

**Foreign Policy Centre**  
**Evidence to the International Relations and Defence Committee Inquiry**  
**‘The UK’s engagement with the multilateral system’**  
**July 2026**

**Executive Summary**

- This submission primarily focuses on analysing the present approaches of the United States (US) and rising powers to multilateralism and their future implications for the United Kingdom (UK).
- It challenges the assertion that the US is retreating from the multilateral system and includes a debate on how the two main US political parties view multilateralism.
- It also explores the perspectives of China, India, South Africa, and Brazil on the UK and the multilateralism system, how their approaches have evolved and what they seek to change.

**Introduction**

1. The Foreign Policy Centre (FPC) is an independent and non-partisan international affairs think tank based in the UK.<sup>1</sup> The FPC publishes independent research and provides an open and accessible space for the exchange of ideas, knowledge and experience, so that the voices of experts and advocates can be heard and acted upon.
2. The FPC has a broad network, including academics, practitioners, experts and former policymakers, many of whom have expertise on issues relating to human rights. For the purposes of this submission, the FPC engaged with our fellows Dr Andrew Gawthorpe (University Lecturer at Leiden University), Dr Chris Ogden (Associate Professor, Global Studies Programme at the University of Auckland), and Dr Sasikumar Sundaram (Senior Lecturer at the Department of International Politics at City St George’s, University of London). This submission is not intended to be a comprehensive analysis of all the areas covered by the inquiry, but seeks to present relevant insights from the FPC and its network that can prompt further consideration of key issues. The views expressed in the submission are those of the authors as cited. Each contributor reviewed and approved citations before submission to the International Relations and Defence Committee.
3. The multilateral system is not disappearing, but it is becoming more contested, more fragmented, and more plural. Institutions built in a world of clear US primacy now operate in an environment of sharper power rivalry, stronger demands from the Global South for voice and representation, and growing demand for flexible coalitions outside formal institutions. Universal institutions still matter, but they are increasingly less effective with reform blocked and enforcement paralysed, and routinely supplemented by minilateral and issue-specific coalitions.

---

<sup>1</sup> Foreign Policy Centre, FPC, <https://fpc.org.uk/>

4. In this context, the UK should not aim to defend a vanishing status quo, nor pretend it can replace the US as the system's guarantor. However, it can and should play a stronger leadership role as a coalition facilitator, reformer, and bridge builder between established and rising powers. While domestic political and economic pressures are forcing many states, including the UK, to look inwards, it's important to not lose sight of the urgent need to protect multilateral cooperation. The recent change in political leadership is a good opportunity for a reset in the UK's approach to international leadership.

### Recommendations for the UK Government

5. The UK must adapt to the US' new transactional approach to multilateralism with a reactive posture and reconsider what it offers the US in the transaction.
6. The UK should support the creation of a more plural multilateral order to safeguard multilateralism by focusing on bridge building and forging new coalitions, being more pragmatic and less prescriptive, supporting institutional reform (especially in the UN Security Council), and paying more attention to the concerns of rising powers.
7. The UK could strengthen its influence by demonstrating better consistency between rhetoric and practice on upholding the international rules-based order.

### Key Insights

#### *How will the US engage with the multilateral system in years to come?*

8. Dr. Sundaram argues that: *"The US is recalibrating, not retreating"* and if this premise is not understood by UK policymakers it will *"produce strategic misalignment and misjudgement."*<sup>2</sup> He continues: *"The US is not withdrawing; it is recalibrating, i.e. shifting from a hegemony that operated through consent and co-optation towards the open assertion of dominance in response to a rising China. Scholars describe this condition as 'dominance without hegemony'."*<sup>3</sup> *American exceptionalism, the ideology underwriting US leadership, remains robust even as the specific liberal commitments of the past recede. The policy implication for the UK is that the multilateral system is being reordered by hardpower contests over legitimacy and voice, rather than by withdrawal. A UK strategy calibrated to 'American retreat' will mis-read both Washington and the rising powers."*<sup>4</sup>
9. Dr Sundaram further argues that the US is changing how it approaches international leadership: *"The Committee's call rightly observes that 'the established assumptions and certainties*

---

<sup>2</sup> Dr Sasikumar Sundaram, comments to FPC, July 2026.

<sup>3</sup> Ranajit Guha, 'Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India', Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Inderjeet Parmar, 'The US-led liberal order: imperialism by another name?', International Affairs 94: 1, 2018, pp. 151–72

<sup>4</sup> Dr Sasikumar Sundaram, comments to FPC, July 2026.

*underpinning the post-war international order are being upended’.<sup>5</sup> It does not follow that the US is abandoning leadership. The evidence points instead to a change in the mode of leadership. For much of the post-war period American primacy operated as hegemony in which allies and institutions internalised US preferences as their own. What is now visible is a shift towards dominance, where diplomatic, military, and economic force dominate over consent. This dominance is also exercised through a changing rhetoric that includes: technological supremacy, conditionality and transactional pressure in interactions, explicitly embracing power politics without diplomatic cover, explicitly arm-twisting allies to American interests, and open weaponisation of financial, technological, and infrastructural networks to meet a narrow definition of American national interests.”<sup>6</sup>*

10. *“This type of dominance without hegemony is very much familiar to colonies and postcolonial states and thus it is important the UK learns lessons from the periphery. American recalibration is a recalibration of means, not a renunciation of ends. The organising ideology of American exceptionalism, the belief that the US is the indispensable architect of an international order built on global capitalism, remains strong across the political spectrum. What has narrowed is the explicitly liberal dimension of that leadership: the willingness to constrain US power within reciprocal rules and to secure followership through concession. The distinction matters because retreat and recalibration call for opposite responses from London.”<sup>7</sup>*
11. Dr Sundaram traces this shift back beyond the current administration: *“A revealing empirical marker is the bipartisan character of the shift. Across Democrats and Republican administrations, the operative demand has been that multilateral institutions be made to serve the American primacy, rather than the US adapting its conduct to institutional constraint. There is an implicit understanding by US policymakers (that is now becoming explicit) that multilateral institutional rules usefully create common expectations among participants but that the US will only conform to those rules depending on national interests. This is not disengagement from multilateralism; it is radical instrumentalisation of multilateralism in which fora and their rules are valued for the leverage they confer rather than the constraints they impose. The continuity of this posture across partisan change from Presidents Obama, Biden, and Trump is precisely what distinguishes structural recalibration from the episodic unilateralism of any single presidency.”<sup>8</sup>*
12. However, Dr Gawthorpe sees more differences in how the two main US political parties view multilateralism:
  - a. *“Firstly, the two major US political parties are now starkly divided on the question of multilateralism. The Republican Party is hostile to many aspects of the multilateral system and sees it as a burden, whereas the Democrats are more welcoming.*

---

<sup>5</sup> International Relations and Defence Committee, ‘Call for Evidence’, <https://committees.parliament.uk/submission/3932/#/evidence/3932/call-for-evidence>

<sup>6</sup> Dr Sasikumar Sundaram, comments to FPC, July 2026.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

- b. *Secondly, because the two parties are very closely divided electorally, this means that US engagement with the multilateral system is likely to oscillate dramatically between these two poles over relatively short time frames. Periods of re-engagement will occur, but they will be interrupted by periods of hostility.*
  - c. *Thirdly, even among Democrats, there is a general trend towards more selective engagement. The electoral importance of the Midwestern swing states means that even a Democratic president is unlikely to enthusiastically engage in striking new trade deals. America's high levels of political polarisation and concerns over democratic backsliding will focus attention on domestic affairs. And as the US represents an increasingly smaller share of global economic and military power, it will have to make increasingly constrained choices about how and where to engage.*
  - d. *Finally, even the Republican Party is not yet ready to make a complete break with the multilateral system. Despite the growing strength of conservative nationalists, the contemporary Republican Party still contains many prominent figures with a somewhat more internationalist outlook. They still see the multilateral system as providing important economic, security and diplomatic benefits to the US. Yet they remain in a relatively defensive, as opposed to assertive, position. This places some limits over how sharply the party will break with the system, although these limits are always being renegotiated.”<sup>9</sup>*
13. Based on his evaluation of how the US will engage with the multilateral system in the coming years, Dr Sundaram recommends: *“The UK should not plan around an American ‘vacancy’ in global leadership to be filled by others; the more accurate expectation is a US that remains present but transactional, extracting alignment as the price of protection. The UK’s value to Washington will increasingly be judged by what it contributes to the American mission, not by shared membership of a rules-based club; London should identify where its comparative strengths make it indispensable. The UK should also avoid the trap of defending ‘the liberal order’ in terms the US itself has quietly abandoned, and instead articulate a positive account of why constrained, reciprocal multilateralism serves British interests on its own merits.”<sup>10</sup>*
14. Specifically he adds: *“UK strategy documents and briefing to Ministers should replace the framing of ‘US retreat’ with ‘US recalibration towards dominance’, and should be tested against the expectation of a present-but-transactional US rather than an absent one.”<sup>11</sup>*

***Could the post-war multilateral system, rooted in institutions like the UN, World Bank, IMF and WTO, survive without US stewardship?***

---

<sup>9</sup> Dr Andrew Gawthorpe, comments to FPC, July 2026.

<sup>10</sup> Dr Sasikumar Sundaram, comments to FPC, July 2026.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

15. Dr Gawthorpe thinks not: *“The post-war multilateral system cannot survive in its current form without US stewardship. The US has played a vital role in maintaining this infrastructure, providing diplomatic leadership – and often financial resources – to do so. For much of the post-war period, the US has been the only Western country with sufficiently large resources and sufficiently global interests to credibly make the maintenance of the multilateral system one of its foreign policy goals. No other Western power matches its resources or truly global outlook. This does not mean that these institutions will disband, but without US leadership they will likely lose effectiveness and credibility.”*<sup>12</sup>

### **Can the UK’s existing approach to multilateral engagement work without the US as a willing partner?**

16. Dr Gawthorpe argues this depends on the extent to which the US withdraws from being a willing partner: *“If the US still remains selectively engaged, then the UK can continue to work with it in areas of shared interests. If the US withdraws from the system more sharply, it will be increasingly hard for the UK to gain benefits from its own engagement with a system that will become less effective and lacking in legitimacy. Notably, in both of these scenarios, the initiative lies with the US and the UK is in a reactive posture. In order to maintain freedom of action and control over the context in which it operates, the UK ought to attempt to forge a new coalition in support of the multilateral order, or key components of it, with like-minded states. One single country cannot replace the US role in upholding the order, but a broad coalition perhaps could.”*<sup>13</sup>
17. Recent public opinion polling shows growing distrust of President Trump’s US among the British public, alongside a preference for closer cooperation with Europe.<sup>14</sup> This provides a basis for the UK to project itself as an independent middle power working towards the UK’s interests and being a ‘force for good’ in the post-war and emerging multilateral system and prioritising working closely with Europe and other like-minded partners, while recalibrating our relationship with the US and their role in the multilateral system.

### **How do rising powers view the multilateral system and its key institutions?**

18. Dr Ogden argues: *“The various multilateral institutions created by Washington after the Second World War have formed the core of the contemporary US-led world order. However, for newly emergent centres of power, these institutions reflect the power balances of a particular historical moment and are often seen as non-representative and outdated. They are also regarded as neither fixed nor immune to challenge.”*<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Dr Andrew Gawthorpe, comments to FPC, July 2026.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> British Foreign Policy Group, ‘2026 Annual Survey of UK Public Opinion on Foreign Policy’, 15 July 2026  
<https://bfpgrp.co.uk/analysis/launch---2026-annual-survey-of-uk-public-opinion-on-foreign-policy>

<sup>15</sup> Dr Chris Ogden, comments to FPC, July 2026.

19. As an example, he says rising powers such as China and India increasingly view the multilateral system as both necessary and constraining. He explains: *“they see it as necessary because global interdependence makes multilateral cooperation indispensable but it is also constraining because existing institutions often privilege Western interests and norms over their own. These rising powers support multilateralism but also seek to reshape it, especially as they guide the realisation of the Asian 21st Century. Contemporary globalisation and transnational problems such as financial instability, terrorism, disease, and environmental degradation have further strengthened the relevance of multilateralism, while also increasing the visibility of rising states within global regimes. China and India thus seek to expand their influence through a more pragmatic and strategic engagement with international institutions, combining support for multilateral cooperation with advocacy of a more multipolar world order, and greater equality, peaceful development, and non-intervention.”*<sup>16</sup>
20. *“In particular, China’s attitude toward multilateralism has evolved from suspicion, to uncertainty, to supportiveness. Beijing now regards participation as a means of dispelling mistrust, improving its international image, and avoiding the perception that China is a revisionist power. China also recognises that institutions created without its participation could constrain its preferences and reproduce older Western power hierarchies. Thus, it has increasingly pursued institutional innovation of its own, working both within the existing order and alongside it. The creation of bodies such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and BRICS reflects this broader tendency among rising powers to supplement, rather than simply accept, the established framework.”*<sup>17</sup>
21. Looking ahead, he says: *“they are likely to remain engaged with multilateral institutions, but with a stronger desire to reform their rules, widen representation, and secure greater voice. The impact will be a more plural and contested international order, in which multilateralism remains central, but its authority and direction are subject to ever-growing negotiation. India’s desire for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council captures these tensions.”*<sup>18</sup>

**How are rising powers likely to engage with the multilateral system in years to come? And what impact will this have?**

22. Dr Sundaram explores this question through the perspectives of India, Brazil, and South Africa. He argues they will rely increasingly on rhetoric: *“Having long felt silenced by the terms of the liberal order, and now emboldened by their economic weight and by the recalibration of American leadership, they deploy rhetorics of Western hypocrisy, Western decline, US imperialism, and ‘the rise of the rest’. This rhetoric does dual work: it disciplines domestic*

---

<sup>16</sup> Dr Chris Ogden, comments to FPC, July 2026.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

*audiences towards national assertion, and it forcibly opens institutional doors that liberal ordering had kept shut.”<sup>19</sup>*

23. *“India, Brazil, and South Africa and also China, articulate their claims through, and against, the very multilateral bodies they seek to reform using membership as a platform and Western non-compliance as ammunition. Read correctly, rising-power rhetoric is a bid for legitimacy and voice, not a wholesale rejection of multilateralism. This is an opening for the UK.”<sup>20</sup>*

24. Based on this analysis, Dr Sundaram makes three recommendations to the UK Government:

- a. *“The UK should treat demands for institutional inclusion on the Security Council and on quota and voice (including technology transfers) reform, as negotiable currency rather than as threats to be resisted, since credible movement on voice buys cooperation on substance.”<sup>21</sup>*
- b. *“The UK should avoid supplying fresh evidence for the hypocrisy charge. Think of selective outcry in the UK over Gaza and Ukraine and differential treatments offered to Benjamin Netanyahu and Vladimir Putin, when both have seriously damaged the rules-based world order. The selective adherence to rules the UK urges on others is strategically costly precisely because it feeds a rhetoric that already resonates across the Global South.”<sup>22</sup>*
- c. *“The UK should act as a broker of legitimacy, convening, translating and bridging between dominance seeking Washington and strategically assertive but legitimacy seeking rising powers. The UK Parliament is well placed to be the bridge, a role that plays to British democratic credentials, diplomatic strengths, and multiculturalism, and is distinct from simply following the US lead.”<sup>23</sup>*

25. He concludes: *“The multilateral system is being transformed less by American absence than by a change in the terms of order: from consent to assertion at the centre, and from rule-drafting to legitimacy-contestation at the margins. A UK strategy premised on ‘US retreat’ will misread Washington’s recalibration and will misinterpret rising-power rhetoric as rejection rather than as a bid for voice. My recommendation is that the UK recognise both dynamics for what they are and position itself as an indispensable contributor to an assertive US and a credible broker of legitimacy for rising powers.”<sup>24</sup>*

***How do rising powers perceive the United Kingdom on the multilateral stage? And how can the UK more effectively engage rising powers within multilateral fora?***

---

<sup>19</sup> Dr Sasikumar Sundaram, comments to FPC, July 2026.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

26. Dr Ogden puts forward that rising powers generally perceive the UK as a significant but no longer consequential actor: *“The UK is often seen as a legacy power with enduring diplomatic, legal, and normative influence, particularly because of its permanent seat on the UN Security Council, its membership in key economic institutions, and its reputation for institutional professionalism. At the same time, rising powers also regard it as closely associated with the Western-led order, and therefore as more effective when it acts as a bridge-builder than when it appears to defend existing older hierarchies.”*<sup>25</sup>

27. He recommends: *“For the UK to engage rising powers more effectively, it will need to adopt a more pragmatic and less prescriptive diplomatic style. This means listening more closely to the priorities of China and India, especially concerning development, reform, and non intervention. The UK can also strengthen its influence by supporting institutional reform (especially in the UN Security Council), demonstrating consistency between its rhetoric and practice, and working through global coalition-building rather than Western-centric moralising. Most importantly, it should present itself as a credible partner in shaping a more plural multilateral order, rather than as a guardian of a diminishing status quo.”*<sup>26</sup>

---

*This submission was prepared by Izzy Cutts, FPC Policy and Parliamentary Affairs Manager, with support from FPC Executive Director Susan Coughtrie and FPC Senior Adviser Craig Oliphant. It was drafted with inputs from FPC Fellows Dr Andrew Gawthorpe (University Lecturer at Leiden University), Dr Chris Ogden (Associate Professor, Global Studies Programme at the University of Auckland), and Dr Sasikumar Sundaram (Senior Lecturer at the Department of International Politics at City St George’s, University of London). The views expressed in the submission are those of the authors as cited.*

---

<sup>25</sup> Dr Chris Ogden, comments to FPC, July 2026.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.