

Waheguru Pal Singh Sidhu
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Reimagining the G4

Beyond UN Security Council Reform



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info@fes.de

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Responsibility for Content and Editing

Matthias Jobelius | Executive Director | Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung |
United Nations and Global Dialogue | New York Office
matthias.jobelius@fes.de

Contact

Christiane.Heun@fes.de

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Reimagining the G4: Beyond UN Security Council Reform

The 80th anniversary of the United Nations this year, amidst on-going crisis within the multilateral system, coincides with the 20th anniversary of the Group of Four (G4: Brazil, Germany, India and Japan). The UN80 Initiative, launched to mark the organization's anniversary, though presented as a drastic reform of the UN system is essentially a harsh cost-cutting exercise to address the budgetary crisis, which is partly attributable to the crisis in multilateralism. The UN80 Initiative does not, however, seek to reform other parts of the UN, notably the Security Council (UNSC).

The G4, in contrast, seeks only to reform the UNSC to enhance its legitimacy, and has not made efforts to engage with the ongoing wider UN reforms or indeed the multilateral crisis. After two decades, however, it is evident that if the G4 is to achieve its primary goal, it may have to do more to strengthen multilateralism in general and the UN in particular. The G4's 20th anniversary is an opportune moment to consider whether these four influential middle powers can revive their efforts to renew multilateral cooperation. This paper explores how the G4 can work to strengthen multilateralism and the UN in order to make a stronger case for UNSC reform.

The G4 is one of a myriad of single-issue, ad-hoc, informal, plurilateral arrangements to emerge in the early 21st century. It emerged in the wake of the 2003 US/UK war against Iraq, which was not authorized by the UNSC and was widely perceived to be illegal and illegitimate. The Iraq war challenged the rules-based international order and paralyzed multilateral institutions through lack of trust among the major powers. An expectation arose that agile, unorthodox alternative arrangements might reform and revitalize the multilateral system.

Such unorthodox partnerships and alliances, though lacking the legitimacy of treaty-based multilateral arrangements, have nonetheless played a critical role in resolving immediate challenges and initiating crucial reforms. The G20 (Group of Twenty important industrialized and emerging economies formed in 1999), which helped the global economy recover after the 2008 financial crisis is perhaps the most prominent example. Yet, there is also concern that such ar-

rangements, which tend to have exclusive memberships and operate mostly outside the established international institutions, might end up weakening the very treaty-based institutions that they are trying to revive. In this context this paper explores whether a reimagined G4 can work on global challenges beyond UNSC reforms.

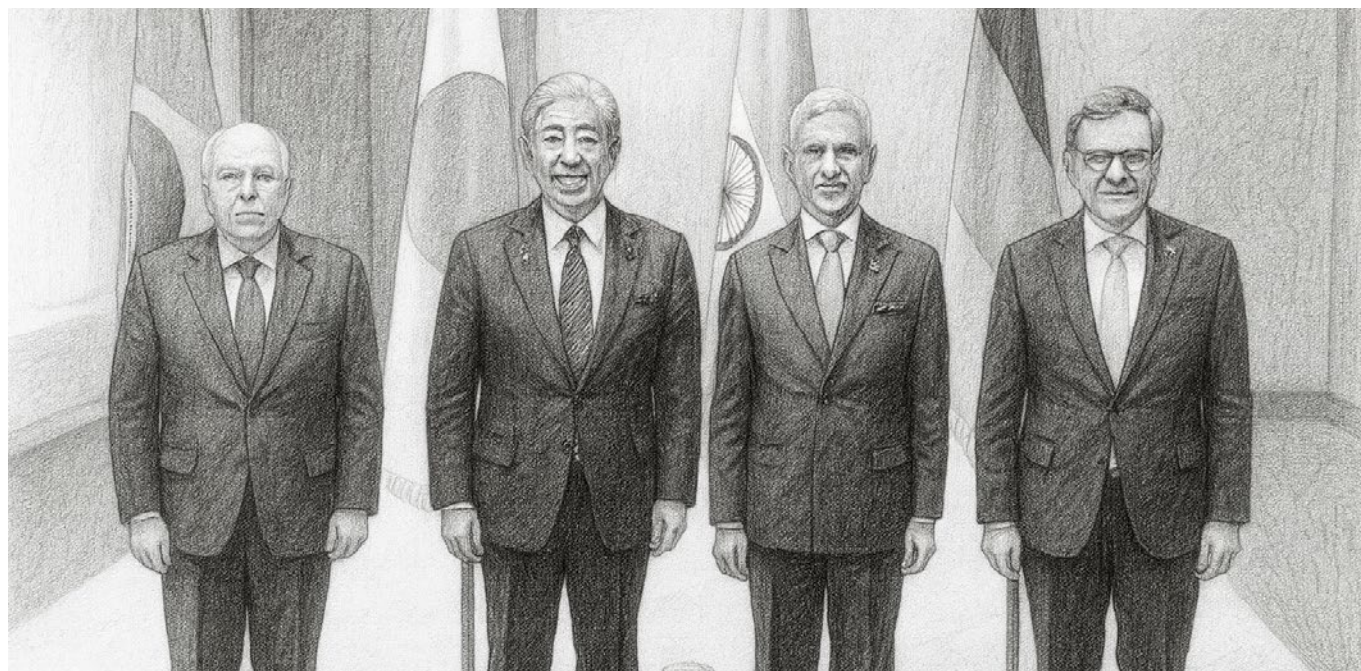
Background

The G4 was born in 2005, as part of wider efforts to revive trust in the UN-centered multilateral system, when Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan jointly sponsored a United Nations General Assembly draft resolution to reform the UNSC. They called for the Security Council's membership to be expanded from 15 to 25, with six new permanent seats: two for Africa, two for Asia, one for Western Europe, and one for Latin America and the Caribbean. They also proposed four new non-permanent seats: one for Africa, one for Asia, one for Eastern Europe and one for Latin America and the Caribbean. The resolution also proposed that, while the new permanent members would have the same responsibilities as current permanent members, their veto would not take effect until a review was conducted 15 years after these changes would have come into effect. Although the resolution did not explicitly mention the G4 countries, it clearly – if tacitly – sought to secure permanent membership for them in the enlarged and reformed Security Council.

Opposition to the G4 came fast and furious. Even before their resolution had been formally tabled, China called it “dangerous” and hinted that it would use its veto to block it. Indeed, of the five permanent members of the Security Council (P5), only the United Kingdom and France endorsed the G4's goals, and France was the only permanent member to formally support the draft resolution.

Even more detrimentally, the G4 failed to garner support from African nations who – based on the so-called Ezulwini Consensus by the African Union – submitted their own draft resolution. The African resolution, though similar to the G4 resolution, called for a 26-member Security Council with two new non-perma-

The foreign ministers of the G4 countries at their meeting in New York in September 2025



ment seats for Africa. It also suggested that the veto should be abolished, but if it remained then the new permanent members should also possess it. Separately, the so-called Uniting for Consensus grouping – primarily in opposition to the G4 – submitted their own resolution, which called for expanding the Council with ten new non-permanent members and abolition of the veto. These competing resolutions split the UN membership. None of the resolutions garnered enough support, and they were never put to vote.

Despite these early setbacks, the G4 members persisted in seeking Security Council reform through regular ministerial statements and occasional meetings and statements at head-of-state level. However, apart from contributing to the formal establishment in 2015 of the Inter-Governmental Negotiation (IGN) process for a text-based negotiating pathway, these efforts have been fruitless. As their 2024 ministerial statement candidly noted: “G4 Ministers voiced strong concern over the persistent absence of substantial progress in the IGN and underlined the urgent need to begin text-based negotiations.” So, twenty years on, the G4 are nowhere near achieving their key objectives.

This failure is undoubtedly partly attributable to the external challenges posed by the Uniting for Consensus group and the inability of the African group to agree on

consensus candidates. Yet it also reflects the limited appeal of the G4’s single-issue agenda to the broader UN membership, especially African states, which are the primary focus of the Security Council’s agenda, viz. around 70 percent of its resolutions deal with issues in Africa. So far, the G4 have not credibly demonstrated why their permanent membership of the UNSC would be to the advantage of all UN members or how it would promote multilateralism.

So, how might the G4 be able to overcome this deficit and create a common platform or program of work that appeals to the broader UN membership? What might such programs include? Might such efforts help the multilateral system to overcome the difficulties presented by the current geopolitical environment, by providing impetus or initiating reforms?

Convergence and divergence

Several obvious areas of political and strategic convergence and divergence among the G4 could facilitate or constrain their broader cooperation to promote multilateralism. On the one hand, all four are liberal democracies, dominant political and economic players in their respective regions, and adherents to the UN Charter and the rules-based international order. All four have served multi-

ple terms as elected members of the Security Council and are key actors in UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding. Germany and Japan together fund nearly 15 percent of the peacekeeping budget, while India and (to a lesser degree) Brazil are major troop-contributing countries. They have all also regularly served on the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC). In fact, in 2025 all the G4 are members of the PBC, with Germany as the chair and Brazil and Japan as vice-chairs. And, of course, they are all aspirants for permanent membership of the Security Council.

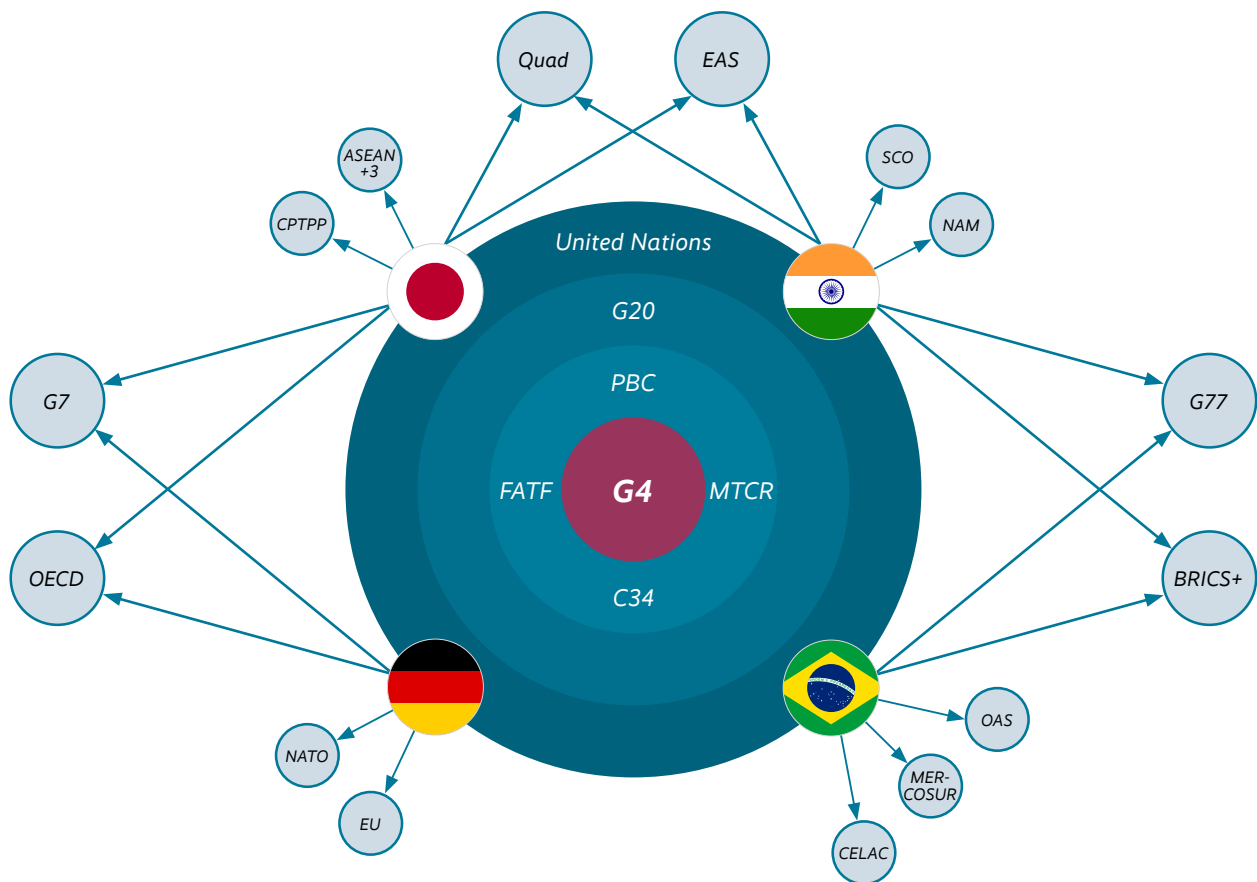
Germany, India, Japan and Brazil are the world’s third, fourth, fifth and tenth largest economies, respectively. Germany and Japan are now the first and third largest donors of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) among the OECD countries and provided over US\$32billion and US\$16billion respectively in 2024 (although this is still below the OECD target of 0.7 percent of GNI). India and Brazil have emerged as significant non-OECD donors, providing an estimated US\$2billion and US\$1billion per year respectively.

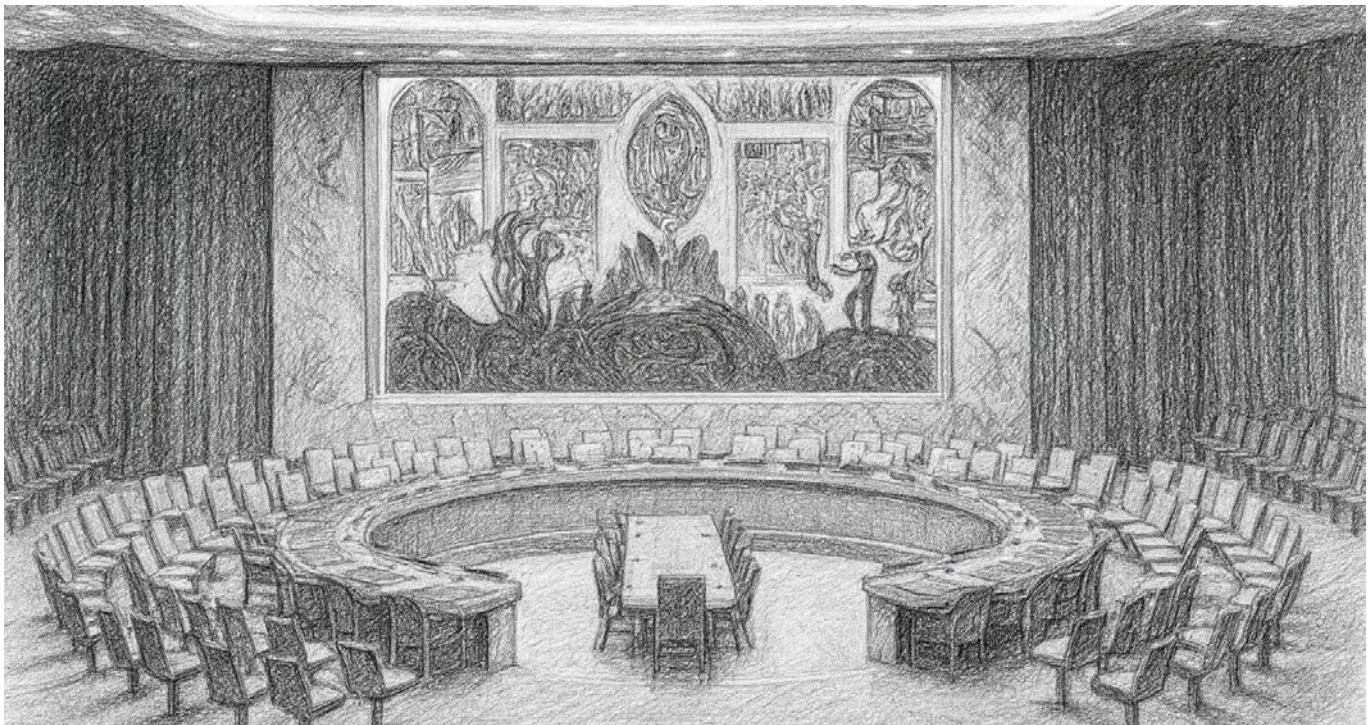
As well as the UN and its agencies, the G4 are also members of the G20, the Financial Action Task Force, and the Missile Technology Control Regime, which are arrangements that seek to enhance multilateral cooperation on the global economy, combat money laundering and restrain the proliferation of ballistic missiles respectively. Brazil and India are members of the G77 group of 134 developing countries and the enlarging BRICS+, while Germany and Japan are members of the G7 group of industrialized nations (where Brazil and India have participated in several summits by invitation). India and Japan are also members of the Indo-Pacific Quad. India and Brazil are vocal champions of the Global South, with which Germany and Japan are keen to engage. These diverse connections create a web of networks and opportunities that the G4 could leverage to collectively advance their objectives and benefit multilateralism.

On the other hand, significant differences create obstacles to greater cooperation. For instance, G4 members have often been on opposing sides in the UNSC, as evi-

Network of G4 member states in international organizations

Figure 2





dent in their diverging positions on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Similarly, in the 2010–2012 period the individual G4 members disagreed strongly on responsibility to protect (R2P), Libya and Syria. There are currently irreconcilable differences on climate change and security. Germany (as a founding member of the Group of Friends on Climate and Security) and Japan support giving the Security Council a role in dealing with climate-related security risks, while Brazil calls for caution and India vehemently opposes any such move. Indeed, in December 2021 India cast a rare negative vote on a draft Security Council resolution on this issue.

In the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations (colloquially C34) the G4 members often find themselves on opposite sides in the so-called “gold versus blood” debate between countries that fund peacekeeping and countries that contribute troops. These differences have often resulted in the C34 failing to adopt a substantive report (as is the case in 2025), generating frustration among the wider UN membership.

At the strategic level both Brazil and India are ardent champions of a multipolar world and proud practitioners of strategic autonomy. They view a US-dominated world order (or a bipolar US-China world) as detrimental to their long-term strategic interests. They seek to promote a multipolar world where both Brasília and

New Delhi emerge as independent strategic poles capable of shaping global rules.

In contrast, both Berlin and Tokyo are still closely tied to Washington through formal alliances and therefore wary of a multipolar world, especially one that may eventually weaken the US-led world order. They have also, until recently, curtailed their strategic autonomy in deference to US leadership. Germany is moreover constrained by its European Union and NATO commitments.

However, the actions of the second Trump administration have compelled both – especially Germany – to recognize that multipolarity is inevitable and that Germany (and the EU) will need to establish itself as a strategically autonomous pole if it wants to shape global rules. Germany is also examining how it can strengthen relations with countries in the Global South and has committed to a new North-South Commission (harking back to the 1980 Brandt Report).

In contrast, Trump's “America First” strategy has unsurprisingly put multilateralism last. This is evident in Washington's withdrawal from the World Health Organization and UNESCO; its denunciation of the Sustainable Development Goals and dismantling of USAID along with its development budget; and cutting funding

for the UN's regular budget and select peacekeeping missions. These developments lie behind the draconian UN80 Initiative, which aims to cut both the UN budget and personnel by 20 percent. And all this comes less than a year after the ambitious Pact for the Future was adopted.

The way forward: policy recommendations

The dramatic developments and near-existential crisis in multilateralism provide an opportunity to reimagine the G4 as norm entrepreneurs, bridge builders, and conveners, to shore up the UN-centric system and advance the group's objective of reforming the UNSC. In the past all four have played roles of this kind: Brazil and Germany were initiators of Mercosur and the European Community respectively; India was instrumental in establishing the Non-Aligned Movement and UN peacekeeping; and Japan played a key role in reviving and completing the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

To achieve their aims, they will have to bridge their significant differences and forge a broader partnership (transcending the narrow focus on the Security Council). Even on Security Council matters they could seek to devise a common program of action that appeals to the wider UN membership. Given that there has been at least one G4 member on the Security Council continuously since 2019 (Germany 2019–2020, India 2021–2022, Brazil 2022–2023, and Japan 2023–2024) such a common program of action would allow for G4 continuity and regular consultations.

Within the UN

To enhance the G4's multilateral effectiveness, particularly within the UN Security Council, the group needs to focus on strengthening its internal unity, streamlining its reform proposals – with a greater emphasis on working methods and tools – and actively engaging with other member states beyond the IGN process itself. Presently the G4 are most visible during the high-level segment of the General Assembly and in the IGN process.

There are three thematic areas where greater unity of purpose would benefit the G4's cause: peace and security in general and peacekeeping in particular; peacebuilding; and development.

First of all, in the area of peace and security, the G4 could develop a common language for resolutions and

consult with affected states, especially in Africa. That would serve their own interests while also improving **Security Council mandates**. While this might be particularly difficult on the most contentious issues, such as Ukraine and Gaza, the G4 could begin with other mandates with less direct impact on the interests of the permanent members, especially China, Russia, and the United States. These mandates, on which there is also broad consensus within the G4 (although little evidence of deliberate efforts to harmonize their positions) include those related to peace and security in Africa.

Indeed, in the Security Council G4 members have steadily voted to renew African peacekeeping mandates. There is no case where a G4 member voted against or abstained on a major African peacekeeping mandate renewal or termination. Individually, the G4 members have also consistently supported general issues related to sanctions (with the rare exception of Brazil's dissent in 2010), threat to international peace and security by terrorist acts (1988 committee), and Children and Armed Conflict. This convergence among the G4 (despite the paucity of coordination), coupled with the UN80 Initiative to rationalize excessively complex mandates, offers an opportunity for the group to harmonize their positions and to work together.

Simultaneously, the G4 need to consult regularly (like EU members do) to enhance **UN peacekeeping** strategically and tactically. Presently the discussions are sporadic and ad hoc. This is a particularly promising area for cooperation given the recent disagreements between troop contributors and funders in the C34. The G4 nations – especially India and Brazil, given their growing economies – might also consider stepping up their financial contributions to peacekeeping. They could also organize regular joint training for peace operations, potentially leveraging peacekeeping commitments to advance their cause.

Maritime security is another area for convergence and cooperation. All the G4 members are major naval powers in their regions and have been involved in operations to ensure maritime security, especially against piracy, criminal gangs and terrorist groups, so this area offers potential for closer coordination. India and Japan conduct maritime humanitarian assistance and disaster relief as part of the Quad, while Germany is a core contributor to the EU's maritime counter-piracy efforts. India and Brazil have been conducting regular joint maritime exercises (along with South Africa). Given this experience, the G4 could build on the 2021 UNSC presidential statement under India's presidency to highlight maritime security concerns, especially those involving non-state criminal and terrorist networks, and

develop joint initiatives and mandates to safeguard oceans for legitimate use. Suitable initiatives might include co-sponsored resolutions, convening high-level side events, or funding pooled projects, and possibly joint maritime peacekeeping exercises that visibly demonstrate the G4's added value.

Once they have addressed some of their own fundamental differences and outlined a common agenda, the G4 might consider enlarging the group to include African member states with aspirations to hold a permanent seat on the UNSC, either formally or informally. While this will not be easy, improving bilateral relations with the G4 members – which are among the biggest global economies, development partners, and influential actors in their regions – might offer an incentive for African nations. The G4 members' involvement in other global groupings (G7, G20, BRICS+, and BRICS New Development Bank) might also appeal. For their part the G4 members could signal their willingness to integrate African reform aspirations by considering rotating partnerships or observer membership for African aspirants, so as to respect the Ezulwini Consensus. This would indicate that the group is committed to working with African members even as the latter seek consensus candidates.

Second, in the realm of **peacebuilding** the G4 could work together to avoid the pitfalls that have plagued the C34 and better harmonize their positions within the Peacebuilding Commission. As long-serving PBC members they could also strategize on ways to improve the work of the Commission, whose track record has been mixed at best. Increasing their contribution to the Peacebuilding Fund would underline their commitment, especially to the Global South countries that are on the PBC's agenda.

Third, in the realm of development, the G4 might want to explore how to cover the huge deficit in **global assistance** left by the withdrawal of US development funding. As major economies and leaders in several international and regional banks, the G4 might seek a more coordinated approach to reforming the international financial architecture and enhancing development assistance through innovative financing. Such cooperation between top OECD and non-OECD donors would also highlight the potential of North-South and Triangular cooperation. It would also benefit the G4 to learn from each other's development experiences and establish common best practices. For instance, India and Brazil could note the best practices that Germany and Japan have established over the decades, while Germany and Japan could benefit from Brazil and India's experience as both donors and recipients of aid.

Additionally, all the G4 members, especially India and Brazil, could be encouraged to increase their contributions, especially through the UN Office of South-South Cooperation and the Peacebuilding Fund. Cooperation and coordination in the financial realm are likely to yield rich dividends in the political arena.

Finally, the G4 has called for a more prominent role for the **General Assembly**. It could advocate for certain non-security initiatives from the Quad (where India and Japan are members). For example, those relating to climate, health, and space are of great interest to the wider UN membership. The German presidency of the General Assembly in 2025–26 provides an ideal opportunity to showcase greater G4 cooperation and coordination in advancing the IGN process and in other areas that are of greater concern and interest to the entire UN membership. In this context, the G4 could explore joint coordination of the process of selecting the Secretary-General, in order to ensure greater transparency and involvement of all member states.

Beyond the UN

While the UN has remained the primary and perhaps only arena of G4 activity, it might be worth considering other settings where they could work to strengthen multilateralism and the delivery of **global common goods**. For instance, Brazil used its G20 presidency in 2024 to prioritize reform of global governance institutions. In a similar vein, G4 members could work with South Africa's G20 presidency in 2025 to continue the theme of empowering the Global South and use that process to garner support among UN members. This would help to communicate that G4 initiatives benefit **all** UN member states, especially the Global South, rather than appearing as a self-serving elitist club.

Similarly, following the adoption of the Global Digital Compact, the G4 could also champion the growing global demand for Digital Public Infrastructure. Germany and Japan as OECD leaders and Brazil and India as non-OECD movers could work together to advance the cause of Digital Public Infrastructure, in the Global South in general and Africa in particular.

While none of these proposals will be easy to initiate and implement, the current crisis in multilateralism and Washington's withdrawal from development funding provide a rare if challenging opportunity for the G4 to strengthen their global governance credentials. While the G4 might not achieve their permanent UNSC seats, their broader coordination could enormously benefit the United Nations and multilateralism generally.

About the author

Dr. Waheguru Pal Singh Sidhu is Clinical Professor at New York University where he directs the United Nations Specialization at the Center for Global Affairs, and teaches courses on global governance, international security, and emerging powers, with a focus on India. He received the SPS Teaching Excellence Award in 2021. Dr. Sidhu has over 30 years of academic and policy-research experience across Asia, Europe, and North America, and is Senior Research Associate at the South African Institute of International Affairs, Associate Fellow at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, and a member of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network. He has consulted for several UN agencies and served on three UN Panels of Governmental Experts on Missiles. His more recent books include *Shaping the Emerging World: India and the Multilateral Order* (Brookings, 2012) and *The Future of Global Affairs: Managing Discontinuity, Disruption and Destruction* (Palgrave, 2021).

Reimagining the G4

The 80th anniversary of the United Nations coincides with the 20th anniversary of the G4 (Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan), and with a deepening crisis of multilateralism. While the UN80 Initiative has launched reforms to address the UN's budgetary crisis, it has left reform of the UN Security Council untouched. Conversely, the G4 has focused almost exclusively on enlarging and legitimizing the Security Council, with little engagement in the broader reform agenda. After two decades it is clear that advancing their goals will require the G4 to demonstrate leadership in strengthening multilateralism more generally.

The G4 emerged in 2005, amid the post-Iraq paralysis of multilateral institutions and declining trust among major powers. Like other ad-hoc coalitions it reflected hopes that flexible, informal arrangements could inject energy into a stagnant system. Yet concerns remain that exclusive clubs risk weakening the universal institutions they seek to support.

This paper explores whether a reimagined G4 can broaden its agenda beyond UNSC reform, seize today's moment of geopolitical disruption, and strengthen its credentials as a middle-power coalition for renewing the UN and global cooperation.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

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