

GLOBAL AND REGIONAL ORDER

# TRUMP 2.0 AND THE UNITED NATIONS

Implications for multilateral funding and leadership

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The United States have long been the most important contributor to overall UN budgets and thus hold considerable financial power across the UN system.



The second Trump administration is likely to cut funding and excessively prioritize earmarked contributions over the provision of core resources, which is set to exacerbate the growing misalignment of funding modalities and expected UN functions.



Member states should embed short-term measures focused on mitigating the liquidity crisis in the UN Secretariat and funding shortfalls elsewhere in the UN system in longer-term strategic thinking about the refinement of UN roles and funding structures.

# TRUMP 2.0 AND THE UNITED NATIONS

## Implications for multilateral funding and leadership



The second Trump administration – Trump 2.0 – will affect the UN in various ways, including through political pressure. Some of the most far-reaching challenges are likely to come down to funding. The United States have long been the most important contributor to overall UN budgets and thus hold considerable financial power across the UN system. Trump's administration might not only withhold UN membership fees, in line with extant US practices, but indeed upend all kinds of multilateral funding flows.



To the extent that the second Trump administration still supports the UN, it is likely to intensify the long-standing US prioritization of earmarked contributions vis-à-vis the provision of core resources. This emboldened emphasis on funding with strings attached would exacerbate the growing misalignment of funding modalities and the functions member states expect the UN to perform.



To safeguard multilateral cooperation at the UN, other member states will have to show leadership. Short-term measures focused on fiscal shortfalls should be combined with longer-term strategic thinking about the refinement of UN roles and funding structures. The authors put forward three recommendations, arguing that member states should (1) limit earmarking practices and pivot to voluntary core contributions; (2) embrace alliances across divides, using the implementation of the UN's 2024 Pact for the Future as a rallying point; and (3) invest in a more balanced multilateral system, based on equal voice and representation.

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*Donald Trump's second term as president of the United States of America is bound to have substantial implications for multilateral organisations, in particular the United Nations (UN). Insights from the first Trump administration and more recent political shifts in the United States suggest that Trump will be guided by short-term national interests and execute substantial funding cuts across the UN system. As Trump's re-election also reflects, and potentially accelerates, ongoing global shifts in power, member states will have to not only deal with the immediate consequences of Trump 2.0 but also consider broader adjustments to how they approach UN multilateralism.*

At the UN, member states come together to discuss and (try to) address global concerns about peace and security, human rights, sustainable development and other transnational challenges. Yet the UN has long faced questions about its effectiveness and efficiency (Dempsey 2023). In all its efforts, the UN depends on the constructive engagement of and support from its member states. Funding is key to influence and leadership at the UN (Baumann and Haug 2024a). The amount of funding, the burden-sharing arrangements between member states, and the modalities through which contributions are made have a profound impact on how the UN operates, as well as on its potential and limitations as the multilateral core of world politics.

As the world's largest economy, the United States has always been a key player in the UN system. The US share of assessed contributions to the UN regular budget is a function of the country's economic performance and has always been higher than those of all other UN member states (Haug et al. 2022). The same goes for the UN peacekeeping budget and the regular budgets of UN specialised agencies. On top of that, the United States has been the largest provider of voluntary contributions to UN entities, in particular to those working on humanitarian assistance and development. All funding flows combined, the United States provided 13 billion US dollars to the UN system in 2023, or 28 per cent of all government contributions the UN received that year (UNSCEB 2024). This represented a larger amount than those provided by the following four major contributing countries – Germany, Japan, China and the United Kingdom – combined (Box 1).

Against the backdrop of concerns about what Trump's re-election might hold for UN finances and capabilities, this Policy Brief proceeds in three steps. First, we highlight key *political changes* that the UN is likely to witness under the second Trump administration. Second, we focus on how Trump 2.0 might challenge the status quo with regard to UN *funding*. Third, we discuss *options* for how UN member states should adapt their leadership and funding behaviour to react to and attenuate the implications of another Trump-led US government.

## 1 TRUMP 2.0 AND (GEO)POLITICAL SHIFTS AT THE UN

Trump returns to the White House in a world that differs significantly from that of 2016, when he was first elected US president. Geopolitical tensions have become more tangible, and Trump is likely to act as a catalyst for them. The dominant global role of Western powers faces unseen challenges and there are signs that the United States and its allies have been losing political ground in the multilateral system, as tensions over Ukraine and Gaza illustrate. The West is also less united, further undermining its post-Cold War claims to leadership. At the same time, China has signalled its desire for a greater role in the UN and beyond (Haug et al. 2024; Matthews 2024). The Global South – represented by the Group of 77 at the UN (Baumann et al. 2024) – appears to be in the ascendance. While the South is far from a homogeneous bloc, it has demonstrated a newfound resolve in defying Western dominance.

It is against this backdrop that the UN system is bracing itself for profound repercussions under Trump 2.0. The actions of Trump's first administration, the utterances of Trump's broader circle of Make America Great Again (MAGA) Republicans and recent announcements of personnel appointments provide references from which to draw the first contours of what another Trump-led administration might look like for the UN system.

A first set of changes relates to concrete steps the second Trump administration is likely to take vis-à-vis UN institutions and processes. An action plan for that has been laid out by the ultra-conservative Heritage Foundation's »Project 2025« (Project-2025 2023). Although Trump distanced himself from Project 2025 during his presidential campaign, the key points it lays out are consistent with his political positions and those of his entourage. At the national level, the plan foresees radical reorganisation of the government apparatus and concentration of power in the hands of the president. Internationally, the action plan posits that:

*The next Administration must end blind support for international organisations. If an international organisation is effective and advances American interests, the United States should support it. If an international organisation is ineffective or does not support American interests, the United States should not support it. Those that are effective will still require constant pressure from U.S. officials.*

This points to a selective and transactional approach to international organisations derived from and in pursuit of narrow, short-term US interest. Multilateralism as a strategic choice concerned with long-term gains, and with providing global public goods, plays no role in that thinking.

Trump's senior appointment announcements for his second administration suggest that the president-elect is determined to follow through on this agenda. Elise Stefanik, a long-time Trump ally, will be the next US permanent representative

to the UN. She has a reputation for being profoundly hostile to international institutions and has slammed the UN as a »corrupt, defunct, and paralyzed institution« (Stefanik 2024). In June 2024, Stefanik voted for an – ultimately unsuccessful – bill in Congress that would have required the US government to halt contributions to the UN's regular budget, the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), the World Health Organization (WHO), the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), UN Women and the UN Environment Fund. The designated Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, appears somewhat less radical and – with reference to other members of Trump's incoming administration – has been referred to as »the best of the worst« (Murphy 2024). In contrast to Trump's isolationist leanings, Rubio is said to value international alliances and has presented himself as a hawkish promoter of human rights and democracy.

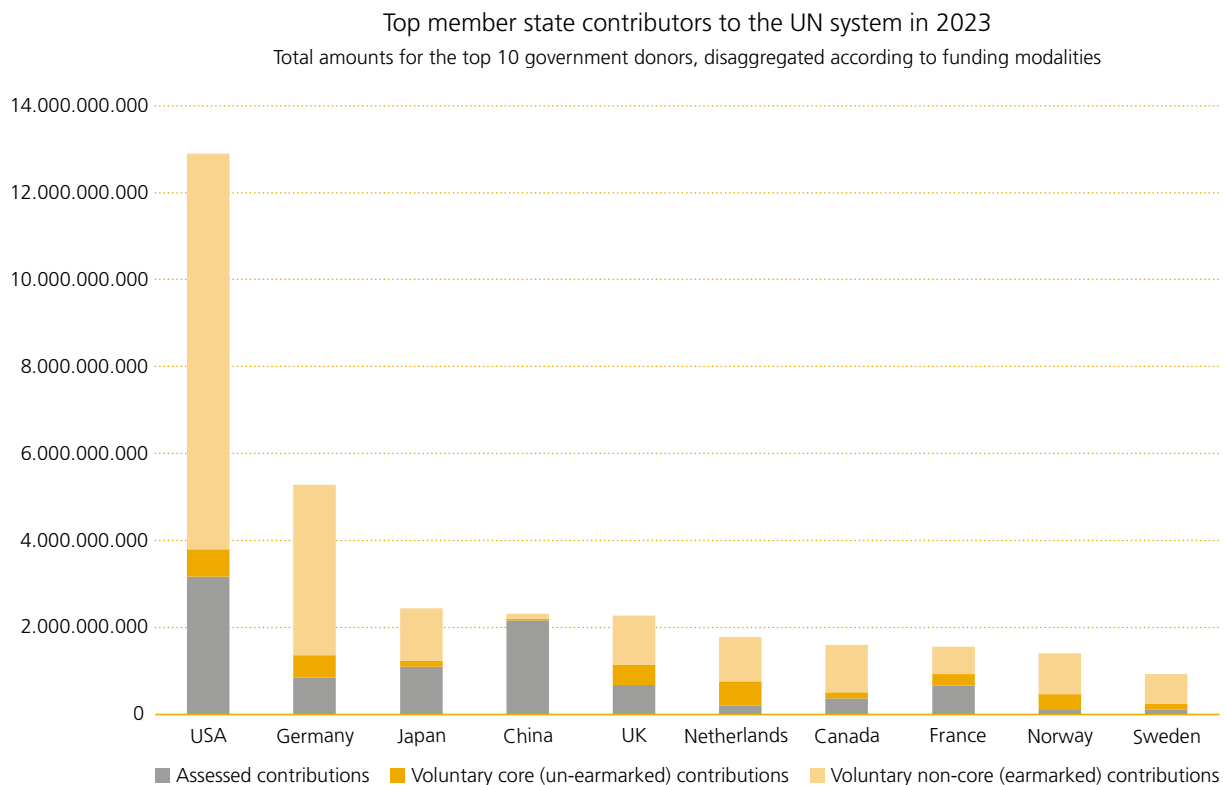
Irrespective of individual appointments, however, the »MAGA« policies and priorities Trump showcased on the

campaign trail indicate that the new US government is likely to cut contributions to and reduce its political support for UN programmes that deal with concerns such as sexual and reproductive health, gender issues or climate. This also applies more generally to the Sustainable Development Goals that – in line with the logic of Project 25 – tend to be seen as »sovereignty-eroding agreements that could come at considerable economic and other costs to the American people« (Project-2025 2023: 175). MAGA voices have also expressed doubts about the importance of humanitarian assistance, which in 2023 accounted for 35 per cent of UN expenditure (UNSCEB 2024). Project 25 sees humanitarian support merely as prolonging conflicts and suggests redirecting humanitarian resources from multilateral bodies to faith-based NGOs.

The second Trump administration is also unlikely to honour the UN Pact for the Future, adopted in September 2024. Through the Pact, UN member states committed themselves to more »effective multilateralism« and thus created a

Box 1

#### Member state contributions to the UN system



**Assessed contributions.** As members of the UN, states are obliged to pay membership fees. For the UN regular budget, these fees are determined based on a scale of assessments (hence »assessed contributions«). The formula behind the scale centres on member states' economic weight and takes other elements – such as debt burden – into account.

**Voluntary contributions.** In contrast to the obligatory nature of membership fees, voluntary contributions are provided at the discretion of member states. In the case of **earmarked** (non-core) contributions, states attach pre-specified conditions to how the UN is supposed to use voluntary resources. In the case of **core** (un-earmarked) contributions, voluntary resources are provided to UN entities without strings attached.

Source: Authors, based on UNSCEB 2024 and Baumann and Haug 2024a.

touchstone for jointly tackling global challenges (UN 2024). However, some states have already distanced themselves from the Pact, including Javier Milei's Argentina, citing »totalitarian international agendas« (Buenos Aires Times 2024). Taking a similar line, a paper by the Heritage Foundation recommended that the incoming US administration should oppose the Pact (Schaefer 2024).

Although such critical views of recent reform processes – and of the UN more generally – are likely to gain ground under Trump 2.0, polls suggest that popular support for the UN in the United States has so far prevailed. While a Pew Research poll found that fewer US Americans view the UN positively, 60 per cent still said that the United States benefitted from being a UN member state (Fetterolf 2024). A poll by Morning Consult found bipartisan support for the UN, as »roughly two-thirds of Republicans and 86% of Democrats believe it's important for the U.S. to »maintain an active role« in the UN« (Better World Campaign 2023). Drastic measures, such as the United States completely defunding or even leaving the UN, would thus be bound to face at least a certain level of domestic resistance.

A second set of changes are related to the implications of Trump 2.0 for geopolitical dynamics that are set to play a more pronounced role at the UN. Increased US support for Israel is likely to exacerbate existing frictions. Across the UN, the war in Gaza has intensified political divisions, and a US Congress controlled by the Republican Party is likely to take a tougher stance towards UN bodies that are seen as friendly towards Palestine (Chen 2024a). Both Rubio and Stefanik are known to be strong supporters of Israel. Stefanik (2024) has even threatened that if the UN »continue[s] down this anti-semitic path« it will have to do so »without the support of American taxpayers«. Such a unilateral step would put other Western powers under pressure, accentuating their dilemma in supporting Israel while complying with UN norms, values and resolutions. The conflict has already exacerbated a split between the West and the Group of 77 (G77), acting as the voice of the Global South at the UN: the G77 has identified support for Palestine as a priority and accuses Western powers of double standards.

Another driver of geopolitical tensions at the UN under Trump 2.0 is the president-elect's confrontational attitude toward China, reflected in recent announcements of increased US tariffs on Chinese goods (Goldman 2024). The past two decades have seen an increase – albeit uneven – in China's ability and readiness to co-shape multilateral processes (Haug et al. 2024; Baumann et al. 2022). In that context, conservatives in the United States have accused China of strategically trying to take control of UN bodies such as the Food and Agriculture Organisation or the UN Industrial Development Organisation. Despite Trump's isolationist tendencies, this might lead the Trump administration to decide against a more comprehensive US retreat from the UN. In order to narrow the space for greater Chinese influence, and in contrast to Trump 1.0, the second Trump administration might shy away from actually withdrawing from UN bodies such as UNESCO or the Human Rights Council (Lynch 2024).

## 2 TRUMP 2.0 AND CHALLENGES TO UN FUNDING

While Trump 2.0 will affect the UN in various ways, including through political pressure, some of the most far-reaching challenges are likely to come down to funding. As already highlighted, the United States has long been the most important overall contributor to UN budgets and thus holds considerable financial power across the UN system. Although polls suggest that »more than half of all [US] voters support paying full dues to the UN's regular budget« (Better World Campaign 2023), the second Trump administration is not only likely to build on extant US practices of withholding UN membership fees but might indeed interrupt all kinds of multilateral funding flows.

In terms of *voluntary contributions*, a number of selective but substantive cuts can be expected. US contributions to UNFPA are certain to be suspended, as Trump 2.0 will reinstate the so-called Mexico City policy – also endorsed by previous Republican presidents – that prohibits support for entities that advance family planning. In light of their policy outlook, UN Women (with its focus on gender), UNEP (environment) and WHO (public health) are among those UN entities likely to see a particularly sharp reduction in funding. If the second Trump administration decides to scale down humanitarian funding significantly, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees will also be – potentially severely – affected. The World Food Programme and the UN Children's Fund may be able to fend off dramatic funding cuts as both are led by US citizens.

In contrast to Trump 1.0, there no longer seem to be domestic barriers to the reduction of voluntary funding. During the first Trump administration, Republicans in Congress effectively stymied efforts to cut core contributions to the UN Development Programme (UNDP) (Congressional Research Service 2020). This time, such opposition is likely to be ineffective, given the considerably more dominant role Trump-aligned Republicans wield in Congress. As there is no legal obligation for the United States or any other member state to provide voluntary resources to the UN, recent shifts within the Republican Party and the dominance of MAGA voices suggest that the curtailment of voluntary funding might indeed turn out to be more drastic under Trump 2.0.

On *assessed contributions*, things are less clear. It was only in September 2024 that all member states committed themselves – in the Pact for the Future – to meet their »financial obligations in full, on time and without conditions« (UN 2024: Action 38). As the United States usually pays its UN membership fees late in the year, potential changes to established assessed contribution payment practices would not manifest themselves before the second half of 2025. If bills like the one supported unsuccessfully by Stefanik earlier in 2024 were now to be passed in Congress, however, the UN Secretariat would face chaos. A US refusal to provide assessed contributions would not only add to the liquidity crisis at the UN Secretariat (Chen 2024b), but also undermine the very system of UN membership fees. If the largest

Box 2:

**Extant UN funding challenges****Insufficient quantities**

Limited regular budgets and overall funding shortfalls across the UN system undermine the ability of the UN to implement its mandates. Funding shortfalls also hurt the UN's credibility and political capacity.

**Misaligned modalities**

Funding modalities are not adequately aligned with the functions expected from the UN. Global regulatory functions and normative work, in particular, should not be funded through earmarked contributions.

**Paralyzing complexity**

Although complexity can increase resilience, UN funding has become overly complex. This has led to institutional fragmentation, internal competition and considerable costs in terms of bureaucratic expenses.

**Problematic hierarchies**

The provision of (particularly voluntary) funding to the UN comes with influence. The limited (mostly Western) donor base of UN budgets undermines the egalitarian logic of UN multilateralism and thus a cornerstone of the organisation's legitimacy.

Source: Baumann and Haug, 2024a.

contributor were to outright reject compliance with an entire set of multilateral obligations, the system of assessed contributions – long a relatively stable foundation of UN finances (Haug et al. 2022) – would face a fundamental challenge. What is more, other member states would have their hands tied to immediately attenuate the effects of US non-compliance: there are legal barriers to filling regular budget gaps with voluntary resources, and it would be unwise to set a precedent of compensation payments that could further erode the system of obligatory contributions.

However, there are reasons why things might not get that far. Under the current regular budget regulations, the United States could lose its right to vote in the General Assembly once it owes the equivalent of two years' unpaid assessed contributions (voting rights in the Security Council would not be affected). It cannot be ruled out entirely but it is rather unlikely that the president-elect would be ready to lead the United States out of the UN. Even Trump sees a benefit in Security Council membership. There are also UN activities paid for from the regular budget – such as UN political missions – that the first Trump administration indeed supported. More generally, and as highlighted above, the United States might not want to give up its regular budget contributions – and thus a key element of its multilateral weight – as a bargaining chip, for example regarding Israel or vis-à-vis China.

Taken together, substantial cuts in US contributions – even if they fall short of a complete financial withdrawal – would exacerbate some of the longstanding challenges UN funding has been facing (Box 2). First and foremost, a significant reduction in US contributions would severely aggravate the mismatch between (scarce) financial resources and (expanding) multilateral mandates. A Trump-led government is also bound to oppose attempts to increase the share of assessed contributions in UN budgets that would expand the overall predictability of funding flows. Instead, it is likely to deepen the already substantial US prioritisation of earmarked contri-

butions over the provision of core resources. This emboldened emphasis on funding with a pre-specified purpose – contrary to core contributions that come without strings attached – would further contribute to the growing misalignment of funding modalities and expected UN functions.

At the same time, although the UN funding situation under Trump 2.0 seems dire, not everything is as bleak as it appears. Even though the United States is the largest funder to the UN system, a closer look at funding data suggests that even the US government is unable to strangle UN budgets unilaterally. While the United States currently pays 22 per cent of the UN regular budget that funds the UN Secretariat and its political and normative functions, the US share of both assessed and voluntary funding for individual UN entities is generally lower. At WHO, for instance, the United States accounted for 14.5 per cent of overall funding in 2023. When it comes to UNFPA that figure stood at 11.8 per cent, the figure for UNDP is 4.1 per cent and for UN Women it is 2.7 per cent. US cuts in voluntary contributions to UN agencies would thus be painful (for them and the constituencies they work with) but not lethal. What is more, an overall reduction of the weight of the United States in the UN funding mix – while challenging for UN entities – could be a step towards attenuating one-sided financing hierarchies in which a small number of (Western) donor countries, led by the United States, have provided the bulk of funding across UN pillars (Baumann and Haug 2024a).

Connected to this slightly less pessimistic view is the consideration that concerns about multilateral funding and more muscular demands for adjustments under Trump 2.0 could – at least in theory – act as catalysts for sensible reforms. There are a number of proposals on how to reform UN funding structures (Box 3). While a Trump-led administration would most certainly oppose an expansion of assessed contributions, other reform proposals – such as regulating earmarking and increasing the UN's efficiency – might be



Box 3:

**Three extant proposals for UN funding reform****1. Expand assessed contributions.**

The share of membership fees within the overall UN funding mix should grow, and the coverage of assessed contributions should be expanded to UN entities that currently depend on voluntary resources only. In addition, adjustments to regular budget formulas could make assessed contributions fairer and more acceptable to member states, while increasing disincentives for arrears (that is, late payments).

**2. Regulate earmarked contributions.**

The transparency and accountability of earmarked contributions, and their fit with UN mandates and work programmes, should be increased. Options include publicly accessible repositories of UN contracts, a requirement for UN boards to approve earmarked contributions, and a quality seal (coupled with a fee for problematic forms of earmarking).

**3. Mobilize non-state contributions.**

While government funding should remain the backbone of UN financing, there is potential to raise money through individual contributions from around the world. Global taxes – such as on extreme wealth – or an aviation levy could also generate significant resources for and diversify the funding base of the UN system.

Source: Baumann and Haug, 2024a.

more aligned with US interests. All depends on whether the UN bureaucracy, together with member states from different regional and geopolitical groups, manage to join hands and channel the (rather malevolent) multilateral reform impetus of Trump 2.0 into processes that ultimately strengthen multilateral cooperation.

## 3 TRUMP 2.0 AND STEPS TOWARDS EFFECTIVE MULTILATERALISM

Trump 2.0 is yet another wakeup call for UN member states that share an interest in what the Pact for the Future calls »effective multilateralism«. In terms of funding as a backbone of multilateral cooperation at the UN, the second Trump administration will likely require from other member states short-term measures focused on mitigating the liquidity crisis in the UN Secretariat and funding shortfalls elsewhere in the UN system. Ideally, these initial steps should be embedded in longer-term strategic thinking about the refinement of UN roles and funding structures. For Western states in particular, taking multilateralism seriously requires a readiness to engage through the UN's egalitarian structures on issues that matter for all member states, also and particularly the weaker ones. Getting effective multilateralism right is a precondition for ensuring that the UN is able to fulfil its mandate, from implementing the commitments in the Pact for the Future (UN 2024) to jointly addressing the universal challenge of sustainable development (Baumann and Haug 2024c, Beisheim and Weinlich 2023, Biermann et al. 2023).

We suggest three areas for action:

1. *Shifting towards core contributions.* UN funding structures need to be strengthened in order to ensure that UN entities can act more coherently and strategically, also in the face of Trump 2.0. Instead of expanding their earmarking practices, member states should pivot to voluntary core contributions that provide UN bodies with more flexibility to spend resources under their mandates and manage income fluctuations. A shift to core contributions would create a win-win situation. Apart from making UN bodies more efficient and effective, they also confer reputation and influence on individual member states: the more core funding states provide, the more they can shape the rules contributors of earmarked resources have to abide by (for example, ensuring respect for UN values and supporting effective and efficient operations). While countries across income groups can play important roles in pushing for a shift to core, the European Union (EU) stands out as a sizeable contributor to the UN that so far provides almost no core resources. If half of its contributions were to be provided as core, the EU would emerge as an even stronger supporter of UN multilateralism. Given the weight of EU contributions and the dominance of EU member states in the overall UN funding mix, such a step would provide an important signal to other member states, nudging them to respond with funding shifts of their own.
2. *Embracing alliances across divides.* As the world moves towards a more multipolar system, and in light of increasing confrontations between and beyond East and West or North and South, member states should use the UN's universal platform and convening power to pursue common interests across divides. This focus on bridge-building would provide a pragmatic counterweight to global power politics and ideological confrontations.

tation. During Trump 1.0, France and Germany launched an Alliance for Multilateralism. Now, member states that have promoted the Pact for the Future as an ambitious UN roadmap – including Mexico, Singapore and Costa Rica – could build on this endeavour and use the Pact's implementation as a rallying point to bundle funding and political support. Established groupings – from the African Group to the European Union – and the revitalisation of formats such as the Forum of Small States offer opportunities for diverse sets of member states to come together in unconventional, issue-specific alliances. While many are motivated by the desire to craft more independent global roles for themselves, more proactive engagement with a diversified set of partners in and through the UN could provide a counterweight to Trump 2.0 and build trust along the way.

3. *Investing in a more balanced multilateral system.* Trump 2.0 is likely to exacerbate the ongoing crisis of multilateralism. But as the conditions for global cooperation change, there are also new opportunities member states can seize to invest in a more balanced multilateral system. International institutions with the UN at their core, often seen as Western tools, might be entering a new phase of global rule-making, similar to the 1990s but – in light of global shifts in power – with more proactive engagement from the South. Western states should acknowledge this reality and, from a strategic long-term perspective, make tangible offers and/or concessions with the goal of creating a more all-encompassing, resilient and universal architecture for multilateral cooperation. There are a number of potential starting points. The Pact for the Future's commitments on »transforming global governance« outline a path to more voice and representation of the Global South. The process towards developing a UN framework convention on international tax cooperation – initiated in 2023 – and the planned review of the sovereign debt architecture are key to a functioning international political economy. Institutionally, Western states should welcome more Southern personnel in the UN, in particular in leadership positions in which Westerners are still overrepresented. A diplomatic code of conduct could help curb the competition for member state influence, affirming rules such as the neutrality of UN officials.

Overall, the second Trump administration is likely to shake up the status quo of UN multilateralism. The list of potentially negative consequences for the UN Secretariat and other UN bodies is long, not least with regard to funding flows. Instead of lamenting MAGA attacks and Trump's unpredictability, however, states committed to a strong UN should adjust their engagement with the world organization. They should support the effective implementation of UN mandates and seize opportunities for concerted action. Funding reform propositions and the Pact for the Future offer indications of what multilateral leadership – in coordination with or despite Trump 2.0 – could look like.

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