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 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. The G7 under the German Presidency needs to position itself in a way that responds to Russia’s aggression without throwing its priority agenda over board as the addressed challenges remain equally pressing. The G7 should stick to the five priority areas – sustainable planet, economic stability and transformation, healthy lives, investment in a better future and stronger together – rolled out by the German Presidency while supplementing, adapting, and linking them according to the evolving situation and necessities. 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. The paper presents a number of exemplary recommendations to that effect. As there are many uncertainties in the current situation, this is an early and preliminary attempt to respond to the new challenge; we will review and further develop the paper.
Challenge

President Putin’s aggression against Ukraine is in the first place, a disaster for the people of Ukraine – and also for the Russian people. It is an attack on the global public goods of peace and security, international law, and a cooperative world order. At the same time, 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 or the G20, both of which Russia is a member to. 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.¹ There are, however, also voices that speak of double standards vis-à-vis other crises or question economic and other sanctions.² As of today, it seems plausible that multilateral processes will be negatively affected, from climate change 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”.³ An immediate end of the aggression and, in the medium term, a lasting peace order in Europe is crucial for allowing effective global collective action to address pressing transnational challenges. Already before the aggression against 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 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.⁴ 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 economic repercussions of the crisis in Europe on the poorer parts of the world are not yet foreseeable.
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 presidency 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. Against this backdrop, we present two broad proposals and specify their implementation in the following section:

1) **Invest in international 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 that is presently building up across the globe. The G7 should strongly support the Indonesian G20 Presidency and its leitmotif “Recover together, recover stronger”.

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. 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 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 and tether them to a strengthened UN**

Plurilateral and multi-stakeholder initiatives, in particular partnerships with non-governmental stakeholders, might be needed more than ever, now that UN processes could be obstructed once again. 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. For the G7, this means that
it should reach out to the UN in its efforts to promote multi-stakeholder partnerships. 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.

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 re 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. Given the shared interests of the G7 and the UN Secretary General with regard to major concerns for the future, the group should nonetheless support the targeted development of the UN’s strategic capacities, and do so politically and financially.

**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 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: On the one
hand, as industrialized countries where a lot of (digital) innovation is taking place, the G7 can make precedents in setting digital standards, thereby creating momentum for more inclusive efforts. On the other hand, their initiatives will gain legitimacy and in turn become more sustainable only if linked with procedures that extend beyond the richer world.

**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 no 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. While the need for a strong multilateral trading system is obvious, declarations of intent to reform and update the WTO have not been followed by concrete action. Moreover, 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 tax and its potential conflict with the global trade regime are a case in point.

Linking initiatives emanating from the G7 to other international players could prevent good intentions from going astray. This link to sustainability issues is commendable and aligns with the ‘green transformation’ as a golden thread of the priorities of the Germany Presidency. The G7’s approach on these matters should 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. This way, G7 countries can demonstrate that they are serious about WTO reform, and could blow some fresh air in to a process that seems to have come to a halt. Second, the G7 should support plurilateral approaches 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 Agreement, 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’ implementation capacities.

**Recommendation: Invest in equitable recovery**

Next to little specific ideas on strengthening the global health architecture, the Presidency also 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 and potentially coordinates with the G20. 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 in view of the effects of economic and financial sanctions or rising inflation in many countries. In particular the latter
could also affect many developing countries, if interest rates have to be raised in the US and the EU, which will lead to a further worsening of the debt situation in many developing countries. The G7 should therefore put a strong emphasis 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. Furthermore, we recommend that efforts of economic recovery need to be closely tied to wider transformations in the economic systems towards more sustainable and socially just practices, as also the G7’s reference to the One Health approach shows. Moreover, links to other multilateral and multi-stakeholder initiatives are needed in order to avoid duplications and make use of synergies. The G7 Presidency 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: Carefully navigate the interrelation and interlinkages between the G7 and the G20**

As said, 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 to neutralize a destructive role of Russia in the group. That is also relevant in other multilateral forums, while the UN General Assembly should stay the place where states can talk to each other in the last resort.\(^\text{17}\)

**Ad Proposal 2) Improve plurilateral and multi-stakeholder formats and tether them to a strengthened UN**

**Recommendation: Support a 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\(^\text{18}\), the G7 should support the development of an effective UN hub for partnerships and, as a good example, link its own initiatives through this hub.

**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”.\(^\text{19}\) The alliance spelled out most clearly is the foundation of a *climate club*\(^\text{20}\) with the aim of advancing the implementation of the Paris Climate Agreement, for instance by agreeing on uniform standards for CO\(_2\)
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, but 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.\(^2\)

**Recommendation: Booster COVAX**

As pledged in the Presidency’s programme, the G7 must contribute to the further vaccine rollout in order to achieve 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. 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.

**Stronger together**

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 affects them. 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.

**Endnotes**


2 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/k1bnnr4ntp](https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1b/k1bnnr4ntp).


4 It might be wise to also self-critically evaluate ones 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](https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/-/2514706).

10 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).


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