

d·i·e

Deutsches Institut für  
Entwicklungspolitik



German Development  
Institute

**“Who, if not us? When, if not now?”**

## The new Franco-German alliance for multilateralism

By Lennart Kaplan and Niels Keijzer  
*German Development Institute /  
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)*

# The Current Column

*of 16 September 2019*

# The new Franco-German alliance for multilateralism

Bonn, 16 September 2019. Germany and France are set to launch an alliance for multilateralism during the 74th session of the UN General Assembly, which begins in New York on 17 September. The alliance will consolidate the multilateral system and enhance its resilience to current unilateral trends in international relations. To this end, alliance members will work to counter violations of international law, guarantee additional finance for tackling global challenges and ensure that regulations are adequate. Germany and France announced the initiative back in mid-February under the slogan "Who, if not us? When, if not now?"

## "When, if not now?" – unilateral dynamics

Recent years have seen a shift in trend towards unilateral approaches. The UK's potential exit from the EU, the US withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement and the weakening of the World Trade Organization are particularly striking examples. Unilateralism has been on the increase from as early as 2001, for example, when US President George W. Bush refused to sign the Kyoto protocol on climate change. Nonetheless, the current situation has a greater geopolitical dimension to it. Against the backdrop of the threat to global public goods in particular, the only expedient solutions are multilateral ones, whether we are dealing with climate change, security issues in the Sahel region or efforts to combat tax avoidance. However, present unilateral processes run counter to global sustainable development agendas and epitomise the way that today's leading countries are no longer willing to fulfil their international responsibilities. The multilateral world order as a whole is being put to the test. How can we reverse this trend?

## "Who, if not us?" – The Franco-German tandem

It is no coincidence that Germany and France are the ones initiating this alliance. It was only in January 2019 that Macron and Merkel renewed the Élysée Treaty with an extended friendship treaty in Aachen, clearly underscoring their support for the multilateral system. Due to Germany's non-permanent membership of the UN Security Council from 2019 to 2020, both nations are currently represented on the council. France also supports Germany's desire for permanent membership. The Franco-German tandem already made use of its dovetailing Security Council presidencies in March and April 2019 to place international conflict, the fight against terror-

ism and peacebuilding on the agenda. Germany and France are key donors in the development cooperation sector, distributing one third of their development finance via multilateral bodies. The two nations have also played a major role in recent years in international initiatives for sustainable development.

## "But what if we fail to act?" – two challenges

Initially, the important thing will be for the alliance to set clear thematic priorities. There are plans for the alliance to respond to current challenges such as regional crises, the targeted manipulation of information and the misuse of digitalisation. However, critics stress that Germany and France are initiating this alliance primarily in their own interests. They are both major trading countries who would have much to lose in a unilateral world order and so have a stake in preserving the current system. It is thus all the more important to show that the alliance is not working for its own interests, but rather for the global common good and that it is prepared to introduce reforms in this regard. The appeal of unilateral policies in influential countries should not be understood only in terms of national political realities, but rather as a disappointed response to the trust placed in international cooperation and a reaction to the negative effects of globalisation.

The greater challenge will thus be to convince as many states as possible of the usefulness of the alliance for multilateralism. So far, Canada, Japan and, surprisingly, China have already confirmed their participation. The EU's 28 member states have committed in the EU Treaties to further multilateral solutions and should similarly give their backing to this initiative. Nonetheless, the lack of unity surrounding the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and the current dispute over shipwrecked refugees in the Mediterranean also illustrate the challenge Europe faces when it comes to identifying and implementing multilateral solutions in practice. The extent to which the alliance succeeds in involving the United States as an influential global policy actor will be decisive. Germany and France have been careful to stress that the alliance is not opposed to any specific actors and that it requires participants to commit to its goals. It will be fascinating to see who will pledge their support to the alliance and when they will turn their cooperation into action.