Status of Legal Coalitions in an Increasingly Multipolar World

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By early 2026, the European Union began speaking in a new tone. Ursula von der Leyen told EU ambassadors that Europe needed to revisit its doctrine, institutions and decision-making processes amid rising contestation, while the European Council backed security guarantees for Ukraine within the Coalition of the Willing. This episode is a symptom of a wider change in world politics. International order lives through practice—the repeated use of common principles, shared venues and collective commitments reflecting multilateralism's core logic. That practice now unfolds in a more fluid and contested setting, with overlapping venues, shifting coalitions, and institutional rivalry shaping the contemporary order.

For the European Union, this environment carries special importance. Article 21 of the Treaty on European Union places multilateral solutions at the heart of the Union's external action. In addition, the EU continues to present itself as a defender of a rule-based global order. Its influence also travels through law. Normative Power Europe captures the Union's role in diffusing standards, while the Brussels Effect and Market Power Europe show how market size, regulatory capacity and single-market pull project European rules outward. Using international law's universal language serves the EU well during geopolitical strain. At the same time, law itself has moved closer to the centre of geopolitical competition. Actors seek influence through legal interpretation, forum choice, technical standards and coalition-building, and they pursue long-term advantage through the design of institutions and partnerships. Legalisation can be understood through obligation, precision and delegation, which offers a practical way to trace how the EU assembles partners around specific rules, procedures and enforcement pathways.

This article asks how the EU can use legal tools and coalition-building to keep international rules alive during multipolar transition. It treats that question as strategic in purpose, legal in substance and institutional in form. It argues that the EU should pursue principled flexibility. In this article, principled flexibility means defending core multilateral commitments where legitimacy remains broad, patching institutions when gridlock

weakens them and extending rule-based cooperation through selective and open partnerships in areas such as economic security and technology governance. This strategy has already begun to take shape in EU practice. EU strategy papers point to stronger cooperation with like-minded partners, issue-based initiatives, diversified partnerships and alliances on standards and regulatory approaches. Legal coalition-building becomes the practical expression of this flexibility in a more contested order.

2. Conceptual foundations Keeping rules alive begins with a clear view of multilateralism itself. Multilateralism coordinates relations among three or more states based on generalised principles of conduct, supported by indivisibility and diffuse reciprocity. In contrast, minilateralism involves restricted groups with more selective participation. In practice, the two formats often coexist, with universal venues conferring breadth and legitimacy and smaller coalitions supplying speed, issue focus and political cohesion.

The legal aspects of cooperation vary as well. The legal character of cooperation can be described along three dimensions, obligation, precision and delegation. Obligation captures the binding force of commitments, precision captures the clarity of the rule, and delegation captures the authority granted to courts, arbitrators or organisations. These dimensions form a continuum, which matters for the EU's strategy because coalitions can be built through hard treaties, interim arbitral arrangements or softer frameworks that still structure behaviour through procedures and review.

In current times, many established multilateral coalitions are dissatisfied, using one multilateral venue to challenge another, be it through regime shifting or competitive regime creation. Contested multilateralism describes this development. Regime shifting moves an issue into a forum with a friendlier mandate or decision rule, while competitive regime creation builds a new institution or network that can reshape the status quo. In both forms, coalition politics and institutional design move to the foreground, and regime complexes grow through conflict over authority, missions and rules. The strategic question then arises which kind of multilateralism will govern a specific issue area and distribute authority within it.

Contestation also operates inside norms and institutions (Deitelhoff, 2020), taking the form of applicatory contestation (norm scope in a specific case) or validity contestation (acceptability of the norm itself). Contestation frames further shape room for re-legitimation and reform, since grievances can target practices or principles and can speak in the name of a nation or a broader community.

Taken together, these concepts define what keeping rules alive means in this article. The task concerns the preservation of meaningful obligation, usable precision and credible delegation across a landscape of universal forums, interim arrangements and selective partnerships. It also concerns the management of contestation through adaptation, institutional patching and coalition design, so that disagreement feeds revision, legitimacy work

and strategic coordination. This framework sets up the EU question in the next section. A Union that seeks influence through law needs a calibrated sense of which rules merit broad defence, which institutions call for reform and which issue areas invite open coalition-building under conditions of strategic rivalry.

3. The EU's position For the EU, law is both identity and leverage. The Union's treaties place multilateral cooperation, the United Nations and international law near the heart of external action, while the EU continues to present itself as a supporter of a rules-based international order. EU external action draws on treaty language, UN-centred diplomacy and formal legal instruments, projecting values like peace, democracy, the rule of law and human rights.

The EU also projects influence through the size and structure of its market. Single-market access encourages firms and governments to align with EU rules in competition, data protection, and environmental regulation, extending European rules outward. This reach grows stronger when market size meets institutional capacity and enforcement. In such settings, domestic rules can travel outward through jurisdictional expansion, with firms adapting to the largest market and public authorities sustaining the legal framework behind that process. In a more geopolitical setting, this market power also connects to competitiveness, economic security and external partnerships.

However, that same openness that gives the EU reach also creates exposure. Dense global networks generate asymmetries that central actors can use for surveillance and coercion, especially in finance, information and supply chains. For a Union deeply integrated into global flows, these pressures run across trade, technology, infrastructure and investment. Recent EU strategy reflects a growing awareness towards this exposure, calling for more effective and fair multilateralism through coalitions of like-minded partners to promote, protect and partner in response to economic coercion, technology leakage and strategic dependencies.

This combination of legal vocation, market reach and geoeconomic exposure defines the EU's position in the current global order. Europe gains influence when it aligns legal credibility, regulatory capacity and partnership building. Legal coalition-building gives the Union a practical way to do so. It turns normative authority and market power into shared rules, institutional support and operational coordination across a fragmented international environment.

4. Proposal for an EU playbook The EU has already moved from declaratory support for multilateralism towards a more strategic effort to sustain institutions under stress. It also recognised that the legal order shifts through interpretation, venue design, standards and coalition-building. That combination points to three tasks for the EU. It should defend core legal principles, patch institutions that still carry broad legitimacy and

extend rule-based cooperation into emerging domains through open partnerships and credible legal frameworks.

4.1 Defend core legal principles The first task is to defend the legal core of the international order. The EU gains reach when it speaks the language of international law. Charter principles such as sovereignty, territorial integrity, peaceful settlement and the prohibition on force carry wide recognition across regions and institutions. They give diplomacy a shared vocabulary, anchor claims in recognised legal sources and help build coalitions beyond Europe's closest partners.

The UN General Assembly's resolution on Ukraine shows how this works in practice. The resolution reaffirmed Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, condemned aggression in and called for the withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukrainian territory. Security Council deadlock shifted the debate to the General Assembly, where a broader membership used a formal resolution to restate the Charter's core rules and give them political backing. For the EU, the lesson lies as much in the coalition around the text as in the text itself. Shared language on aggression, legality and accountability helped gather support across a wide membership and raised the political cost of violating the Charter.

But this task exceeds the General Assembly. Competing powers often seek influence through their own readings of existing rules, linking legal claims to technical standards, development offers and institutional partnerships, and then reinforcing those claims through repeated use across issue areas. The EU strengthens its position when it enters these debates early, with clear legal arguments and sustained diplomatic follow-through, as shown in areas such as maritime law, trade and digital governance.

A practical next step would be a stronger EU legal diplomacy track alongside sanctions, aid and summit diplomacy. Such a track could coordinate member state positions in the UN, identify priority interpretation battles early, support legal outreach to partner states and mobilise technical expertise around key votes, resolutions and advisory proceedings. That would give the Union a more systematic way to defend core rules before rival readings gain wider acceptance.

4.2 Patch and reform institutions under strain The second task is institutional repair. In a more contested order, multilateral conflict often runs through forum shifting and the creation of alternative institutions, as dissatisfied coalitions look for arenas with friendlier rules or greater control over outcomes. This creates a practical challenge for the EU. Universal institutions still matter because they carry legitimacy, scale and continuity, yet political blockage can weaken them over time. Repair mechanisms can help to keep partners inside a common framework, preserve routines of cooperation and leave space for broader reform later on.

The WTO appellate crisis offers the clearest example. The Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement emerged as a coalition-built backstop during the paralysis of the Appellate Body, with the EU playing a

leading role in gathering support well beyond its closest partners. The importance of this case is in its design. A selective arrangement kept appellate review alive inside the WTO framework and preserved a measure of legal certainty for states and firms. That gave members a way to sustain adjudication, maintain confidence in the system and keep open the prospect of fuller institutional repair.

This example could work in other fields as well. Institutional patching can sustain adjudication, funding, technical coordination and crisis management during periods of strain. In that sense, repair serves as a strategic bridge. It keeps rules in use, supports habits of compliance and helps stop institutional weakening from hardening into exit and fragmentation.

A useful next step would be an EU strategy for interim institutional safeguards across key multilateral forums. Such a strategy, while carrying potential risk of weakening incentives for more structural reforms, could identify vulnerable procedures early, map coalitions for temporary fixes and prepare ready-made legal options for dispute settlement, monitoring and technical coordination. That would give the Union a more systematic way to protect institutions under pressure while building support for broader reform.

4.3 Extend rule-based cooperation into emerging domains The third task is to extend rule-based cooperation into emerging domains. Technology, supply chains, investment, research partnerships and standards bodies now shape the legal environment long before formal treaties come into power. Influence increasingly runs through domestic laws with external reach, technical standards, dispute-settlement venues and partnership-based legal initiatives. For the EU, this places legal governance inside partnership policy, trade policy and economic security policy at the same time.

The European Economic Security Strategy already points in this direction. It identifies four main risk areas, supply chains, critical infrastructure, technology security and leakage, and economic coercion, and organises the response around promote, protect and partner. It outlines a coalition-based approach to rulemaking in a geoeconomic environment. Internal regulation, external coordination and partnership building all sit within one strategic framework.

This agenda builds on some familiar sources of EU power. Market size gives the Union reach when it is matched by institutional capacity and enforcement, allowing domestic rules to travel outward through jurisdictional expansion and shape the choices of firms and partner governments. In a more geopolitical environment, economic security, competitiveness and partnerships increasingly move together. At the same time, global networks in finance, data and supply chains create points of control that central actors can use for coercion, especially when strong domestic institutions sit behind them. These pressures make early rule-setting and coalition-building more valuable for the EU.

These strategic coalitions can carry shared approaches to export controls, investment screening, research security, digital governance and infrastructure. They have become a more developed instrument of EU foreign policy, shaped by the combination of strategic objectives and normative commitments. Used well, they can spread trusted legal frameworks, connect regulatory capacity with development and technology cooperation, and widen the group of states with a stake in predictable governance.

A useful next step would be an EU coalition toolkit for emerging domains. It could combine model clauses, regulatory dialogues, technical assistance and capacity-building packages for partner countries in areas such as digital standards, research security, investment screening and infrastructure governance. That would give the Union a more systematic way to move from ad hoc coordination to durable legal coalition-building in the spaces where strategic competition is growing fastest.

5. Risks, trade-offs and design principles Legal coalition-building brings real trade-offs. It can preserve obligation, precision and implementation in one field, while also increasing fragmentation across the wider order when membership stays narrow, costs and benefits fall unevenly, or regulatory projection appears hierarchical to outside partners. EU credibility also depends on instrument choice. The Union draws authority from multilateral language and support for international law and that authority comes under pressure when unilateral trade, sanctions and regulatory tools shape how outside partners read EU action, especially where extraterritoriality and double standards frame that reading.

Coalition-building also opens up questions of fairness and voice. Persuasive reform usually asks the EU to share influence, widen representation and accept adjustments to institutional arrangements from which it has long benefited. Research on contestation points in the same direction. Disagreement can support reform when institutions remain open to reinterpretation, accommodation and procedural revision, especially where grievances focus on application, representation and institutional fairness.

These risks suggest a clear set of design principles. Coalitions gain legitimacy when they rest on a clear legal basis, open accession paths, review clauses and visible links to wider multilateral frameworks. Legal instruments gain acceptance when precision, proportionality and a risk-based rationale remain visible in their design and use, especially in areas such as economic security, investment and research cooperation. Institutional depth matters too. Technical assistance, judicial and administrative capacity-building and stronger internal coordination give partnerships more staying power and widen support for shared rules over time. Principled flexibility takes practical shape when open membership, fair reform, precise legal design and sustained capacity-building move together.

6. Conclusion The international order now moves through contestation, adaptation and coalition politics, changing its character continuously. In this setting, the EU serves its interests and its identity best when it

treats law as a field of practical statecraft and keeps multilateral legality in active use. That task begins with the defence of Charter principles, continues through the repair of institutions under strain, and extends into new areas such as economic security, technology governance and standards through open partnerships with legal substance.

Principled flexibility captures the logic of this approach. The EU can gather support around foundational rules, sustain procedures and adjudication through interim mechanisms, and project credible frameworks through its market, partnerships and regulatory capacity. At the same time, this strategy carries limits. Coalition-building works best when it supports fairness, openness and institutional legitimacy, since narrow membership, unequal influence and heavy-handed regulatory projection can weaken support across the wider order.

For the EU, the core challenge concerns the preservation of legal order as a living practice. Rules endure through use, institutional care and political backing, which gives legal coalition-building both strategic and normative force in a more contested world. The strongest course now is to make legal coalition-building a standing method of external action, built on open participation, fair reform, precise legal design and clear links back to wider multilateral frameworks. That would give the Union a practical way to defend the core, preserve the machinery and widen support for rules that still carry global weight.

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