

Brozus, Lars; Shulman, Naomi

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SWP Comment

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Multilateral Cooperation in Times of Multiple Crises

The G7 should focus on inclusive, selective and anticipatory policy approaches

Lars Brozus and Naomi Shulman

“Progress towards an equitable world” – this is the German government’s ambitious goal since taking over the G7 presidency in 2022. Since the 1970s, this club of seven major industrialised democracies has played an important role in discussing global affairs and developing policies to address major challenges facing the international order. Germany’s presidency was supposed to be characterised by a triad of ecological transformation, social cohesion and fiscal sustainability, but instead the agenda has been dominated by a triple crisis of geopolitical escalation in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, democratic regression in several G7 member states and geo-economic disentanglement due to Covid-19. In order to deal with the multiple crises that pose grave dangers to the global community, the G7 should focus on inclusive societies, selective international cooperation and anticipatory governance.

On January 1st, 2022, Germany assumed the rotating presidency of the G7. It took over from the UK, which organized the G7 process throughout 2021, culminating in the Cornwall summit. Here, after being largely ignored by the US under former President Donald Trump, the G7 saw the administration of President Joe Biden renew America’s commitment to close cooperation with its traditional partners. Washington helped to revitalise the G7 with ideas such as fostering social cohesion through a “foreign policy for the middle class”. Inspired by this, the Cornwall Consensus highlights the responsibility of the state as an investing, framework-setting and rule-enforcing

actor that takes corrective and proactive measures while bearing in mind the interests of the global community.

G7: Current and Future Challenges

Taking up the torch, the new German government set out an ambitious plan to address pressing global challenges, focusing on climate change, democratic resilience, food security and global health. To accelerate the transformative policies necessary to cope with these challenges, Berlin proposed building strong alliances such as a



Climate Club and recommended heavily investing in global infrastructure projects geared towards sustainable development.

Alas, Russia's invasion of Ukraine disrupted the process, prompting the G7 to manage several problems simultaneously. The first is maintaining unity and cohesion as a group that is being confronted with geopolitical aggression. So far, the G7's stance towards Russia has been remarkably firm despite Moscow's numerous attempts to rouse differences. However, this unity cannot be taken for granted. US congressional elections will be held in November, and regardless of their outcome, domestic issues will likely dominate American politics thereafter due to the approaching 2024 presidential elections. Thus, the US's resumed international leadership under the Biden administration will likely wane.

Secondly, it has become more important not only to strengthen cohesion among the G7 member states but also within them. The political staying power of the G7 governments — with a view to supporting Ukraine, and also to tackling the transformative challenges addressed for example by the Build Back Better and Green Recovery post-pandemic strategies — needs broad support from citizens and societies. The electoral successes of national-chauvinist parties in most G7 countries in recent years are not least due to growing sociocultural divides. By definition, these parties prefer to deny or discount the significance of global problems. Therefore, the G7 should continue the political course set out under the British presidency in 2021 and aim to consistently gear domestic and economic policies towards social inclusion, thus promoting internal cohesion and political stability.

Third, the G7 should lobby for more international support for its positions. So far, less than a quarter of UN member states have enacted sanctions on Russia for its aggression. Most of those countries that have are like-minded industrialised democracies, yet the Global South is much more directly exposed to the consequences of the conflict, such as food and energy shortages,

inflation and impoverishment. Important regional powers such as Argentina, India, Indonesia (which will host the G20 summit scheduled for November 2022), Senegal and South Africa participated in the G7 Schloss Elmau summit in June 2022. In addition to encouraging their participation in such high-level meetings, these guest countries could be engaged to strengthen global co-operation and solidarity through the continuous inclusion of their parliaments, businesses and civil societies in the G7 process.

Lastly, the G7 must draw conclusions from the failure to understand and prevent global crises. Of course, precautionary measures require accurate early warnings — first, to secure political backing, and second, to be successful. Based on the positive results of forecast-based financing in humanitarian assistance, the accuracy and relevance of predictions should be systematically explored in other issue areas. In addition, a digital foresight platform could serve as an integral component of a networked and cross-sectoral framework for multilateralism.

The German presidency should initiate discussions with Japan (the next G7 leader) about how to improve the G7's capacities for anticipatory governance. Tokyo's specific expertise when it comes to China and the Indo-Pacific complements the primarily North Atlantic/Eurasian perspectives of the other G7 partners. Investing in complementary approaches to futures analyses would help to future-proof G7 policies and may contribute to early detection of relevant developments and events, possibly preempting some nasty surprises in the near future. It could also support the integration of anticipatory governance into everyday policymaking, thus reconciling this conceptually attractive but rather abstract idea with practical politics.

Policy for Inclusive Societies

The political consequences of growing social inequality are evident in democracies on both sides of the Atlantic. The rise of

populist movements in the US and UK, as well as in France, Germany and Italy, is closely linked to the discontent of the middle class in these countries. Developments in the United States are reason for particular concern. As fierce debate erupted over how Trump was able to unexpectedly defeat Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election, Democratic Party analyses concluded that middle class dissatisfaction with American foreign policy was a contributing factor. Broad constituencies disapproved of trade and capital liberalisation, Washington's military involvement in international conflicts and an overly permissive immigration policy. In particular, skilled workers without college degrees, a demographic that had once formed the core base of the Democratic Party, turned their backs on it.

The analyses prescribed that the next Democratic administration would be well advised to focus on the interests of the middle class when it came to foreign policy. Therefore, in his first programmatic speech after taking office, Secretary of State Antony Blinken declared that US foreign policy would establish priorities according to how their implementation would affect "American workers and their families". Here, he examined three issue areas: the so-called endless wars, immigration and trade liberalising economic policy, with its accompanying effects that increase inequality.

In line with these priorities, cohesion in and between societies has become a major issue for the G7. The Cornwall summit's communiqué explicitly stated that in the past not enough attention was paid to whether the funds provided to crisis management were used in a way that avoided increasing inequality. In this vein, G7 heads of state and government pledged that the resources allotted to the Covid-19 pandemic should not exacerbate social imbalances.

In the US, this focus on the middle class was initially designed as a strategy with which the Democrats could win back important swing voters. Nonetheless, during Biden's first term, it has become a political necessity as the survival of American democracy continues to be considered at

risk. To date, Trump has not recognised the results of the 2020 elections; his supporters attacked Congress on January 6th, 2021; and up to three quarters of Republican voters consistently deny the legitimacy of Biden's presidency. Free and fair elections, a fundamental principle of democracy, have come under pressure in many Republican-controlled states. It will be hard to avoid results being disputed in the next elections, and this could possibly lead to prolonged disagreement over which party controls Congress and who moves into the White House in 2025.

Cooperation out of Choice or out of Necessity: Selective Multilateralism

The new focus of American foreign policy is compatible with German ideas about the future of international cooperation. The title of the German government's white paper on multilateralism, published in May 2021, expresses as much: "A Multilateralism for the People" echoes the Biden administration's focus on the middle class. After all, it is not only the US that faces the problem of increasing discontent about social inequality. Democracy has declined internationally, and authoritarian regimes like China and Russia are pursuing their interests more vigorously. Beijing has converted its economic strength into geopolitical influence while Moscow's invasion of Ukraine is a flagrant violation of international law and the core institutions of the global order. These are bad times indeed for international cooperation.

At the same time, cooperation among adversaries will be required to address the global challenges of the Anthropocene, and differentiated multilateralism could provide a way out of the dilemma. This approach foresees states cooperating regardless of ideological differences in cases where such cooperation is indispensable in solving specific problems. This applies, for example, to climate change, the protection of biodiversity or pandemic prevention. Therefore,

Germany's G7 initiative for a Climate Club is open to all governments committed to the full implementation of the Paris Agreement regardless of their democratic legitimacy or political orientation.

Such cooperation out of necessity must be distinguished from intensified cooperation among like-minded partners whose interests and policies converge in ideological and economic affairs or in socio-political matters. Cooperation out of choice would be characterised by close policy coordination and privileged trade, for example, but also by the promotion of cross-border mobility of people and information, and deep social, scientific and cultural exchange. In short, countries aiming to participate in such dense cooperative networks should offer reciprocal incentives to reward mirrored behaviour and thus make it self-stabilising.

In principle, the German government's white paper subscribes to politically selective multilateralism. The section entitled "Looking Ahead – Multilateralism for the Future" points out that the decisive prerequisite for further development of the multilateral order is a more effective and compatible approach to human rights, democracy and sustainability. The white paper designates the EU, the US and NATO as the core of this "active multilateralism". Japan, the robust G20 democracies, and a few others such as New Zealand, Norway, and Switzerland would be obvious additions to this global network of cooperation.

Intensified and privileged cooperation within such a network could be strengthened by cross-sectoral multilateralism that included actors regardless of their status under international law, thus it could also involve organised economic and societal actors as well as those from the fields of philanthropy, science and culture. Robust democracies are familiar with the process of cooperating with critical partners, especially those from civil society, they therefore have a comparative advantage over authoritarian regimes in this regard.

Anticipatory Governance: Foresight and Forecasts

At the opening of the last UN General Assembly in September 2021, UN Secretary-General António Guterres argued that the multilateral system is too focused on short-term challenges and does not sufficiently consider future concerns. Traditionally, matters of strategic foresight are indeed a domain of national governments and their intelligence services or militaries. The Five Eyes cooperation between intelligence agencies from the US, the UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand is an exception to the rule.

Cooperation with partners from different regions could help raise awareness of unexpected global developments. The G7, as a group composed of like-minded members representing perspectives from America, Asia and Europe, is well-suited for such a cooperation. Non-state actors could be included in this framework as additional sources of information that increase the diversity of views being represented. A process establishing cross-sectoral foresight would build trust, contribute to a shared understanding of different perceptions, interests, and preferences, and thus promote multiperspectivity and collective strategic empathy. Furthermore, such collective and multiperspectival approaches would allow the G7 member states, in pooling their knowledge and resources, to learn from one another's particular political expertise. In this way, the member states may develop more nuanced understandings of political challenges both at the national and international levels, as the varied facets of multicultural interpretations generate further, more imaginative possibilities of addressing these challenges.

Generally, there are two methodological approaches to improving anticipatory capacities: foresight and forecasts. A G7 foresight process could be designed to address both desirable and undesirable future scenarios. As a point of departure, the policy planning units of the G7 governments could jointly analyse scenarios already developed by individual member states. Foreign ministers

would then debate the outcomes that result from a limited number of geopolitical scenarios. The non-governmental engagement groups that represent economic, societal and scientific voices in the G7 process could offer additional input.

In fact, the various engagement group meetings that accompany this year's G7 process have addressed the overarching need for concerted action in the face of multiple crises. A digital platform for foresight research, engagement and policy advocacy modelled on end-to-end early warning systems — an example being the Anticipation Hub — could serve as an integral component of an inclusive, networked and cross-sectoral framework for multilateralism. While the Anticipation Hub focuses on risk prevention and disaster mitigation related to weather events and climate, calls to broaden the scope of such warning systems to other issues including conflict prevention are frequent. A digital platform coordinating the foresight-oriented concerns and processes of the G7 — an end-to-end multi-issue anticipatory system — could include the Anticipation Hub's pillars of learning and exchange, support, and policy and advocacy but apply them to broader, interconnected issues relevant to multilateral governance.

This would serve several purposes. Not only would this digital platform cultivate an interdisciplinary and international foresight community of diverse actors that focuses on the questions central to the G7, but it would also link the diverse anticipatory approaches of scholarship, policy-making, activism and aid. Finally, it would also serve as a forum for evaluating implementations of foresight-oriented actions and policies and allow for a critical appraisal of the shortcomings or limitations of tested approaches. It would thus highlight areas in need of further inquiry, potentially triggering new and innovative options.

What is more, the creation of a digital platform that brings together the voices of scholars, practitioners and policymakers would institutionalize the G7's commitment to dialogue with diverse engagement

groups and sustain it for years to come. Like the Anticipation Hub, it would provide a publicly accessible site offering multiple forms of potential exchange, such as working groups for particular issues or dialogue platforms dedicated to regional and global concerns. With this platform, the network of actors and interested parties would be afforded a permanent forum for foresight-oriented discussions on complex and interconnected global issues such as climate, health and social inequality, thus bridging the various G7 presidencies and the individual summits.

In this way, such an open platform could bolster trust as it embodies a commitment to a people-centred public forum. By modelling inclusivity and the exchange of diverse opinions, the forum could counter tendencies geared towards polarising arguments and siloed discussions. Finally, such a platform could also collect and publish proof of the efficacy of foresight approaches — as the Anticipation Hub does with its evidence database. This would help to further improve foresight methods and counteract stakeholders' doubts about the need for and utility of sustained anticipatory work.

To complement the foresight approach, a forecasting platform could also be created to collect and evaluate competitive predictions of hypothetical events. The British platform Cosmic Bazaar could serve as a model. Since April 2020, this platform gives voice to participants from the civil service offering their predictions on the likelihood that predefined geopolitical events will occur within a specified period of time. The participants draw on publicly available information, i.e. open source intelligence.

Scaling such a platform to the level of the G7 would significantly promote the goal of geopolitical forecasting: namely, to identify those individuals who have a higher-than-average rate of accurate predictions. As multi-year research projects have shown, various options for achieving greater forecasting accuracy exist. Forecast tournaments and betting markets produce the best results for the prognosis of geopolitical events, and it is also possible to

train better forecasters. Finally, forecasting accuracy further increases when competitors whose predictions consistently produce above-average results are integrated into teams. Incorporating foresight and forecasts into everyday policymaking would surely increase the capabilities of the G7 for anticipatory governance as it works to advance people-centred multilateralism.

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und
Politik
German Institute for
International and
Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3 – 4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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Dr. Lars Brozus is Deputy Head of the Global Issues Research Division at SWP.

Dr. Naomi Shulman was an Intern at SWP in 2022 and is completing a MA in Futures Studies at Freie Universität Berlin.

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