilateralism*: core universal institutions persist but increasingly rely on flexible, non-binding mechanisms, coalitions of the willing, and sectoral hubs to sustain cooperation (e.g., environmental agendas progressing informally through the WTO). A second option is bottom-up *layering*, in which overlapping regional, plurilateral, and private governance arrangements proliferate, gradually replacing older universal architectures – like the consensus-based UN and WTO – that perform less effectively. A third approach is formal *selective renewal*, where targeted institutional reforms (stronger financing, clearer compliance tools, improved representation) revive specific regimes but stop short of a system-wide restoration. ENSURED project analyses of trade and climate show that the WTO and UNFCCC are already moving toward the first two

dynamics – informal outcomes and layered governance – because political divisions limit binding rulemaking.

There is scope to transform global governance in areas where new political coalitions, procedural innovation, and EU leadership converge. The Pandemic Agreement exemplifies partial but meaningful institutional change: the treaty codifies new norms and a legal foothold for pandemic prevention, even if implementation is uneven and financing remains modest. Similarly, digital governance and cryptocurrency regulation illustrate that multilateral frameworks (i.e., FATF, FSB, BCBS) can be strengthened, but only if major actors coordinate and domestic implementation follows. In climate governance, the flexible design of the Paris Agreement ensures robustness but tends to blunt effectiveness unless complemented by stronger finance and implementation pathways. In short, transformation is possible, but it will be incremental, uneven across sectors, and dependent on political will and resource commitments.

Coalition-building is therefore crucial. The EU will need to distinguish between actors that can reliably defend multilateral cooperation and those who act as spoilers or selective participants. These roles are not fixed and may vary across sectors. The US, for example, may appear semi-detached or obstructionist in some negotiations while remaining fully engaged in technical agencies and budgetary contributions. Such variability calls for flexible engagement strategies rather than blanket assumptions about partnership or rivalry.

At the same time, the EU should invest more systematically in relationships with parts of the Plural South – ‘swing states’ such as Brazil, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria, and South Africa – that value strategic autonomy but also recognize the benefits of effective global governance. Meaningful engagement requires addressing substantive concerns about equity, representation, and development, rather than treating alignment as a given. This can help counter alternative governance initiatives that bypass or weaken multilateral frameworks. By contrast, substantively narrow or shallow agreements and partnerships (e.g., in trade, security, and defence) will have limited impact and may be seen as band-aids on deeper structural gaps.

A central risk is that, in responding to intensified geopolitical and geoeconomic pressures, the EU dilutes or sidelines its core values – such as democracy promotion, poverty reduction, or environmental sustainability – in favour of short-term strategic interests. This tension has already led to perceptions of double standards: divergent EU positions across policy areas or regions risk undermining its consistency, predictability, credibility, and leverage as a defender of multilateral norms. Interest-driven positioning may also weaken trust among rules-based partners and non-aligned states alike, particularly when EU institutions or instruments appear misaligned in their objectives or messaging. When in doubt, the EU

should adhere to its principles and commonly agreed rules. Domestic and global regulatory alignment is required by the EU's own rulebook. Similarly, the European Commission and Member States with advanced membership rights in relevant organizations must align external action with internal decision-making.

The EU should double down on instruments that enhance implementation and accountability. This requires strategically choosing when to prioritize binding versus flexible norms: binding rules may be feasible in areas like digital finance, health treaties, and human rights, while flexible approaches (such as peer review or soft law) may be more realistic for migration compacts or certain trade norms. Embedding transparency, monitoring, and evaluation mechanisms is essential, as norms without credible follow-up risk remaining merely aspirational.

Resource constraints further complicate strategic choices. Budgetary pressures, limited staff, and administrative capacity will inevitably force prioritization across policy areas and geographies, raising difficult questions about where EU engagement can be most impactful. Resistance from partner states – and domestic constituencies within the EU – toward binding international norms, accountability mechanisms, or perceived intrusions on sovereignty can also constrain ambition and generate political backlash. EU voluntary funding, complemented by Member State contributions to cover gaps left by the US and other donors, remains the main mechanism for supporting the UN. Outside of defence (via NATO), there is no additional EU budget earmarked for such purposes, limiting the scope for larger contributions to UN core funding. However, in areas where EU interests are directly at risk, targeted support is more likely. Refugee and migration issues, notably addressed by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), whose funding is under pressure, stand out as priority areas – particularly given the risk of a new refugee crisis spurred by armed conflict and climate change impacts. Without timely funding, the humanitarian sector – including the World Food Programme (WFP) – faces collapse, highlighting the critical role of EU and Member State contributions.

Finally, there is a risk of overcommitment: pursuing multiple governance reforms simultaneously may stretch EU capacities too thin, resulting in diluted focus, implementation fatigue, and limited results. Managing these trade-offs requires clear prioritization, realistic sequencing of reforms, and sustained political communication to preserve both effectiveness and legitimacy.

5 PATHWAYS FOR EU LEADERSHIP

To prevent multilateralism from eroding into empty rhetoric or exclusive 'club governance', the EU must pair normative leadership with practical, targeted reforms:

- Reframe and own the narrative to defend core values and demonstrate the practical utility of multilateral governance, particularly in health security, economic stability, and climate risk reduction. The EU's strategic communications regarding global governance should counter scepticism by showing what works in practice.
- Enhance EU diplomatic engagement, leveraging EU institutions and Member States in negotiation settings and building issue-specific coalitions with like-minded partners willing to uphold global governance systems that serve their core principles. The focus should be on key BRICS countries like Brazil, India, and South Africa, as well as other swing states of the Plural South (including Indonesia, Mexico, and Nigeria) whose influence, and population, is considerable.
- Target global governance reform to improve monitoring and defend compliance. Commission or support pilot projects in thematic areas (e.g., climate finance for loss and damage; digital standard implementation in low-income countries) to demonstrate feasibility.
- Secure predictable financing for selected organizations (for example, staff capacity and secretarial support) in areas like trade, climate, and migration governance, where the robustness of multilateralism and the EU's strategic interests are at stake.
- Align domestic and global regulations more effectively. In doing so, involve civil society at every stage, reduce the procedural barriers to participation, ensure the representation of marginalized and small states, and ensure the EU models best practices in its own conduct.

As global politics shift from cooperative multilateralism toward great power competition, the EU must recalibrate its ambitions for transforming global governance. In a diffuse system increasingly shaped by power asymmetries and transactional bargaining, the EU cannot rely on hard-power leverage like other major actors. It will therefore need to accept pragmatic compromises in the pursuit of its core principles and interests, prioritizing influence and outcomes over institutional purity in some policy domains.

This does not imply strategic ambiguity or alignment with only one side in the G2 rivalry. Rather, the EU must consciously manage the tension between transactional arrangements and its long-standing commitment to inclusive, rules-based multilateralism. In practice, this requires differentiated strategies across policy areas, recognizing that the feasibility of multilateral solutions varies by issue, institutional setting, and the constellation of actors.

The EU has both the opportunity and responsibility to act more decisively to safeguard and strengthen multilateral governance. To succeed, the EU must move beyond symbolic and procedural reforms, focusing instead on defending compliance, ensuring monitoring and delivery within existing regimes, boosting predictable financing of selected organizations, and promoting inclusive participation and effective accountability. Without such action, global governance risks further decay – undermining the EU’s interests and its ability, alongside like-minded partners, to respond to humanity’s most urgent shared challenges.

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