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A rude awakening

The EU faces an uphill battle at the UN as the Trump administration shifts gears on Ukraine. Can Europe rally the Global South to its side?

In late February, European diplomats faced a double shock at the United Nations. The source of the first shock was the Trump administration. The United States, which cooperated closely with European Union member states to promote resolutions supporting Ukraine against Russia in the Biden era, suddenly changed its tune. When Kyiv and Brussels proposed a new UN General Assembly text reaffirming Ukraine's territorial integrity to mark the third anniversary of Moscow's all-out aggression on 24 February, the US put pressure on them to withdraw it.

While Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy insisted that the resolution continue, Washington tabled alternative texts in the Assembly and the Security Council endorsing a rapid deal with Russia and making no reference to Ukraine's sovereignty or holding Russian leaders accountable for the war.

The second shock for EU members was that many other UN members either endorsed the US approach or refused to get involved in this transatlantic tussle.

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In 2022 and 2023, EU and US officials worked effectively with allies like Australia and the UK to secure large majorities of General Assembly resolutions critical of Russia. One hundred forty-one UN members backed a March 2022 resolution condemning Russian aggression. The same number backed a February 2023 text laying out the terms for a just and lasting peace, which firmly endorsed Kyiv's sovereignty and territorial rights.

In that first phase of the war, it briefly seemed that the US and EU were building an international coalition in support of Ukraine that stretched across regions. American and European officials underlined that

Moscow's actions were not just a regional war, but also challenged core principles of the UN Charter, including the prohibition of aggression. African and Latin American nations who had criticised Western policies in other cases, such as the Iraq war, backed these arguments.

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As of this month, the picture looks very different. The US effort to kill off the Ukrainian-European resolution – which involved a lot of very crude lobbying and threats to UN members – looked like a rejection of both transatlantic cooperation and the principles of the UN Charter. The Global South's tepid response to the US diplomatic offensive suggested non-Western diplomats' support for Ukraine had only been shallow. On the morning of 25 February, European officials in New York awoke befuddled by the previous day's events, and feeling uncomfortably isolated.

The non-Western UN membership's response to the US-European stand-off was not entirely negative. Fifty African, Asian and Latin American states backed the draft resolution endorsing Ukraine's rights. When combined with European and other allied votes, this was sufficient to let the text pass. But 13 countries from the non-European regions opposed it (as did Russia and the US), and 75 abstained or did not vote. Major powers from the Global South, such as Brazil and South Africa, implied that European states were prolonging the war.

The US also struggled to get widespread backing for its own General Assembly text and actually abstained on it after France successfully inserted pro-Kyiv amendments. But when it took its stripped-down resolution to the Security Council, all the non-European members of the smaller body backed it, whereas the Europeans abstained. Since 2022, Britain, France and the US have voted in lockstep in the Council on Ukraine. Now the US sided with China and Russia over its allies.

How should the EU respond?

In retrospect, both the US attack and the Global South's response should not have been a surprise. Both before and after taking office, President Donald Trump has made his goal of securing a peace deal with Russia over Ukraine very clear. Senior US officials met their Russian counterparts in Saudi Arabia a few days before the UN vote. Meanwhile, there had long been signs that Global South support for Ukraine was slipping in UN forums. After the outbreak of the war between Israel and

Hamas in October 2023, many non-Western countries accused the US and EU of caring less about Palestinians than Ukrainians. When Ukraine introduced a General Assembly resolution focusing on protecting its nuclear sites last summer, only 98 UN members endorsed it. Even if the US had stayed neutral on the Ukrainian-European text, it would not have gotten more than 120 votes.

Having faced this double shock, EU representatives now face a double dilemma: How should they approach the US and Global South in UN debates from here on? In the days after the controversial Ukraine votes, European diplomats I spoke to in Manhattan split into two camps. One group argued that, given Europe's stakes in a functioning transatlantic alliance, it is necessary to treat this bust-up as an unfortunate aberration and move on. There are rumours that the US policy was driven by mid-level officials and should not be taken as a sign of future US policies.

A less optimistic school of thought is that the Trump administration has now made its political approach at the UN clear. Nobody expected Trump, who pulled out of the Paris Climate Agreement and World Health Organization on his first day in office in January, to be an easy partner in multilateral forums. But his approach to the Security Council was unclear before the Ukraine dispute. Now, the pessimists say, it is clear that he sees the UN as one platform to improve relations with Russia, and he will override core UN Charter concerns like non-aggression to do so.

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There are also two schools of thought concerning the Global South. Some European officials are frustrated that only a limited number of non-Western countries supported them. In recent years, eager to prop up support for Ukraine, EU officials have aimed to reassure their counterparts from developing countries that they understand their concerns on issues like debt. This outreach does not seem to have paid off. Some European officials would like to play hardball with non-Western states, drawing clearer linkages between issues like aid and political relations at the UN.

Less pugnacious observers wonder if such a hawkish approach is wise. If Western countries – which are already cutting foreign aid in many cases – try to pressure their non-Western counterparts, the latter may simply draw closer to China. And the Trump administration may take steps in the coming months that will alienate states beyond the EU. UN officials

are, for example, concerned that the Trump administration will back Israeli efforts to annex the West Bank or drive Palestinians from the West Bank in the Security Council and General Assembly. That might lead a lot of non-Western countries to rethink their postures towards Washington and make them more willing to listen to European arguments about the need to defend Ukraine and the UN Charter.

European officials should work on the assumption that they could face future battles with the US over Ukraine in New York and may need non-Western backing. If Moscow and Washington do hash out a ceasefire deal, there is a good chance that they will bring it to the Security Council for endorsement (Russia persuaded the Council to rubber stamp the Minsk 2 agreements in 2015). If it is a deal that Kyiv can accept and major European powers think is credible, that will be fine. If it is a deal that the Ukrainians struggle to swallow, or European observers think is fundamentally flawed, there may be more fights at the UN ahead. In a worst-case scenario, Britain and France might consider vetoing a US-drafted resolution, a potentially explosive move that diplomats did not seriously ponder this time around.

The EU and allies should presume that the US will spring more surprises on them at the UN over Ukraine. It would be prudent to engage rather than alienate the Global South in advance and remake the argument that standing up for Ukraine's rights equates with defending the core values of the UN Charter.



Richard Gowan

Richard Gowan works at the International Crisis Group, overseeing advocacy at the United Nations and liaising with diplomats and UN officials in New York. Previously, he was a senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations and taught at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs.