Centre for Multilateral Negotiations

MULTILATERALISM SERIES – POLICY BRIEF 1/2026

Faster, Fairer, Fit for Purpose: Rewiring Multilateralism in a Fragmented Era

Executive Summary

- Multilateralism is under sustained pressure driven by geopolitics, polycrises, and declining legitimacy, which requires adapting to this fragmented world.
- Recent negotiations demonstrate both the indispensability of multilateral cooperation and its growing delivery gap.
- As universal processes struggle to deliver at speed, new cooperation formats—mini-laterals, issues-based clubs, and stronger Global South leadership—are reshaping global governance.
- The core policy challenge for 2026 is to enhance the effectiveness and speed of multilateralism while safeguarding legitimacy and inclusiveness.

The Centre for Multilateral Negotiations (CEMUNE) will convene discussions on this theme throughout the year and invites interest from event and content partners.

Introduction

The year 2025 marked yet another rocky period for multilateralism. While progress was achieved in some areas, including biodiversity negotiations, several high-profile forums faced significant setbacks. The United States' disengagement from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations, the collapse of the plastics treaty talks, and persistent blockages within the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and Security Council paralysis on major conflicts have all left visible marks on the multilateral system. Collectively, these developments have intensified concerns about whether existing institutions can deliver solutions at the required pace and scale.

These dynamics have reignited a fundamental question: what role can multilateralism realistically play in 2026 and beyond, to deliver the stability and progress it has underpinned for more than 70 years?' And just as importantly: What will it take to ensure multilateralism thrives, rather than merely survives, in the years ahead?' For decades, multilateral cooperation has underpinned global stability and sustainable development, including providing vital market signals to business and industry around the world. Today, it faces mounting political, geopolitical, and legitimacy pressures. This policy brief argues that the central issue is not whether multilateralism will endure, but rather that it must adapt to remain effective.

What Is Multilateralism? Concepts and Evolution

At its most basic, multilateralism is defined as the practice of coordinating policies among three or more states, typically through formal institutions or agreements. However, historically, these arrangements have largely been used for broader, open-ended groups, often 10 or more countries, including those anchored in the United Nations system, particularly the General Assembly and the Security Council. Over time, a wider ecosystem of institutions has emerged, including the WTO, the UNFCCC, and the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

Multilateral institutions perform essential functional roles: reducing transaction costs, facilitating information exchange, brokering agreements, and monitoring compliance (Keohane, 1990; Woods, 2023). They also embed shared norms related to sovereignty, collective security, human rights, and development, while informal groupings such as the G7 and G20 have provided platforms for coalition leadership (Ikenberry, 2015).

With the birth of contemporary multilateralism after World War I, the rule of law was prioritized over balance-of-power politics. The underlying premise was that peace would be more durable if states accepted common rules and impartial procedures—treaties, arbitration, collective decision-making, and transparency—rather than relying

on shifting alliances, secret bargains, and deterrence through rival blocs. The post-World War II era saw the advent of the United Nations (UN) and the Bretton Woods institutions—the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—which together formed the backbone of a new rules-based international order. As noted above, these institutions supported open economies and collective action. Today, however, their credibility and effectiveness are increasingly questioned (Singh & Woolcock, 2022).

These pressures caused by these questions vary across regimes. The Security Council entrenches power asymmetries, while climate negotiations subject major emitters to greater scrutiny and demands for finance and implementation. As a result, the UNFCCC can generate pressure on these dominant actors. Within the UNFCCC, states are treated more equally than in the Security Council, and developing countries repeatedly highlight implementation gaps and the need for financial support from developed states. This is one reason the United States (US) withdrew from the Paris Agreement, and more recently, the UNFCCC itself, but the power asymmetries in the Security Council mean the US is unlikely to ever give up its role there.

While multilateralism faces multiple challenges, the world faces a multitude of crises that cannot be solved by individual nation-states. Security, climate, biodiversity, health, and trade issues require global solutions. María Fernanda Espinosa, President of the 73rd Session of the UN General Assembly, rightly points out that "we need clear and globally agreed rules and commitments to ensure that everyone has access to public goods and services and that our global commons are preserved and maintained for future generations." (Espinosa, 2023, p. 2).

Current Strains on Multilateralism

Recent environmental negotiations illustrate the widening gap between ambition and delivery. In climate governance, expectations have continued to rise following the adoption of the Paris Agreement, yet subsequent COPs have struggled to translate commitments into implementation (Guilanpour, 2022; Watkinson, 2025). Structural inertia, consensus-based decision-making, and increased domestic political constraints have limited progress.
Similar dynamics have played out in biodiversity negotiations, where disagreements over finance and monitoring prevented the closure of COP16. These impasses have deepened mistrust between the Global North and the Global South, undermining confidence in future agreements on finance—securing and deploying the money, capabilities, and other inputs needed to achieve Convention and other goals.

The collapse of the plastics treaty negotiations further underscores the difficulty of reconciling divergent economic interests under existing multilateral frameworks. Beginning with a resolution mandating the creation of a legally binding treaty to address plastic pollution throughout its lifecycle, the process ultimately collapsed amid entrenched divides with no obvious way forward. High-ambition countries sought production limits, whereas producer nations prioritised recycling and voluntary measures. Industry influence further hampered progress (Lal et al., 2025). Without any meaningful way forward or any agreement in sight, the multilateral process has failed to meet the urgent needs it was meant to address.

Together, these examples underline a widening trust deficit around multilateral processes. Thus, the central question is **whether, and how, multilateralism can adapt to today's polycrisis and remain fit-for-purpose? Can it evolve quickly enough to rebuild trust, deliver solutions, and reassert its relevance in an era of fragmentation? What impact will such evolution have in a new era of multilateralism?**

GEOPOLITICS

Great-power competition—especially among the US, China, and Russia—has become a structural constraint on multilateral cooperation, shaping what is negotiable, what is implementable, and even which forums are considered legitimate.

Rivalry increasingly "securitises" issue areas that were once treated primarily as technical or developmental: supply chains and critical minerals, technology standards, infrastructure finance, and even public health are now viewed through the lens of strategic advantage. In this environment, multilateral institutions are asked to deliver collective goods (stability, rules, financing, crisis response) while simultaneously serving as arenas in which major powers contest influence and constrain one another.

Under the second Trump administration, US behaviour has added a further layer of unpredictability and "transactionalism", with direct consequences for coalition-building and for the credibility of negotiated commitments. Recent episodes illustrate the point. At the 2026 World Economic Forum in Davos, President Trump again pressed for the US acquisition of Greenland while warning of economic consequences for allies who resist, including threats of tariffs, underscoring a wider willingness to use market access and coercive leverage as negotiating tools (Boak et al., 2026). More broadly, this "America First" posture has coincided with an emphasis on domestic political and economic priorities and a renewed tolerance for protectionist measures—dynamics that can narrow the space for compromise in universal forums and push cooperation into smaller, interest-aligned groupings (Böller & Wiedekind, 2025).

These geopolitical dynamics are also visible in the UN Security Council, where the combination of permanent-member privilege and intensified rivalry has entrenched gridlock. On Ukraine, the Council has repeatedly struggled to act decisively as Russia's status as a permanent member—and party to the conflict—enables it to block outcomes it sees as adverse, feeding wider criticism about the "misuse" of the veto and prompting the General Assembly to scrutinise vetoes more directly (United Nations, 2025). Even when resolutions are adopted, the politics of unanimity can yield minimalist language that signals the limits of consensus in conditions of great-power confrontation.

The Council's paralysis has been further exacerbated by the January 2026 US strikes in Venezuela and the capture of President Nicolás Maduro, which triggered emergency Security Council deliberations and sharpened divisions among both US allies and adversaries over legality, sovereignty, and precedent. In this sense, the Council is doubly constrained: it is expected to uphold core norms (non-use of force, territorial integrity, peaceful dispute settlement) while its most powerful members increasingly test, reinterpret, or selectively apply those norms when high-stakes interests are at play.

Yet the same institutions that appear weakened by rivalry can still function as instruments for managing it. Even when they fail to produce binding outcomes, multilateral forums can provide channels for signalling, deconfliction, documentation, and reputational contestation—mechanisms that can reduce miscalculation and keep some procedural commitments alive. As Woods (2023) suggests, institutions may be undermined by great-power dynamics while still helping to structure and contain them, offering at least a thin form of order when thicker cooperation becomes unattainable.

TRANSNATIONAL CRISES AS STRESS TESTS

Lately, the international system has been confronted by increasingly complex challenges. These transnational challenges, for example, climate change, biodiversity loss, the COVID-19 pandemic, world trade, and maritime security, are prime examples of how multilateralism can work, and at the same time, become strained and appear on the brink of paralysis.

Climate change and biodiversity loss, addressed in more depth below, are governed through carefully negotiated agreements under UN auspices. These are ultimately slow-moving systems that do not always keep pace with the crises they face. They have equally bent and bowed under the stress of failed agreements. Impasses in both cases have coalesced around negotiations of finance and funding arrangements. This has undermined progress and momentum and exposed the depth of mistrust that has accumulated between the Global North and the Global South.

The UNFCCC process illustrates how difficult international cooperation becomes when ambition must be translated into implementation. Although the Paris Agreement was widely celebrated as a tremendous success in 2015, subsequent COPs have been perceived as struggling to close the implementation gap. Because all decisions require consensus, any party can block progress (Kolekar

et al., 2025), highlighting both the inclusiveness and the fragility of multilateral decision-making.

The COVID-19 pandemic is another clear example of the importance of multilateralism: "at a minimum, multilateral coordination is necessary to generate finance and implement global solutions to global problems" (Singh & Woolcock, 2022, p. 4). It, along with the UNFCCC and other processes, has shown that transboundary crises cannot truly be resolved without relying on multilateralism at some point. At the same time, the pandemic also showed that while the multilateral system works, it isn't built to move fast, fairly, and at scale (The Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response, 2021).

DOMESTIC POLITICS AND LEGITIMACY PROBLEMS

Multilateral institutions also face mounting legitimacy challenges at home, as populism and nationalism gain traction across many regions. Populist politics often frames international organisations as distant, unaccountable, or biased—casting "global rules" as constraints on sovereignty and "global cooperation" as a bargain that benefits outsiders at domestic expense. Comparative evidence suggests these attitudes are not merely rhetorical: surveys track persistent populist sentiments across countries, and scholarly work links populist governance to more sceptical positioning toward core norms and practices of the liberal international order in UN voting behaviour (IPSOS, 2025). At the same time, analyses of public opinion indicate a growing "confidence problem" around the UN—one that reflects not only elite contestation, but also broader public doubt about whether multilateral institutions can deliver on peace, security, and fairness (Trithart & Romier, 2025). Geopolitical deadlock—especially repeated failures to act decisively on major crises—further reinforces the perception that the UN is either ineffective or captured by great-power politics.

In the US, these legitimacy pressures have been amplified by the second Trump administration's more openly transactional approach to international cooperation and its signalling of reduced buy-in to universal frameworks. A striking example is the administration's public posture toward the UN's development agenda, including statements that the United States "rejects and denounces" the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), framing them as incompatible with domestic mandates and sovereignty-first priorities (Akanle Eni-ibukun et al., 2025). This matters because the UN system remains a central platform for development coordination and humanitarian assistance—functions that are less visible to many domestic audiences than Security Council showdowns. When public attention is disproportionately

drawn to moments of paralysis or veto-driven stalemate, the system's quieter "delivery" functions—humanitarian coordination, norm-setting, technical standardisation, and long-term development support—tend to be crowded out of view, deepening scepticism and weakening the perceived legitimacy of multilateral solutions.

Recent events around Venezuela illustrate how quickly high-profile Security Council episodes can become legitimacy stress tests. Following US military action on 3 January 2026 and the capture of Venezuela's leadership, an emergency Security Council meeting became a focal point not only for adversaries but also for allies, who registered their concerns (United Nations, 2026a)—often through the language of sovereignty, the UN Charter, and precedent (Greene, 2026). The UN Secretary-General warned that the rules of international law may not have been respected and that the episode could set a dangerous precedent, while UN human rights experts similarly condemned the action as a grave violation with destabilising implications (United Nations, 2026b). Yet the Council was structurally constrained in its ability to respond robustly because the US—like other permanent members—can block outcomes it views as unfavourable. The result is a familiar legitimacy trap: the Council is simultaneously the arena in which the world debates the legality of force and the institution least able to act when a permanent member is directly implicated. That gap between the UN's normative claims and its political capacity fuels a cycle of mistrust—domestically and internationally—especially when media coverage foregrounds institutional deadlock over the system's less visible (but often consequential) operational roles.

Emerging Patterns of "New" Multilateralism

Multilateralism has evolved over time, moving from initially managing power relations to ensuring the rule of law to defining collective responses to the global climate and health crises. Yet current geopolitical dynamics—global tensions around the US foreign policy, the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, and the Gaza conflict, among others—raise the possibility of a regression to multilateralism's most basic function: preventing major-power war. But, if this becomes reality, what happens to other urgent agendas, such as development and humanitarian aid, climate change, and biodiversity loss? Against this backdrop, we identify several emerging patterns of "new" multilateralism that may help sustain progress and provide pathways forward.

FROM UNIVERSAL INSTITUTIONS TO "CLUBS" AND MINI-LATERALS

Although many multilateral negotiations still take place in universal or near-universal forums—most notably under the UN system—smaller, issue-specific groupings are becoming increasingly prominent. This shift is not entirely new. Long-standing "club" formats such as the G7 (G8/G7) and the G20 have for decades provided relatively informal but highly influential venues where major economies coordinate positions and signal priorities (Raghavan, 2023). Over time, these clubs have become more institutionalised than their informal character suggests: they convene on predictable cycles, operate with standing agendas and workstreams, and rotate presidencies that shape priorities and diplomatic tempo.

More recently, however, the growth of "mini-lateral" cooperation reflects both the limits of universal institutions and the strategic need for faster, more flexible coordination—particularly when consensus-based processes stall or regional dynamics require tighter alignment. Mini-laterals tend to be smaller coalitions assembled around a defined problem set, often without the procedural density of formal treaties. Their appeal lies in practical advantages: they can reduce transaction costs, move more quickly from ambition to action, and tailor commitments to the capabilities and interests of a select group. At the same time, these arrangements are less inclusive and typically do not carry "an aspiration for a shared set of rules" in the way universal institutions do (Tödtling & Mumford, 2025). The resulting trade-off—speed and specificity versus representation and legitimacy—has become a defining feature of contemporary multilateralism.

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("Quad") illustrates this pattern. Comprising the United States, Australia, India, and Japan, the Quad originated in the context of Indo-Pacific maritime security, but has since expanded into a broader agenda that links security with economic resilience, technology, health cooperation, and development-related initiatives (Smith, 2021). Its evolution underscores a wider trend: in practice, today's mini-laterals often blur traditional boundaries between "hard" security and "soft" cooperation, treating supply

chains, critical technologies, public health, and infrastructure as integral to strategic stability.

A different—but equally instructive—example is the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) with South Africa, Germany, France and the United Kingdom among others. As a mini-lateral financing and implementation platform, it is oriented toward accelerating decarbonisation and expanding clean energy while explicitly engaging the distributional and political economy questions that determine feasibility: jobs and reskilling, energy security, and broader sustainable development priorities. In this sense, it functions less like a classic donor-recipient instrument and more like a targeted coalition designed to unlock domestic transition pathways through a negotiated package of finance, technical support, and policy alignment.

As uncertainty and contestation in universal forums persist, mini-laterals are likely to assume an even greater role. They can sharpen dialogue by gathering the most relevant actors around a concrete agenda, curb free-riding by concentrating commitments among those willing to act and enable "coalitions of the willing" to demonstrate progress that can later be scaled or socialised into wider institutions (Blanchard & Pisani-Ferry, 2025; Falkner, 2015). Their effectiveness, however, will depend on whether they complement rather than substitute universal processes—by delivering implementation capacity while maintaining pathways back to broader legitimacy, accountability, and inclusive benefit-sharing.

GREATER ROLE OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH AND REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS

The Global South has often been framed primarily as a beneficiary of multilateralism—protected by sovereignty and international law and positioned as a recipient of development assistance rather than a driver of institutional direction. That narrative is increasingly outdated. Many Global South states are not only demanding a greater voice; they are also demonstrating political agility and policy innovation that, in some cases, can outpace slower-moving dynamics in the Global North. In Africa in particular, governments and regional bodies have intensified calls for UN reform aimed at expanding representation, rebalancing decision-making authority, and enabling a more agile organisation capable of responding to contemporary crises (Dabkowski et al., 2025).

This shift is visible in agenda-setting and representation in global "club" governance. The African Union's admission as a permanent member of the G20 institutionalises African representation in a forum that shapes global economic priorities and signals what "counts" as systemically important. This matters not only symbolically, but also procedurally: where participation has at times been influenced by the priorities of rotating presidencies, permanent AU membership reduces the risk that African perspectives are treated as optional or contingent.
Within universal institutions, collective negotiating power has also grown. The G77 and China grouping has become increasingly influential by coordinating positions across regions and issue-areas, allowing members to bargain more effectively on shared priorities. This has been particularly evident in climate negotiations, where coalition discipline helped keep questions of finance, equity, and historical responsibility at the centre of COP outcomes—and where sustained pressure contributed to the eventual operationalisation of loss and damage funding arrangements. Beyond the UNFCCC context, the growing salience of BRICS (and associated South–South cooperation platforms) reflects a broader redistribution of influence away from traditional power centres and toward a more plural set of agenda-setters, reinforcing demands for fairer voice and vote in global governance.
At the same time, this rebalancing does not automatically translate into coherent "global" solutions. There remains a real risk of fragmentation and more "bumpy" multilateralism: groupings may compete rather than coordinate; capabilities and financing constraints can limit implementation; and internal divergence—different threat perceptions, development models, and regional priorities—can blunt collective impact. The emerging challenge, therefore, is not simply increasing Global South representation, but ensuring that greater voice is matched by institutional capacity, intra-coalition cohesion, and pathways that connect mini-lateral and bloc-based diplomacy back into effective, legitimate universal cooperation

Policy Implications and Conclusion

This brief does not advance a single blueprint for multilateralism in 2026 and beyond. Instead, it offers a framework for strategic reflection: how can established institutions and emerging "new" formats be better aligned to close the gap between ambition and implementation, while safeguarding inclusiveness and legitimacy? How does a New Multilateralism need to evolve to take account of growing multipolarity and regional power plays? What can a rewired multilateral system do to enhance the signals it provides business and industry to drive sustainable, enhanced economic growth?

What is clear is that, for multilateralism to remain fit for purpose, all engaged actors – from negotiators to diplomats to policymakers – will need to adopt a pragmatic, results-oriented approach. Universal institutions remain indispensable for legitimacy, norm-setting, and broad-based coordination, but they are unlikely to reform quickly enough to keep pace with today's crises. In the short term, coalitions of the willing, regional arrangements, and other complementary formats can help deliver timely action—provided they are designed to support universal frameworks, not substitute for them, and to keep pathways open for wider participation and accountability. The central task ahead is to combine flexibility with fairness—using smaller groupings to accelerate progress where consensus stalls, while anchoring outcomes in shared rules and institutions that can sustain them over time.

CEMUNE will continue to lead this debate through convenings and additional publications—drawing on our own analysis as well as the insights of practitioners working within, alongside, and in reform of the multilateral system.

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About

Centre for Multilateral Negotiations

CEMUNE – the Centre for Multilateral Negotiations, a non-profit organization, is dedicated to strengthening international negotiations for better outcomes on climate, biodiversity, and sustainability. Our goal is to achieve more effective outcomes at global UN sustainability summits by strengthening the negotiation capacities of all participants – fostering international cooperation for our planet. Over the past decade, we have contributed to the adoption of the Paris Agreement and supported over ten UN conferences with strategic process facilitation, providing tailor-made negotiation solutions for specific country and stakeholder needs. CEMUNE is the bridge between these international processes and those responsible for carrying out the work on the ground (Businesses, COP Presidencies, Governments, Civil Society) and serves as a neutral and trusted facilitator.

We stand for a sustainable and just future and support the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through our commitment to multilateral negotiations, we promote climate action (SDG 13), the preservation of biodiversity, and the fight against desertification (SDGs 14 and 15). We strengthen peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16) and advocate for global partnerships that enable the achievement of all goals set out in the 2030 Agenda (SDG 17).

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THE MULTILATERLAISM PROJECT
This policy brief is the first publication part of CEMUNE's "Rewiring Multilateralism" Project, which aims to strengthen the understanding of multilateralism in today's shifting geopolitical landscape. It outlines how to make it more inclusive, agile, and effective. It will deepen insight into changing power dynamics and inequalities and their impact on shaping global cooperation in the future. It will provide actionable recommendations for reform. Through research and dialogue, the project will help reimagine multilateralism as a more adaptive and results-oriented system capable of addressing 21st-century challenges.

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