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Belgium's Approach to Contested Global Multilateralism

Hedging Between Integration and Outreach

Edouard Xia

The resurgence of power politics within a fragmented multilateral system and an increasingly contested global order has reaffirmed the importance of national interest in Belgium's foreign policy. The international environment is now dominated by countries – referred to as the T25 by The Economist[53] – that adopt transactional, opportunistic, and pragmatic diplomatic approaches. The escalation of the war in Ukraine (February 2022) acted as a wake-up call, accelerating debates in Belgium on how to incorporate a multidimensional approach to foreign policy. Although this aspect was never completely overlooked, there is now a growing recognition that the EU and multilateralism have, at times, been treated as ends in themselves rather than as tools to safeguard Belgium's interests.

This chapter aims to analyze the approaches shaping Belgium's current foreign policy to protect its foremost interest: promoting security, whether territorial, political, or economic. First, we outline the contested structure of contemporary multilateralism to sketch the evolving context in which Belgium finds itself. We question whether the UN-centered multilateral system truly is in crisis. We also analyze the dynamics of contestation from both within (US) and outside (Russia and China). We end this first section by reflecting on the role of the countries of the South and the switch from global multilateralism to multi-multilateralism. Next, we assess the impact of these developments on Belgium's traditional foreign policy. The analysis is divided into two parts: first, we examine what we label a defensive approach, centered on supporting regional and global integration; second, we explore an offensive approach, focused on strengthening bilateral relations with key partners beyond the Western sphere. Finally, we conclude by evaluating the need for a clear roadmap to better articulate these approaches.

1. The contested structure of multilateralism

UN-centered multilateralism is but the contemporary shape of international cooperation. The world order that resulted from the end of bipolarity in the 1990s can be coined as global multilateralism, as it was a broadly accepted framework for international collaboration in which numerous countries joined forces to tackle global challenges, create regulations, and

[53] The Economist (11 April 2023) *How to Survive a Superpower Split*.

make decisions within organized and inclusive structures[54]. This global multilateralism appears increasingly contested in the eyes of revisionist states, as its core, liberal, values are not broadly accepted anymore. The 56th Munich Security Conference in February 2020 illustrated this point clearly[55].

In recent years, many analysts have described the multilateral system as being in a state of crisis[56]. Admittedly, the UN-centered international system has been increasingly polarized following events such as the wars in Yugoslavia (1995), Kosovo (1999), Iraq (2003), Libya (2011), Syria (2014), Ukraine (2014, then 2022) and Gaza (2023). The overarching Great Power rivalry, culminating in the trade war between the US and China (2018, then 2025), underlines contradictory visions of the world. In fact, an expanding gap between *status quo* states and revisionist states is dividing the international community one had seen emerge in the post-Cold war era[57].

But while it is clear that competing views on how the system should be structured to accommodate emerging powers remain far from consensual, is the essence of multilateralism truly in crisis? In their book "*Crisis of Multilateralism? Challenges and Resilience*", Guilbaud, Petiteville, and Ramel look beyond the crisis qualification, as it "*presupposes that there would be such a thing as a 'stable' or 'normal' state of multilateralism where 'crises' would be destabilizing anomalies*"[58]. Based on a sociological approach to international relations, the authors propose viewing crises as permanent features of multilateralism. The history of international relations indeed points to a trend of increasing cooperation[59]. Although episodes of competition regularly occur, connectivity between nations continues to grow, and evidence suggests a stronger tendency toward cooperation and integration within a common system.

It could actually be argued that every momentum leading to an additional step of integration is accompanied by a regressive move. Take for instance the establishment of the League of Nations and the defection of the US[60]. It also goes for the UN and its Security Council, which was mostly paralyzed during the Cold War. The revival of multilateralism in the post-Cold War era through the joint response during the Gulf War (1991), the soar of

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[54] Kratochwil, F. (2006) "The Genealogy of Multilateralism: Reflections on an Organizational Form and its Crisis". In Newman, E., Thakur, R. and Tirman, J. (eds.) *Multilateralism Under Challenge? Power, International Order, and Structural Change*. Tokyo: The United Nations University Press, 119–138.
[55] Ischinger, W. (2020) *Munich Security Report 2020: Westlessness*. Munich.
[56] Newman, E. (2007) *A Crisis of Global Institutions? Multilateralism and International Security (1st ed.)*. London: Routledge; Meyer, T., de Sales Marques, J.L. and Telò, M. (2020) *Towards a New Multilateralism: Cultural Divergence and Political Convergence? (1st ed.)*. London: Routledge; Saxer, M. (2012) "Multilateralism in Crisis? Global Governance in the Twenty-First Century". In Biscop, S. and Renard, T. (eds). *The European Union and Emerging Powers in the 21st Century. How Europe Can Shape a New Global Order*. London: Routledge.
[57] Davidson, J. (2006) *The Origins of Revisionist and Status-quo States*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
[58] Guilbaud, A., Petiteville, F. and Ramel, F. (2023) *Crisis of Multilateralism? Challenges and Resilience*. London : Palgrave Macmillan, p. 2.
[59] Devin, G. (2013) *Un seul monde. L'évolution de la coopération internationale*. Paris: CNRS Éditions.
[60] Cottrell, M. (2017) *The League of Nations. Tooltip Enduring Legacies of the First Experiment at World Organization*. London: Routledge.

UN Peacekeeping missions, the creation of the International Court of Justice (ICC) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) were all tempered by the impotency to face crises in the Balkans or Central Africa. And if the launch of a Global Compact (2000) aimed at integrating non-state actors more durably into the UN framework, dynamics such as neo-regionalism and the broad unilateralism of the US as hegemon raised concerns about fragmentation.

In this sense, the contemporary cycle of crisis in which multilateralism navigates is not a fatality. The state of transition in which international relations are now evolving should be read carefully to understand how to achieve further cooperation in a different context than the one inherited from the 1990s.

1.1. Multilateralism contested from within

Multilateralism is seen by great powers as a tool for competition as well as for cooperation[61]. This was certainly the case during the bipolarity of the Cold War era, when the US and the USSR viewed international institutions as forums for political competition and contests for influence. Multilateralism was thus understood as a means – an instrument – rather than an end in itself. Past events have shown the tendency for the US to use global multilateralism when it serves its interests and organize 'coalitions of the willing' between partners and allies when it fits better. "*Multilateral when we can, unilateral when we must*", famously said Madeleine Albright, Secretary of State under Clinton[62].

Nevertheless, a cornerstone of the American grand strategy has long been the belief that US commitment to multilateralism serves its national interest, an "*institutional bargain*" as Ikenberry calls it[63]. Trump's first term (2017–2021) disrupted this certainty, leading to a contestation of multilateralism from within – originating from the very hegemon expected to defend the international order it helped build after the Second World War. Overall, Trump's foreign policy casts doubt on the reliability of America's engagement with the world order. Multilateralism is, indeed, unlikely to thrive without the capable and constructive involvement of the world's foremost power.

Trump's transactional approach to foreign policy quickly appeared as a zero-sum game, whereas it could have been based on win-win situations, not necessarily incompatible with multilateral practices[64]. By putting America first, Trump endeavored to renegotiate previous agreements in a thought to be a more favorable manner for the US. Such was the case

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[61] Devin, G. (2022) *Les organisations internationales. Entre intégration et différenciation*. Paris: Armand Colin.
[62] Goh, E. (2004) "Reviewed Work(s): Sino-American Relations: Mutual Paranoia by Radha Sinha: Beyond Tiananmen: The Politics of US-China Relations 1989–2000 by Robert L. Suettinger", *International Affairs*, *80*(1), p. 125.
[63] Ikenberry, J. (2002) "Multilateralism and US Grand Strategy". In Stewart, P. and Shepard, F. (eds.) *Multilateralism and US Foreign Policy: Ambivalent Engagement*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, p. 137.
[64] Steff, R. (2022) *US Foreign Policy in the Age of Trump: Drivers, Strategy and Tactics*. New York: Routledge.

for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) replaced in 2017 by the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement. Trump also withdrew from several international commitments (2017), such as the Paris Agreement, the Tran-Pacific Partnership (TPP), or the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran. The US also stopped funding UNRWA (2018) and withdrew from international organizations like UNESCO (2018) or WHO (2020). Finally, Trump openly criticized US allies in NATO and sometimes calling the EU an enemy[65].

This approach had a significant impact on the international system. Even though American unilateral actions are not new[66], Trump's tenure has set up a method of government particularly favorable to sow critics against the US liberal order. It has furthermore set an example emulated by governments in Brazil, the Philippines or Central Europe[67]. Trump's distrust of institutions and of scientific expertise, his use of the people against the elites and his compliance towards authoritarian regimes have broadly contributed to breaking trust in the American political model[68]. Moreover, the undermining of collective security mechanisms (the repeated refusal to explicitly subscribe to Article 5 of NATO), and the abandonment of the Kurdish allies in 2019 deeply troubled Western capitals and other US like-minded partners.

Biden's tenure (2021–2025) has partly rerouted the ship. The return to treaties and international organizations is seen as a pledge to foster multilateralism. But the creation of new alliances in the Pacific and the initiative to convene an annual Democracy Summit to bring democracies closer against the rise of authoritarian, populist and nationalist regimes around the world have set in stone a conflict-prone vision of multilateralism. "*In the American strategy as Joe Biden seems to see it, multilateralism and the defense of democracy are two sides of the same coin (...): multilateralism and democracy are both part of a liberal vision*"[69]. From China's perspective, this initiative "*undermined the international system with the UN at its core*"[70].

Illiberal states might therefore find global multilateralism inherited from the 1990s unsuitable to their vision of the world. Besides, Trump's second tenure might further question the relevance of engaging in an international system based on a multilateral process that could easily be disrupted by US' own discretion. The first few months have certainly shown that when Trump continued targeting UNESCO, WHO or WTO. Trump also notably dismantled USAID, the agency for humanitarian aid. The wide tariffs increase, or the wavering approach to Ukraine constitute another step further. In the end, global multilateral-

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[65] La Libre Belgique (15 July 2018) *Donald Trump se lâche : "L'Union européenne, la Russie et la Chine sont nos ennemies*".
[66] Wilson and the League of Nations in 1919, Nixon and the gold standard in 1971, Bush in Iraq in 2003
[67] Charillon, F. (2023) "The United States from Trump to Biden: A Fragile Return to Multilateralism". In Guilbaud, A., *et. al., op. cit.*, p. 120.
[68] James, T. (2021) "The Effects of Donald Trump", *Policy Studies*, *42*(5–6), 755–769.
[69] Charillon, F., *op. cit.*, p. 123.
[70] Hua, C. (12 November 2021) *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Statement on the "Summit of Democracy*", Beijing. Cited in Brugier, C. (2023) "China: Contender or Supporter of Multilateralism?". In Guilbaud, A., *et. al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

ism may have lost some of its appeal, as countries increasingly doubt whether state's continuity can still be considered a dependable element of international relations and the long-term viability of commitments made by governments after their terms expire.

1.2. Multilateralism contested from outside

There is a clear link between the structure of the international system and the distribution of power within. The 2008 economic crisis, China's emergence as a global power, the resurgence of Russian ambitions, and the rise of major players, like India, Brazil, and soon Indonesia, are therefore ushering in a new era of pluralism. The very concept of multilateralism is being challenged by nations dissatisfied with their place in the international system. The way these revisionist states see the world often clashes with that of status quo states. Global multilateralism faces fragmentation on the grounds of several divides (liberal and illiberal states, democracies and authoritarian regimes, South and North), driven by the pressure of shifting global power relations.

Alongside US contestation of multilateralism under Trump's first tenure, two global shocks called into question the very principle of the international order.

First, the COVID-19 pandemic (2020) highlighted the vulnerability of states to global interdependence[71]. Political circles now broadly consider the virtues of strategic autonomy. The crisis has also shown fierce competition within international organizations, mainly the WHO. In this regard, Guilbaud observed a normative fragmentation in global health multilateralism, highlighting the divide between global multilateralism and what she calls "*restricted multilateralism*" seen in public-private partnerships[72]. Finally, the pandemic has above all brought into competition different political models in the management of crises and questioned the liberal globalization, even in the democratic states. The race for vaccines and the harshly fought limited waiver for intellectual property signed in June 2022 further exemplified the inability to solve a global problem through global multilateralism.

The second shock occurred in February 2022. The war in Ukraine hastened the question of strategic autonomy with ideas of de-linking or de-risking critical sides of the economy. Russia and Ukraine are indeed both important exporters of agricultural products, strategic raw materials and energy. But more broadly, parallels are being drawn with potential conflicts with other great powers. The war has also shown that condemnation of Russia's actions is nuanced and not consensual. This is illustrated in the following figure depicting the votes tallied for the six resolutions adopted at the General Assembly in the framework of the 11th Emergency Special Session.

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[71] Omelicheva, M. and Carter, B. (2024) *COVID-19 "Humanitarianism", Geopolitical Logics of Chinese, American, and Russian Assistance*. Leiden: Brill/Nijhoff.

[72] According to the author, divergence reflects differing priorities in principles like universality, effectiveness, trust, and reciprocity, contributing to the fragmentation in global health governance. Guilbaud, A. (2023) "A Stress-Test for Global Health Multilateralism: The Covid-19 Pandemic as Revealer and Catalyst of Cooperation Challenges". In Guilbaud, A., *et. al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 53–57.

VOTES ON GENERAL ASSEMBLY RESOLUTIONS REGARDING THE WAR IN UKRAINE[73]

RESOLUTION	FOR	AGAINST	ABSTAINED	ABSENT
ES-11/1 "Aggression against Ukraine", 2 March 2022.	**141**	**5**	**35**	**12**
ES-11/2 "Humanitarian consequences of the aggression against Ukraine", 24 March 2022.	**140**	**5**	**38**	**10**
ES-11/3 "Suspension of the rights of membership of the Russian Federation in the Human Rights Council", 7 April 2022.	**93**	**24**	**58**	**18**
ES-11/4 "Territorial integrity of Ukraine: defending the principles of the Charter of the United Nations", 12 October 2022.	**143**	**5**	**35**	**10**
ES-11/5 "Furtherance of remedy and reparation for aggression against Ukraine", 14 November 2022.	**94**	**14**	**73**	**12**
ES-11/6 "Principles of the Charter of the United Nations underlying a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine", 2 March 2023.	**141**	**7**	**32**	**13**

In this chapter, we will limit our analysis to the case of China. Its oscillation between supporting and contesting the existing multilateral architecture highlights the pivotal moment in which global multilateralism currently finds itself. As Mitter frames it: "*Unlike Russia, which has a clear interest in destroying key parts of the existing global infrastructure particularly in Europe and the Middle East, China has many motivations to preserve or slowly adapt aspects of the existing international order*"[74].

China is, in fact, often attributed perceived attacks against the multilateral system. Recent events recount the refusal to vote the exclusion of Russia from the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) or the support to maintain Russia in the G20 despite the aggressive actions in Ukraine (2022). China is seen as a de facto contender of the multilateral order, as it often aligns with or tacitly supports Russia, a country that actively competes against the liberal order and the core principles of the UN Charter. Although the analysis will not go too deeply into Chinese foreign policy, with regards to multilateralism, we could rather ar-

[73] The data for this graph were extracted from the United Nations Digital Library.
[74] Mitter, R. (2022) "China: Revolutionary or Revisionist?", *The Washington Quarterly*, *45*(3), p. 7.

gue that China follows a strategy of balancing the influence and reputation it gains from the UN-centered international system.

In short China follows a clear course of action much like other great powers: the country consistently supports elements of the multilateral system that align with its interests and neglects institutions that are averse to them. It is particularly the case in the security and trade sectors. The country's preferred organ and organization are thus the UNSC and the WTO it respectively joined in 1971 and 2001. China, like the US, is, however, not part of the ICC. It also does not recognize rulings of the Permanent Court of Arbitration, for instance on the South China Sea (2016). In essence, China seeks to reshape the design of these institutions rather than dismantling or bypassing them entirely, simultaneously upholding and contesting the system[75].

China supports the UN because the organization recognizes it as one of the most important players with a special status – permanent member of the UNSC. In the UN, China pursues three key agendas: expanding its power and influence by appointing Chinese nationals to executive leadership roles[76], enhancing its reputation as a 'responsible power'[77], and aligning international norms with its short- and long-term interests[78].

Theories of international relations such as the power transition theory make China the most likely contender of the international order based on liberal multilateralism[79]. However, we see in practice that this role is mainly endorsed by Russia, and that China's behavior does not create a direct threat to the functioning of the UN system. While Russia quasi-systematically blocks Western initiatives, China primarily uses its veto right to punish countries that recognize Taiwan's sovereignty, resist norms contrary to its interests – particularly regarding R2P – and signal opposition to Western sanctions on illiberal states[80]. Its contributions to the UN budget have increased fifteenfold in a little more than

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[75] Feng, Y. (2020) *China and Multilateralism: From Estrangement to Competition*. London: Routledge.

[76] Although China counts "*the lowest number of executive leadership posts among permanent and aspiring permanent members of the UNSC*", we can observe a clear increase in the number of positions in specialized agencies. China's apparent avoidance of high-profile positions may either stem from efforts to prevent reputational risks or simply reflect its foreign policy choices. Ekman, A. (2022) "China and the Battle of Coalitions: The 'Circle of Friends' versus the Indopacific Strategy", *Chaillot Paper*, (174), 1-58; Fung, C. and Lam, S. (2021) "Staffing the United Nations: China's Motivations and Prospects", *International Affairs*, *97*(4), p. 1156; Lam, S. and Fung, C. (2024) "Mapping China's Influence at the United Nations", *The Review of International Organizations*, 1–31.

[77] Cho, S. (2018) "China's Participation in UN Peacekeeping Operations since the 2000s", *Journal of Contemporary China*, *28*(117), 482–498.

[78] Brugier, C., *op. cit.*, p. 135.

[79] Organski, A. (1958) *World Politics*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

[80] China used its veto right twice between 1971 and 1997, then 18 times until April 2024. As a comparison, Russia used its right 36 times after 1997 and the US 21 times. France and the UK have not used their right since 1989 when Panama demanded the withdrawal of the US armed forces from Panama (S/21048). Security Council Report, *The Security Council Veto*, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/working_methods_theveto-7.pdf. Accessed 9 September 2025.

twenty years (1% in 2000, 3.2% in 2010, 15.25% in 2023)[81], making China the second-biggest contributor behind the US.

China is in fact frequently criticized for the fundamental incompatibility between its communist regime and the principles of the liberal international order, which is defined as a set of global, rule-based structured relationships grounded in the principles of political liberalism, economic liberalism and liberal internationalism[82]. As Chen Weiss and Wallace observe, "*characteristics of contemporary Chinese Communist Party rule are at odds with the liberal international order as a rules-based order that privileges democracy, free enterprise, and individual political freedoms*"[83]. The case of the WTO is particularly eloquent in this regard: while Chinese behavior is considered 'normal' for a great power, the nature of its economic regime (not a market economy) is problematic for the institution[84]. As US Ambassador in Geneva, Dennis Shea, said in 2018: "*One of the most critical issues facing the WTO membership is China's failure to fully embrace the open, market-oriented policies on which this institution is founded*"[85].

Ultimately, adopting a "*revisionist but not revolutionary posture*"[86], China simultaneously supports liberal multilateralism when it serves its interests, promotes initiatives to reshape the system to align with its worldview, and establishes alternative multilateral institutions. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), BRICS+, the New Development Bank (NDB), and, to some extent, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) effectively challenge the centrality of the UN. While these initiatives may be viewed as balancing the relative erosion of power caused by delegating aspects of national sovereignty to the UN, they may also reflect a willingness to adapt the global order to governance models more closely aligned with a "*Chinese way*"[87].

1.3. From global multilateralism to multi-multilateralism

We can observe another challenging dynamic alongside the overarching great power rivalry between the US and China. The growing number of countries from the South has pressured multilateral forums, originally established after the Second World War in a world

[81] United Nations Secretariat (11 January 2023) *Assessment of Member States' advances to the Working Capital Fund for 2023 and contributions to the United Nations regular budget for 2023*, ST/ADM/SER.B/1052.
[82] Lake, D., Martin, L. L. and Risse, T. (2021) "*Challenges to the liberal order: Reflections on international organization*", *International Organization*, *75*(2), 231–232.
[83] Hen Weiss, J. and Wallace, J. (2021) "*Domestic Politics, China's Rise and the Future of the Liberal International Order*", *International Organization*, *75*, p. 640.
[84] Zhang, X. and Li, X. (2014) "The Politics of Compliance with Adverse WTO Dispute Settlement Rulings in China", *Journal of Contemporary China*, *23*(85), pp. 143 – 160; Wang, C. and Zhou, W. (2022) "A Political Anatomy of China's Compliance in WTO disputes", *Journal of Contemporary China*, *31*(1), 1–17.
[85] Shea, D. (27 July 2018) "China's Trade Disruptive Economic Model and Implications for the WTO", *Statement delivered at the WTO General Council*.
[86] Mitter, R., *op. cit*.
[87] Qin, Y. (2016) "*A Relational Theory of World Politics*", *International Studies Review*, *18*(1), 33–47.

with fewer sovereign states, to adapt both institutionally and normatively. Yet, persistent imbalances in representation continue to fuel frustration and weaken the legitimacy of global multilateral institutions, obstructing efforts to build a more cohesive and inclusive system perceived as perpetuating global interstate asymmetries[88].

UN-centered multilateralism is far from inactive. Consider the highly polarized conflict in Syria, which remained a persistent item on the UNSC's agenda from 2011 to 2024[89]. During this period, the Council voted over fifty resolutions, witnessed intense diplomatic confrontations, and faced eighteen Russian vetoes – ten times alongside China. Demonstrating the resilience of multilateralism, a shift took place as the UNGA and the UNHRC assumed responsibility for addressing the situation, respectively adopting sixteen and ten resolutions between 2011 and 2021[90].

Contemporary multilateralism encounters several functional challenges[91]. Chief among them is the difficulty of achieving consensus amid a growing number of actors, often leading to diluted compromises. Additionally, international organizations struggle to effectively address the complex and interconnected issues of the 21st century – Kofi Annan's "*problems without passports*"[92]. Balzacq and Ramel, for their part, advocate that these functional issues should not "*cloud the normative crisis of multilateralism*"[93]. Building on their argument, we argue that the current cycle of crises reflects intersecting normative disagreements that make the acceptance of global multilateralism increasingly challenging.

The current normative landscape indeed highlights growing tensions surrounding the global universalization of rules, central to the global order. Emerging countries are scrutinizing and even challenging this framework. In this normative clash, differing interpretations of foundational documents, such as the San Francisco Charter, are put forward. For instance, China advocates for a multilateral international order grounded in the principles of the United Nations Charter closer to the ideal of a "*community of destiny for humanity*"[94], whereas Western countries tend to adopt an extensive understanding of what constitutes individual freedom.

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[88] Brender, R. (2024) "In Danger of Falling Short: The EU, the Global South, and the Reform of Multilateralism", *Egmont Paper*, (127), 1–18.

[89] Syria was part of the UNSC agenda every single month during this period. United Nations Security Council, *Previous Monthly Programmes*. https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/content/previous-monthly-programmes. Accessed 9 September 2025.

[90] Whiting, A. (2017) "An Investigation Mechanism for Syria: The General Assembly Steps into the Breach", *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, *15*(2), 231–237.

[91] Fernandez, J. and Holeindre, J.-V. (2022) *Nations désunies ? La crise du multilatéralisme dans les relations internationales*. Paris: CNRS Editions.

[92] Annan, K. (9 November 2009) "Problems Without Passports", *Foreign Policy*.

[93] Balzacq, Th. and Ramel, F., "The Enduring Crisis: Reclaiming the Normative Foundations of Multilateralism". In Guilbaud, A., *et. al., op. cit.,* p. 94.

[94] Ming Guo, W. (2022) "A community with a shared future for mankind and the transformation of the international order: An international institutionalist perspective", *International Forum*. Cited in Balzacq, Th. and Ramel, F., *op. cit.*, p. 98.

In this debate, the growing divide between countries of the South and the North is crucial. In this chapter, we use the term 'South' rather than 'Global South' to highlight the diversity among its members, which the latter term may overly generalize. A notable shared characteristic among countries of the South is their common opposition to the status quo, stemming from their generally disadvantaged position on the international stage[95]. This diversity underscores one of the key dilemmas of multilateralism: how to define its fundamental values[96]. Institutional examples of the South, such as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the South American Common Market (MERCOSUR), the Arab League, The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), the African Union (AU) certainly point to a pluralization of international cooperation. However, they also reveal the challenge of achieving a universally agreed-upon structure.

Take for instance the G77. It is divided into many substantial matters, such as climate issues, leading compromises to represent only the lowest common denominator. Carter has, for example, shown diverging views, notably between China and the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS)[97]. Klöck concludes that G77 members (now 133, plus China) manage their differing interests by forming subgroups and coalitions, while also leveraging the group to demonstrate numerical strength and promote broad, flexible normative goals[98]. In fact, the pluralization of international cooperation, driven by the growing influence of the South, aligns with Aron's theory of a homogeneous-heterogeneous international system[99].

"*I call homogeneous systems those in which states belong to the same type and adhere to the same conception of politics. Conversely, I call heterogeneous systems those in which states are organized according to different principles and uphold contradictory values*"[100]. The divide between what is commonly understood as "*the West and the rest*"[101] (liberal and illiberal states, democracies and authoritarian regimes, South and North) places the contemporary international system squarely within the heterogeneity paradigm. This heteroge-

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[95] Albaret, M. (2022) "Multilatéralisme et Sud. Analyser le multilatéralisme à partir de la polysémie du Sud". In Fernandez, J. and Holeindre, J.-V., *op. cit*., 303–317.

[96] Helleiner, E. (2021) "The Life and Times of Embedded Liberalism: Legacies and Innovations since Bretton Woods", *Review of International Political Economy*, *26*(6), 1112–1135; Barnett, M. (2021) "International Progress, International Order, and the Liberal International Order", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, *14*(1), 1–22.

[97] Carter, G. (2020) "Pacific Island States and 30 Years of Global Climate Change Negotiations". In Klöck, C. (ed.) *Coalitions in the Climate Change Negotiations*. London: Routledge, 73–90.

[98] Klöck, C. (2020) "Multiple Coalition Memberships: Helping or Hindering Small States in Multilateral (Climate) Negotiations?", *International Negotiation*, *25*(2), 279–297.

[99] Aron, R. (1967) "Qu'est-ce qu'une théorie des relations internationales ?", *Revue française de science politique*, (5), 846-848. Aron's ideal type of the international system is rooted in Papaligouras' theory of formalism, where the concepts of homogeneity and heterogeneity provide the foundation for a philosophical interpretation of international society, as revealed through the study of socialization processes. Meszaros, Th. (2007) "Un apport philosophique marginalisé. Le concept de société internationale chez Panayis Papaligouras", *Études Internationales*, *38*(1), 87-109; Papaligouras, P. (1941) *Théorie de la société internationale*. Genève : Kundig.

[100] Aron, R. (2006) *Paix et guerre entre les nations*. Paris: Calmann-Lévy.

[101] Balzacq, Th. and Ramel, F. *op. cit.*, p. 94.

neity is reflected in the intense challenge to the values upheld by the UN-centered system, which is now seen as a liberal normative dominance linked to a neocolonial legacy[102]. The effect of this on the multilateral order is still uncertain, although a tendency toward fragmentation can be observed.

Far from leaving the UN multilateral order, countries of the South are instead advocating for a rebalancing of representation that more accurately reflects the current global distribution of power, with the reform of the UNSC serving as a central focus[103]. Nevertheless, similar to China's inclination toward alternative multilateralism, countries of the South are also increasing their participation in minilateral forums such as the G77, G20, BASIC, and the D-9 Organization for Economic Cooperation (formerly known as D-8 before Azerbaijan's accession in December 2024).

Global multilateralism, as inherited from the 1990s, may be transforming into a 'multi-multilateral system' – a form of multi-speed multilateralism fragmented by diverging initiatives driven by neo-regionalism, minilateralism, contested spheres of influence, ideological divides, and its instrumentalization as a tool for competition. Multiple governance models now compete, suggesting a multipolar distribution of power. Various international organizations operate in parallel, and rising tensions jeopardize the stability of the global market for trade and political dialogue. The future may reveal deeper fragmentation if revisionist states and countries from the South fail to secure a position they regard as legitimate, or if US commitment continues to wane amid the Great Power rivalry that increasingly shapes the international system.

2. A brief overview of Belgium's foreign policy

Given the momentum shown by the current cycle in which multilateralism is evolving (contestation and fragmentation), where does Belgium's foreign policy stand? Are the core national interests still protected? Or, on the contrary, what changes to the traditional foreign policy could be observed that better promote Belgium's position in the world?

2.1. Remembering the fundamentals

Since the Second World War, Belgian foreign policy has been grounded in the belief that a rules-based international order, enforced and respected by all, provides the only framework conducive to effectively addressing cross-cutting issues and meeting the challenges of an increasingly globalized world[104]. Traditionally, Belgium views the general interest as in-

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[102] Meyer, Th. (2021) "Multiple Modernities and Universal Human Rights". In De Sales Marques, J., Telo, M. and Meyer, Th. (eds.) *Towards A New Multilateralism: Cultural Divergence and Political Convergence?* London: Routledge, 153–169.

[103] The occurrence of countries formally leaving the UN is virtually nonexistent, with the only notable case being Indonesia's self-suspension in 1965 in response to Malaysia's election as a non-permanent member of the UNSC.

[104] For a thorough overview: Coolsaet, R. (1987) *Buitenlandse zaken*. Leuven: Kritak.

herently linked to its national interest. Promoting the stability of an open international system is seen as broadly beneficial to Belgium's security – both territorial and economic – and to the values underpinning its society.

Belgium is therefore a fervent supporter of multilateralism, which is all at once considered a political project, a diplomatic method, and an ideology that embodies national values. Within the multilateral system, Belgium plays the role of a bridge builder and consensus facilitator, thereby enhancing its authority and potential influence on the global stage[105].

First, multilateralism is a political project. Since its inception in 1830, within the context of the European Concert, Belgium has engaged actively in international collaboration, adapting to its evolving complexities over time. Multilateralism is deeply ingrained in the Kingdom's diplomatic identity. As a small state, though not necessarily a small power[106], Belgium bases much of its foreign policy on international cooperation. Most of Belgium's efforts aim to strengthen regional and global integration.

Second, multilateralism is Belgium's preferred diplomatic method, enabling the country to 'punch above its weight'. Belgium regards multilateralism as the most effective mechanism for addressing global challenges, aligning closely with its national priorities. European integration, for instance, bolsters Belgium's international standing and supports its regional economy. Similarly, the UN system provides Belgium with a platform to participate in global governance negotiations and promote their effective implementation. Belgium's periodic involvement in high-level decision-making processes, exemplified by its six mandates on the UNSC – most recently in 2019–2020 – further underscores its commitment to multilateral engagement[107].

Finally, multilateralism is also understood as an ideology, reflecting the values enshrined in the preamble of the United Nations Charter. Multilateralism not only provides a method for achieving international cooperation but also serves as a framework rooted in shared values and norms. Adopted in 1945, these principles were deemed universally desirable by UN Member States. While this liberal order now faces increasing criticism, its foundational ideals continue to shape Belgium's foreign policy. Belgium's emphasis on "*the achievements of a democratic state under the rule of law, national resilience and the associated shared values*", as well as "*an international order based on international law and multilateral frameworks*", illustrates its commitment to these principles, highlighting multilateralism as both a strategic tool and an ideological marker[108].

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[105] Verbeke, J. (2018) "What Is It Like to Be a Non-Permanent Member of the UN Security Council?", *Egmont Security Policy Brief*, (96), 1–3.
[106] Jacques, M., Struye de Swielande, T. and De Wilde d'Estmael, T. (2022) "Belgium: The Capacities of a Middle Power, but the Ambitions of a Small power?". In Abbondanza, G. and Stow Wilkins, Th. (eds.) *Awkward Powers: Escaping Traditional Great and Middle Power Theory*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 349-371.
[107] Van Kemseke, P. (2007) *België in de Veiligheidsraad 1946-2006*. Leuven: Acco.
[108] De Croo, A. (2021) *Stratégie nationale de sécurité*. Brussels: Chancellery of the Prime Minister, p. 10.

2.2. Today's perspective

While multilateralism appears as a political project, a method, and an ideology, it is foremost a response to Belgium's need for a stable and open environment. In the current paradigm of polarization affecting international relations – and multilateralism as a symptom – Belgian foreign policy may increasingly need to adapt to foster the national interest. The rise of national withdrawal, combined with an increasing shift toward minilateralism (*e.g.*, AUKUS, Quad, G20, G77, ASEAN) or alternative multilateral initiatives (*e.g.*, BRICS+, SCO, AIIB), poses a risk of fragmentation to the existing international system. Within, Belgium's position could be diminished and its interests of stability and openness threatened.

The type of multilateralism that Belgium promotes is closely tied to advancing the broader global interest in the 21st century. Belgium advocates for a global order anchored in inclusive multilateralism, with a pluralistic United Nations at its core. For a small state, a rules-based international order is essential to ensuring stability and equity. This vision reflects the principles of the UN Charter, which seeks to balance power dynamics and uphold the sovereign equality of its members. Nevertheless, recent conflicts such as those in Iraq, Libya, Syria, Ukraine, and Gaza have exposed the limitations of this framework, revealing challenges in enforcing international norms and addressing geopolitical tensions.

Without question, the European interest remains highly important for Belgium, as does the Transatlantic alliance. However, these partnerships do not fully reflect the broader global interest, which emerges from a consensual system that values the plurality of states. The nature of the general interest is also modified by the growing influence of the private sector. "*Multilateralism is slowly being replaced by multiparticularism*"[109], as Olivier Belle reflected. Consequently, Belgium has committed itself to supporting the adaptation and reform of the current multilateral system. Its national interest appears to align with a globalist perspective in international relations[110]. To deepen this perspective, Belgium must extend its outreach beyond the Western sphere.

Ultimately, this approach requires Belgium to balance consolidating its immediate environment through regional stability and global integration (defensive approach) and promoting more inclusive and diversified engagement through bilateral and regional partnerships (offensive approach). While these strategies are not mutually exclusive, they imply a "need for a clear overall orientation and set of priorities for the diplomatic services"[111].

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[109] Belle, O. (1 December 2024) "From Multilateralism to Multiparticularism", *Diplomat Magazine*.
[110] Cosmopolitan in the Kantian sense: belonging to a global community while respecting individual particularities. Kant, E. (2009) *Idée d'une théorie universelle au point de vue cosmopolitique (1990)*. Paris: Flammarion; Battistella, D., Cornut, J. and Baranets, E. (2019) *Théories des relations internationales – 6e édition*. Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 71-73.
[111] Anonymous interview with a Belgian diplomat, Brussels, October 2023.

3. Linking a defensive approach (…)

Belgium published a National Security Strategy (NSS) in 2021, which resembles the beginnings of a grand strategy. This document – the first of its kind in the country's history – clearly connects national security with the security of Belgium's environment, indicating a general path towards the promotion of national interests. In short, a stable, rules-based order is sought at both the regional and global levels. In the framework of this chapter: Belgium's longstanding commitment to regional and global integration reflects a defensive aspect of a strategy aimed at countering the fragmentation of an increasingly heterogeneous Aronian world system.

3.1. The regional integration

Regional stability, particularly within the EU, is of vital economic and political importance to Belgium[112]. It is the preferred channel through which develops influence worldwide, one that Belgium continuously helps maintaining and adapting.

Politically, the underlying assumption is that as European influence grows, Belgium's influence in the world grows as well[113]. The EU provides a multiplier effect, for instance in the context of UN reforms. Yet, recent events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have underlined the EU's uncertain position[114]. In short, Belgium's preferred approach to exerting influence on the global stage may be losing effectiveness within this evolving paradigm.

In this context, Belgium's 2024 Presidency of the Council of the EU carried high expectations both domestically and internationally. As the country's 13th Presidency, it occurred at a pivotal juncture for the EU, primarily focusing on finalizing the legislative agenda for 2019–2024. Notably, Belgium secured 74 agreements and more than 50 negotiating mandates, addressing a wide range of issues aligned with its six priorities. These priorities reflect Belgium's commitment to "*protecting citizens, strengthening institutions, and preparing the EU for future challenges*"[115]. In its second major task – preparing the next legislative cycle – Belgium emphasized institutional reforms aimed at "*preparing Europe for the coming world order*"[116].

Its active role in the Conference on the Future of Europe (2021) exemplifies Belgium's commitment to fostering greater democratic legitimacy and accountability within EU gov-

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[112] L'Hoost, F. (2024) *Belgian Foreign Trade 2023*. Brussels: Belgian Foreign Trade Agency.
[113] De Wilde d'Estmael, T. (2014) "La politique étrangère de la Belgique : fondements et évolutions", *Outre-Terre*, *3*(40), 277-293.
[114] Deschaux-Dutard, D. and Nivet, B. (2024) "A Lamb in the Jungle? The Eu and the Return of Power Politics". In Baranets, E. and Novo, A. (eds.) *Turbulences Across the Sea. Transatlantic Relations and Strategic Competition*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
[115] De Croo, A. and Lahbib, A. (8 December 2023) Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2024*, Kick-off event*, Brussels.
[116] Anonymous interview with a Belgian diplomat, Brussels, September 2024.

ernance[117]. In parallel, Belgium's simultaneous Presidency of Benelux, often regarded as a "*laboratory within the EU*"[118], reinforced regional integration. This dual leadership role underscores Belgium's strategic approach to regional cooperation.

3.2. The global integration

Given the evolving state of global multilateralism, Belgium's current strategy appears primarily defensive, although internal discussions also reveal a relatively recent willingness to engage in proactive outreach towards countries of the South.

Belgium's main approach to the UN-centered system is to defend the rules-based order and international law[119]. Belgium is, in this sense, a status quo state. It does, however, not mean that the Kingdom eludes fundamental questions raised by revisionist states and countries of the South. Indeed, Belgium's track record in recent years shows efforts to tackle issues of international solidarity (development and vulnerability) and reform (efficiency and inclusiveness) – two key elements of the delegitimization of Western-led multilateralism.

Although Belgium was on track to meet targets for only 20 of the 51 indicators examined in 2022, it remains a strong advocate of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[120]. Sustainable development has long been a shared priority, focusing on human rights promotion and protection, inclusive multilateralism, international solidarity, poverty eradication, climate change mitigation, and reducing inequalities[121]. Belgium's commitment to these principles was further reinforced during its sixth term as a non-permanent member of the UNSC, where it prioritized issues such as climate security, the protection of children in armed conflicts, access to humanitarian aid, and the fight against impunity[122]. Belgium's dedication to the SDGs is reflected in the advocacy efforts of Queen Mathilde, who has played an active role in promoting these goals on the international stage.

While the SDGs are undeniably important for Belgium's security, they also carry political significance. Countries of the South are particularly vulnerable to climate and development issues. "*Other political subjects are highly polarized, but it is through the SDGs that we can hope to bridge the divide between the North and the South at the UN today*"[123]. Cynics may view this as a strategy to enhance international influence, as seen in the voting power

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[117] Gentzis, Th. (2022) *Synthesis Report: Belgium in the Conference on the Future of Europe*. Brussels: FPS Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development.
[118] Kingdom of Belgium, *Why we need the Benelux*. https://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/policy/policy-areas/highlighted/why-we-need-benelux. Accessed 9 September 2025.
[119] Liégeois, M. (1993) "La Belgique au Conseil de sécurité de l'Organisation des Nations Unies", *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP*, *16*(1401-1402), 1-56.
[120] Khattabi, Z (2023), *Voluntary National Review 2023*. Brussels.
[121] *Ibid.,* pp. 14-24.
[122] Xia, E. (2024) *La Belgique au Conseil de sécurité des Nations Unies en 2019-2020*. Louvain-la-Neuve : Presses Universitaires de Louvain, pp. 95-96.
[123] Anonymous interview with a Belgian Development Cooperation agent, Brussels, December 2024.

of small island nations in the Pacific at the UNGA[124]. Meanwhile, globalists would emphasize the SDGs' potential to reduce the fragmentation gap and promote inclusivity.

In any case, Belgium has been a consistent advocate for institutional reforms at the UN level[125]. Belgium mainly promotes an African permanent seat on the UNSC and supports Resolution 2719, which allows for the funding of peacekeeping missions by the African Union. "*We are also urging the EU and rich countries to step out of their ivory towers to engage in open dialogue with the Global South on an equal footing*"[126], says a Belgian diplomat. Indications of this course of action unfolded in January 2024 in Addis Ababa, the diplomatic capital of Africa, where the Belgian embassy hosted the event "*Geopolitical Conversation*" for greater mutual understanding in a world in turmoil[127].

Additionally, the Summit for the Future in September 2024 provided Belgium with an opportunity to promote more inclusive global governance. During the summit, 56 actions aimed at strengthening multilateralism were agreed upon in the politically – though not legally – binding Pact for the Future[128]. Admittedly, the Pact fell short of the ambitious reform program outlined in Guterres' Our Common Agenda (2021), and persistent divides between the North and South hindered the enshrinement of more fundamental reforms. However, notable progress was achieved in addressing the underrepresentation of African, Asia-Pacific, and Latin American countries in both the UNSC and the international financial system[129].

Moreover, Belgium actively promotes and reinforces multilateralism by contributing to enhancing the effectiveness of international institutions. Its 2024 chairmanship of the Multilateral Organization Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN) exemplifies this commitment. Comprising 22 Member States, MOPAN evaluates selected international organizations – including UN agencies, international financial institutions, development banks, and vertical funds – through independent and comprehensive assessments. In 2024, Belgium, alongside Luxembourg and Canada, played a leading role in conducting an evaluation of the WHO[130]. The Kingdom also chaired the Technical Group, which is responsible for refining the MOPAN methodology.

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[124] Corbett, J., Yi-Chong, X. and Weller, P. (2023) *International Organizations and Small States Participation, Legitimacy and Vulnerability*. Bristol: Bristol University Press, 87–110.

[125] Kingdom of Belgium, *Summit of the Future seeks to guide the future of global governance*. https://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/policy/policy-areas/highlighted/summit-future-seeks-guide-future-global-governance. Accessed 9 September 2025.

[126] Anonymous interview with Belgian diplomats and Development Cooperation agents, Brussels, November 2023.

[127] Kingdom of Belgium, *Addis Ababa: conversations for greater mutual understanding*. https://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/policy/policy-areas/highlighted/addis-ababa-conversations-greater-mutual-understanding. Accessed 9 September 2025.

[128] United Nations (2024) *Pact for the Future, Global Digital Compact and Declaration on Future Generations*. New York: United Nations.

[129] Brender, S. (2024) "The UN Pact for the Future: A Modest Boost for Global Governance Reform", *Egmont Commentaries*.

[130] Mopan (2024) *MOPAN Assessment Report: World Health Organization*. Paris.

Ultimately, Belgium's commitment to reforming and strengthening multilateralism reflects a motivation similar to that which guided its European integration. While elements of national sovereignty are delegated, and adapting the current multilateral system may lead to a rebalancing of international influence, Belgium will continue to benefit from having universally agreed-upon rules as a foundation for negotiation.

4. (…) With an offensive approach

"*The defense of global multilateralism necessitates a broad outreach towards the countries of the South. It is they who will shape the coming world order*"[131]. Outreach should be understood as initiating dialogue to establish shared objectives and promote inclusive global governance. Belgium's actions in this area play a pivotal role in bridging competing models of global governance. Countries of the South are indeed hedging between an attractive albeit closed European network, gatekept by values and norms, and a transactional yet possibly opaque Chinese network[132].

4.1. Bilateralism as a tool in a multidimensional approach to foreign policy

The return of power politics in a contested world order and fragmented multilateral system has reminded Belgium of the centrality of national interest in foreign policy[133]. The war in Ukraine (February 2022) served as a wake-up call, hastening questions about how to integrate a multidimensional foreign policy[134]. While this dimension was never entirely neglected, "*we have come to a point where the EU and multilateralism became an objective in itself rather than an instrument to defend our interests*"[135].

In a world increasingly structured as a network, where international relations are being reshaped by transactional dynamics[136], Belgium's role as a bridge builder appears indispensable, both for the country's national interest and the multilateral order. Promoting connectivity within this system enhances influence by serving as an information hub and strengthens ties between the periphery (currently represented by the South) and the core (composed of traditional powers)[137]. This approach to combating fragmentation can be pursued through the revitalization of bilateralism.

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[131] Anonymous interview with a Belgian diplomat, Brussels, November 2023.
[132] Auregan, X. (2024) *Chine, puissance africaine. Géopolitique des relations sino-africaines*. Malakoff: Armand Colin, 91-108.
[133] Belgium's Diplomatic days, Egmont Palace, Brussels, 6–10 November 2023.
[134] Mattelaer, A. (2023) "Re-Empowering Belgian Foreign Policy", *Egmont Policy Brief*, (354), 1–9.
[135] Anonymous interview with a Belgian diplomat, Brussels, January 2023.
[136] Xia, E. (forhcoming) "L'imaginaire cybernétique. Les formes du système international à l'ère des réseaux". In De Wilde d'Estmael, T., Hockers, F. and Piron, A. (eds.) *L'imaginaire en relations internationales*. Lausanne: Peter Lang.
[137] Leonard, M. (2021) *The Age of Unpeace. How Connectivity Causes Conflicts*. London: Penguin Books.

While Belgium primarily conducts its negotiations within a multilateral framework, it can indeed further strengthen its connectivity by deepening bilateral relationships in the South. The two approaches are complementary in theory. But can the country realistically follow this logic?

Bilateralism depends in great part on the quality of the diplomatic network. In this regard, Belgium is rather well represented with 113 diplomatic posts across 89 countries as of 2023. However, the decreasing number of postings is pushing Belgium further down the rankings, especially compared to countries that are strengthening their international representation[138]. Moreover, many postings operate with minimal staffing, often limited to an ambassador and one diplomat. Belgium's bilateral network actually reflects the dispersed nature of the Kingdom's interests. The national economic fabric is primarily composed of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) that provide advanced and niche technical solutions[139]. Their business-to-business (B2B) focus necessitates a global presence, unlike industries centered on mass consumer markets. In addition, the regionalization of competences such as commerce or culture complicates Belgium's reliance on bilateral ties to strengthen its position abroad.

4.2. A case for principled pragmatism

Effective bilateral outreach requires a clear definition of national interests and standpoints. Connecting political objectives and economic interests through bilateralism means balancing values and transactions. In an increasingly transactional world, where diplomacy is often opportunistic and pragmatic, the relevance of a Belgian foreign policy primarily rooted in values warrants scrutiny. This challenge is particularly acute when ideological schisms are exploited by revisionist states that portray Western values as signs of moral decline and neocolonial dominance[140].

Admittedly, foreign policy needs a clear rationale. The 2021 NSS offers it in its opening statement: "*Our vision of security is shaped by our identity and the values we hold dear*"[141]. As shown in the following figure, Belgium's national interest is centered on seven core values.

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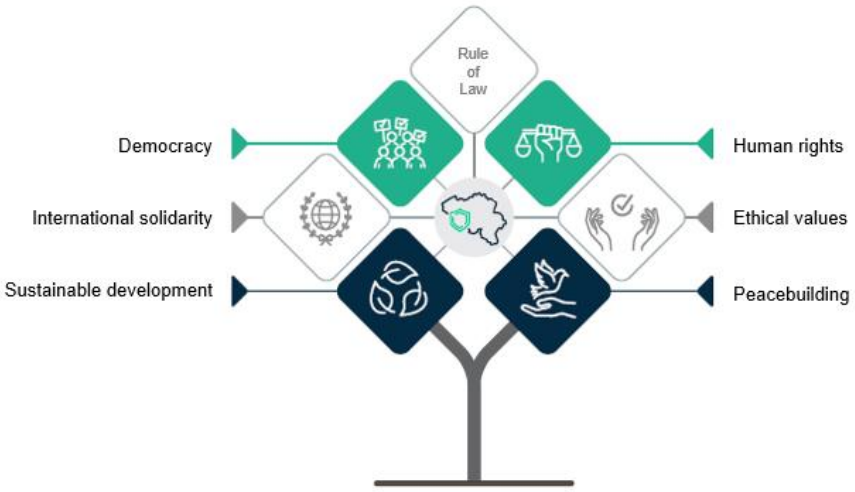
[138] Lowy Institute, *Global Diplomacy Index*. https://globaldiplomacyindex.lowyinstitute.org/. Accessed 9 September 2025. In 2023, Belgium ranked 32nd out of 65 analyzed countries, compared to 28th in 2021 and 26th in 2019.

[139] L'Hoost, F. *op. cit*., p. 15.

[140] Moeini, A. (5 October 2023) "A Requiem for the Rules-Based Order: The Case for Value-Neutral Ethics in International Relations", *Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs*.

[141] De Croo, A. *op. cit*., p. 6.

UNDERLYING VALUES OF THE BELGIAN NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY[142]



Some of these values – such as democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and ethical principles – are contested and may not be universally interpreted in the same way, while others – such as international solidarity, sustainable development, and peace building – are likely to be more unifying at the international level. Belgium's national interest appears to be grounded in these values for two main reasons. On the one hand, Belgian civil society and political elites consider them fundamental. On the other hand, there is a belief that societies not built on similar values are more prone to instability, potentially posing threats to Belgium's security. Values are also perceived, to some extent, as "*part of Belgian soft power although the tendency to adopt the moral high ground has faced criticism*"[143].

As Cooper noted in 2002, "*The challenge for the postmodern world is to get used to double standards*"[144]. Producing a clear narrative that embraces the complexity of the multi-speed world and explains the Belgian approach is, in this regard, paramount. Concretely, promoting values can deter potential partners[145]. Through principled pragmatism, as highlighted by the European Global Strategy[146], Belgium can nevertheless hope to engage transactional partners without compromising its identity. It consists in presenting regimes based on values and the rule of law as stabilizing forces that attract investments and foster coop-

[142] *Ibid*., p. 7.
[143] Anonymous interview with a Belgian diplomat, Brussels, January 2023.
[144] Cooper, R. (7 April 2002) "The New Liberal Imperialism", *The Guardian*.
[145] Anonymous interview with Belgian diplomats and Development Cooperation agents, Brussels, November 2023.
[146] Mogherini, F. (2016) *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign And Security Policy*. Brussels: European Union.

eration, rather than as ends in themselves[147]. It means achieving geopolitical or economic goals while promoting key principles when possible; the result is a compromise[148]. To some extent, Belgium is already adopting this approach in its dealings with China[149].

Other examples, such as the EU free trade agreements, underscore a growing divide related to Trade and Sustainable Development (TSD) the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) and the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD)[150]. This divide is between those who oppose the agreements on the grounds that they fail to respect SDG rules, and those who seek to use the agreements, once implemented, as leverage to guide local authorities toward better alignment with sustainable development goals[151]. It reminds the need for a unified approach to foreign policy in a federal state[152].

5. In conclusion

The fundamentals of Belgian foreign policy have not changed: Belgium stands among the most committed members to integration, whether European or global[153]. There is no doubt that the international system benefits from this approach, as, after all, "*small states are the very glue of progressive international cooperation for the common good*"[154]. But while continuity characterizes Belgium's position since the Second World War, the return to power politics and the current contestation of global multilateralism reshape its methods. In essence, Belgium maintains a strong preeminence in its multilateral action in the 21st century. It advocates effective and inclusive multilateralism. The country may also intend to specialize at the bilateral level in areas where it can provide expertise while reserving multilateralism for issues where its network of posts is insufficient. This balance between bilateralism

[147] Van Elsuwege, P. and Bossuyt, F. (2021) "From Strategic Partner to Strategic Challenge: In Search of an EU Policy towards Russia". In Van Elsuwege, P. and Bossuyt, F. (eds.) *Principled Pragmatism in Practice: The EU's Policy Towards Russia After Crimea*. Leiden: Brill/Nijhoff, 1–16.
[148] Backer, L. (2017) "Principled Pragmatism in the Elaboration of a Comprehensive Treaty on Business and Human Rights". In Deva, S. and Bilchitz, D. (eds.) *Building a Treaty on Business and Human Rights: Context and Contours*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 105–130.
[149] Hellendorf, B. (2018) "Belgium's Multilayered China Policy: A Case of Principled Pragmatism?". In Rühlig, T., Björn Jerden, B., van der Putte, F. P., Seaman, J., Otero-Iglesias, M. and Ekman, A. (eds.) *Political Values in Europe-China Relations*. Brussels: The European Think-tank Network on China, 23–26.
[150] De Decker, V. (2024) "From Carrots to Sticks, To Carrots Again? The EU's Changing Sustainable Trade Agenda", *Egmont Policy Brief*, (331).
[151] Anonymous interview with a Belgian diplomat, Brussels, January 2023.
[152] Xia, E. (2024) "Belgium's Multilateral Policymaking Put to the Test of the 21st Century", *Egmont Policy Brief*, (365), 1–7.
[153] Belgium is placed 2nd on the KOF Index of Globalization, trailing only Switzerland. This index evaluates globalization across economic, social, and political dimensions, considering factors such as economic flows, trade restrictions, information exchange, personal interactions, and cultural ties. ETH Zürich, *KOF Globalisation Index*. https://kof.ethz.ch/en/forecasts-and-indicators/indicators/kof-globalisation-index.html. Accessed 9 September 2025.
[154] Koffi Annan. Cited in O'Suilleabhain, A., *Small States at the United Nations: Diverse Perspectives, Shared Opportunities*. New York: International Peace Institute, p. 10.

and multilateralism has, since 1945, favored the latter, as the bilateral network has seen a slight decrease in scope.

The overarching Great Power rivalry between the US and China questions the essence of multilateralism, while the redistribution of power with the emerging pluralization brought by the South challenges the structure of global governance. In a nutshell, Belgium is defending the current system by supporting reforms for a more inclusive functioning of the UN-centered system. The country is simultaneously multiplying bilateral and regional partnerships with emerging powers to weave the fabric of a global community. National interest is once again at the core of the Kingdom's international action, and Belgium is fighting fragmentation brought by alternative multilateralism and minilateral initiatives using multilateralism and bilateralism as instruments.

The difficulty lies in clearly defining Belgian national interests, especially in a federal context, and then, ipso facto, defending them. The National Security Strategy has started to do so but is rather considered an umbrella under which other strategies are harbored. Unlike the "*Policy Framework on Global Multilateralism (2022–2026)*"[155] published by the government of the Netherlands, no clear strategy on multilateralism has been produced in Belgium. Ultimately, if bilateralism is to be considered a complementary approach to multilateralism, the country would benefit from a clear roadmap on how to articulate them.

[155] Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2023) *Global Multilateralism: Defining the Kingdom of the Netherlands' position in a changing multilateral global order*. Den Haag.

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