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› US and European Visions of Global Governance*

- › While the EU remains committed to preserving and reforming rules-based international institutions, the US has adopted a hyper-selective approach to global governance, withdrawing from UN mechanisms and international agreements.
- › Despite deep policy divides in areas like climate and trade, the EU and the US can still collaborate through informal, flexible formats on shared strategic priorities, such as AI governance and economic security.
- › To safeguard global governance without relying on the US, the EU must build coalitions with middle powers, improve engagement with the Global South and leverage its regulatory strength to shape global standards.

The rules-based international order is facing an unprecedented period of strain. Global governance is more contested and fragmented than at any time since the end of the Cold War. At a time when geopolitical tensions are intensifying and transnational challenges – from climate change and technological disruption to armed conflicts and global health threats – require collective responses, the ability of international institutions and multilateral fora to foster effective cooperation has been severely curtailed. Growing competition among major powers, the rising influence of revisionist forces challenging the current institutional system, the US turn toward unilateralism and increasing political polarisation across advanced democracies have weakened the legitimacy and effectiveness of existing multilateral frameworks and made consensus-building more difficult. Against this backdrop, the United States and the EU differ in their understanding of how global governance should operate and what role multilateral institutions should play.

Diverging approaches to multilateralism

Effective multilateralism remains a cornerstone of the EU's external action. The promotion of multilateral solutions is embedded in its institutional identity

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(Article 21 TEU)¹ and the Union continues to champion multilateralism as a framework for international cooperation, particularly within the UN system. In recent years, the EU has sought to translate its rhetorical commitment to multilateralism into concrete initiatives, framing the defence of rules-based multilateralism as both a strategic objective and a means of preserving an open and predictable international order. This approach is especially evident in areas where the EU holds significant competences, notably in economic and financial affairs.

The United States, by contrast, has adopted a more selective and interest-driven approach to multilateral engagement, particularly under the second Trump Administration. It has disengaged from institutions perceived as constraining US sovereignty or advancing normative agendas that do not align with its national interests, while maintaining support for organisations considered strategically useful, albeit often while advocating significant reform. Since returning to office, President Trump has withdrawn US participation in and/or funding for several UN bodies, as well as a number of non-UN organisations, conventions and treaties. This selective disengagement was formalised through the presidential memorandum of 7 January 2026,² which identified 66 international entities and frameworks for review or withdrawal, many of them within or connected to the UN system.

Competing priorities across policy domains

The EU remains committed to strengthening universal institutions and improving their capacity to address global challenges. Brussels has strongly supported the UN80 initiative launched by Secretary-General António Guterres in 2025, as well as the implementation of the Pact for the Future adopted in 2024, viewing reform as a way to reinforce rather than bypass the multilateral system.³ The US approach is more selective: while Washington supports greater efficiency, accountability and burden-sharing within the UN system, it assesses international organisations according to their direct contribution to US interests and strategic objectives. This has translated into a critical stance towards several UN bodies and initiatives, including reduced participation and funding for institutions considered misaligned with US priorities.

The EU and the United States share an interest in reforming the World Trade Organization (WTO), but their objectives differ significantly.⁴ While remaining within the WTO framework, the United States has adopted aggressive bilateral tariffs that bypass multilateral rules and blocked the appointment of appellate body judges. In its current configuration, the WTO is seen by the United States as an obstacle to the use of its own economic and political clout. Instead,

¹ See *Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union*, Title V, General Provisions on the Union's External Action - Article 21, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/teu_2008/art_21/oj/eng.

² White House, *Withdrawing the United States from International Organizations, Conventions, and Treaties that Are Contrary to the Interests of the United States*, 7 January 2026, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2026/01/withdrawing-the-united-states-from-international-organizations-conventions-and-treaties-that-are-contrary-to-the-interests-of-the-united-states>.

³ See the official websites: *United to Deliver Better*, <https://www.un.org/un80-initiative/en>; *Pact for the Future* (A/RES/79/1), <https://www.un.org/pact-for-the-future/en>.

⁴ Alcidi, Cinzia, "When the Rules No Longer Rule: The EU and Canada's Responses to Trump's Tariffs", in *IAI Papers*, No. 26 | 13 (September 2026), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/22834>.



»» **Climate governance represents one of the areas of sharpest divergence**

the EU continues to regard the WTO as the cornerstone of the global trading system and seeks to preserve its role in providing predictable rules, while supporting targeted reforms and plurilateral initiatives where consensus is difficult to achieve. The EU was instrumental in forming a coalition with a group of WTO members to establish the Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement (MPIA), an alternative appeal system to resolve trade disputes.⁵ Moreover, the EU cooperates with the members of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) on an agenda aimed at promoting an open and rules-based trade system.⁶

Climate governance represents one of the areas of sharpest divergence. The EU considers the Paris Agreement and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) essential platforms for coordinating global climate action and has prioritised implementation, climate finance and coalition-building through initiatives such as the Green Deal diplomacy and international climate partnerships. By contrast, the United States has placed greater emphasis on energy security, domestic fossil fuel production and energy dominance over global cooperation. Under the second Trump Administration, it has moved away from UN-centred climate cooperation, including renewed withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the Green Climate Fund (GCF).

A similar divide is visible in global health governance. The EU has sought to strengthen international health cooperation through initiatives such as the negotiations on the Pandemic Agreement, aimed at improving preparedness, coordination and resilience after the Covid-19 crisis.⁷ The United States, which has historically been a leading global health actor and the largest bilateral donor, has reduced its engagement with multilateral health institutions while prioritising bilateral initiatives and strategic partnerships. The US withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO),⁸ alongside diminished support for other UN-related health mechanisms, represents a significant departure from previous patterns of multilateral health leadership. Moreover, the suspension of US foreign assistance following the Trump Administration's dismantling of USAID, despite the introduction of limited waivers, has already affected the implementation of health programmes worldwide.

Finally, digital governance and emerging technologies illustrate both competition and potential convergence. The EU seeks to shape global digital rules through regulatory leadership, participation in international standard-setting processes and initiatives aimed at responsible artificial intelligence (AI) governance. The United States, while supporting international coordination, prioritises technological leadership, innovation and strategic competition, particularly

⁵ Grieger, Gisela, "International Trade Dispute Settlement: World Trade Organisation Appellate Body Crisis and the Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement", in *EPRS Briefings*, June 2024, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2024\)762342](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2024)762342).

⁶ European Commission DG for Trade, *EU Launches Trade and Investment Dialogue with Trans-Pacific Bloc*, 20 November 2025, https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/node/1932_en.

⁷ Bozzini, Emanuela and Daniela Sicurelli, "The EU and the Pandemic Treaty: From Agenda-Setter to Troubled Deal-Maker", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 24 | 36 (July 2024), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/18692>.

⁸ Aremu, Stephen Olaide, "The United States Withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO), Its Implications for Global Health Governance", in *Globalization and Health*, Vol. 21 (2025), article 48, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-025-01137-0>.



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with China. Washington has therefore favoured flexible frameworks among like-minded partners, including initiatives on AI in the G7 and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, rather than comprehensive UN-led regulatory approaches.

Search for convergence and alternative paths

The US turn towards unilateralism and its disengagement from key international commitments under the Trump Administration present the EU with thorny dilemmas. As a pillar of the EU's foreign policy strategy, the defence and promotion of multilateral cooperation requires a steady diplomatic action to counter unilateralist drives. At the same time the EU is vitally interested in preserving the transatlantic partnership on which its security ultimately depends. In the current circumstances, European leaders are indeed intensively working to prevent a further deterioration of the ongoing tensions with Washington, including those stemming from divergences over the role of multilateral organisations.

As the crisis of global governance structures deepens, the EU cannot afford to wait for a US return to a more cooperative attitude, an unlikely scenario at least until Trump remains at the White House. The United States and Europe continue to cooperate through a dense web of security agencies, regulatory authorities and standard-setting bodies. This more technical cooperation may help but cannot substitute for a high politics strategic alignment. Alone, the Union also lacks the capacity to fill the leadership gap caused by US political and financial disengagement, although it can partially compensate for it in specific sectors.

All this suggests that the EU should follow an articulated strategy that combines the search for possible areas of transatlantic convergence with renewed efforts to build coalitions with other partners that are willing and able to engage in new initiatives to preserve and reform the existing institutions.

While the room for a value-based alignment with the United States has all but disappeared, common strategic interests can provide the basis for joint action within multilateral settings. Despite the deep transatlantic rift, the United States remains a potential partner in specific areas of global governance. Brussels and Washington share the objective to increase the efficiency, accountability and transparency of some international organisations, including the UN. Within flexible formats like the G7, Americans and Europeans have reached agreements regarding economic security and regulatory harmonisation that have potentially global significance. These include joint efforts to define voluntary rules for AI governance, counter China's economic coercion and its market-distorting practices, and increase technological cooperation.

In the longer run, bolder proposals such as reviving the US-EU Trade and Technology Council and bringing the United States into the MPIA to revive trade cooperation based on WTO rules could gain traction. At the moment, however, informal multilateral frameworks remain the only vehicle for advancing of pragmatic transatlantic cooperation on global governance issues.



»» The EU should work to build a coalition of like-minded middle powers such as Australia, Canada, Japan and South Korea

In addition to initiatives aimed at reviving transatlantic cooperation over global matters, the EU should develop other lines of action that can contribute to enhancing global governance without US engagement or even in open opposition to US unilateralist policies. The EU should work to build a coalition of like-minded middle powers such as Australia, Canada, Japan and South Korea to present common positions and proposals in multilateral bodies, promote regulatory frameworks and offer viable solutions to funding problems. A promising model is the EU-CPTPP cooperation that aims to counter trade protectionism, promote the WTO reform and establish trade rules that could become the centrepiece of a reformed trade system.

The EU should also intensify efforts to revise its engagement strategy with the Global South by offering equal partnerships and applying a flexible conditionality. To meet the concerns and priorities of emerging countries the EU should propose mechanisms for debt relief and a more equitable representation within UN bodies and in international financial institutions. An EU-led multilateralist coalition should emphasise the need to overhaul structures, decision-making processes and power sharing within international organisations such as the International Monetary Fund, the WHO and, critically, the UN Security Council itself.

By leveraging its regulatory power, the EU can make a major contribution to normative and standard setting at a global level. It should incentivise dialogue and cooperation on the establishment of frameworks modelled or drawing on its regulatory activities. The so-called “Brussels effect” may have lost part of its appeal, but the EU continues to promote rules and standards in several sectors that are widely adopted and can provide the basis for global agreements.

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