



NAVIGATOR

D2.3 REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS, GLOBAL GOVERNANCE, AND THE EU

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Executive Summary

The US is distancing itself from institutions it has been central in establishing, and recent crises like COVID-19, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the Gaza conflict have raised critical questions about the future direction of international cooperation and global governance. This report sheds light on the role of regional organizations as a key component of global governance. It offers detailed analyses of the historical evolution and contemporary functioning of key regional organizations and discuss their role in fostering multilateral decision-making.

Regional powers are seeking a larger voice in global institutions, yet institutional inertia persists and there is little progress on efforts to reform key international organizations like the UN, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. At the same time, we can observe a trend towards informal and club-like governance – via G7, G20 and BRICS formats. The role of regional organizations in this context is important to assess, not least in light of considerable criticism and push-back against European and other western powers from countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Therefore, understanding the unique characteristics of each regional organization is critical to assessing their potential contributions to global governance.

We find that there is significant variation between regions in the investment in regional organizations. In Europe, the EU is becoming more central. Outside of Europe, the African Union has seen significant institutional growth. ASEAN serves as a crucial diplomatic arena, while Latin America's regional organizations primarily focus on trade and economic cooperation. These differences highlight the importance of empirically grounded analyses to understand the specific roles, capabilities, and contributions of regional organizations to global governance.

Geopolitical competition is likely to continue intensifying. Further, states in Africa, Asia, and Latin America will continue to call for reforms of multilateral institutions. These developments are likely to impede regional cooperation as well, as global-level political fault lines tend to structure the trajectory of regional cooperation.



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While regional organizations cannot replace the role of global institutions, they fulfill essential governance functions, offering regionally specific diplomacy and cooperation on key issues. The trend toward "orchestration" and club governance present an opportunity for the EU to offset imbalances in global governance arrangements. By leveraging its role in formats like the G7 and G20 and partnering with the African Union as a G20 member, the EU can integrate regional organizations to better reflect a broader array of regional perspectives and potentially offsetting some of the concerns of lack of reform of global institutions.



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Introduction

There is by now a sizeable literature on the significant changes in the role and workings of international organizations (IOs) in global governance. Scholars have demonstrated how states have opted to fund IOs with earmarked funding, thus increasing state control and reducing IO autonomy (Graham, 2017). In parallel to this, there has been a significant growth in the number of non-state actors engaged in global governance (Abbott, Green & Keohane, 2016), and – more important – a marked preference for states to opt for club formats and ad-hoc coalitions rather than governance through formalized IOs (Tsingou, 2015; Brosig & Karlsrud, 2024). Findings from the NAVIGATOR project across issue-areas like climate change, digitalization, finance and tax, health, migration and security note the same trend towards informality. These changes in the institutional landscape amount to a marked shift towards a preference for bilateral and “minilateral” governance arrangements marked by informality and non-binding commitments.

Taken together, these findings raise questions about the future of multilateral decision making and the strength of international rules. In this context, the role of regional organizations is of particular interest because they form an alternative governance arrangement with more limited membership defined by geography, which presumably make it comparatively easier to form agreements. However, regional organizations are also embedded in – and reflect – regional political dynamics, which differ markedly. In some regions, like Europe, states have come to invest considerably in political integration and the pooling of resources. In others, like in Asia, regional organizations function more as institutionalized diplomatic arenas, with markedly less pooling of resources, while in Africa, efforts towards institution-building.

The rise of regionalism is not solely demand-driven, however, but also influenced by the strategies of major powers like the United States, the EU, and China. For example, the US has in the past used regional trade agreements to embed its preferred rules rather than to operate via the WTO (Henning, 2020); the EU has sought to export its model of regional integration to shape the functioning of the AU (Haastrup, 2013), and China, sometimes in collaboration with Russia, is actively establishing new regional arrangements, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to vest stronger influence in the region and keep other great powers at bay (Song, 2013).

Below, we describe the historical development as well as the contemporary institutional character and role of key regional organizations in different world regions. As we show, the bilateral relations of key states in each region, combined with the role of great powers, are central factors in shaping regional cooperation. In both Africa and Asia, colonial ties and the role of great powers helped shape the timing as well as the degree of regional cooperation. For example, after 1945 the US promoted and helped invest in regional integration in Europe, notably via the Marshall Plan and active participation in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In Asia, by contrast, the US opted for bilateral relations with key allies to shape developments there (Kahler, 2017).



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Taken together, regional organizations, while characterized by considerable variation in their strength and functioning, are not immune to more overarching trends, notably long-standing efforts by great powers – including the EU – to shape political decisions and of long-standing calls from states in Africa, Asia and Latin America of reform of international organizations such as the UN, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. However, regional organizations perform a distinct role in global governance by serving as arenas for regional diplomacy and problem-solving, which offloads international organizations whose agendas are already overwhelmed. Further, we note that, with a few exceptions, the direction of travel of the work of regional organizations – however limited it may be in certain regions – is generally towards supporting rather than undermining international rules.



Trends in regionalism

Americas – segmented and overlapping regionalism

The Americas have a complex network of international organizations, with varying regional and topical focuses. Some organizations cover the whole continent (the Organization of American States (OAS)), while others focus on segmented areas, such as Latin America (Latin American Integration Association (ALADI)), South America (Union of South American Nations (UNASUR)), Central America (Central American Integration System (SICA)) or the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). Some organizations have a sub-regional focus, such as the Mercosur (Southern Common Market) and the Andean Community, others, have an interregional scope, such as the Pacific Alliance. Regarding mandates and issue areas, some are more focused on peace and security (OAS, historically), others on trade (Mercosur, NAFTA/USMCA), and others on political aspects (UNASUR), Forum for the Progress and Integration of South America (PROSUR). In contrast with the European region, in which the EU has been growing through a more cumulative process of enlargement, regionalism in the Americas has advanced in not so continuous waves (Rosenthal, 1991). This resulted in two different, even if interconnected, processes occurring simultaneously: segmented and overlapping regionalism (Malamud & Gardini, 2012). Following a chronological overview, it is possible to identify three general waves of institutionalized regionalism, with the creation of region organizations marked by two main issues: security and economic integration.

The first wave resulted from historical processes driven by US security strategy. The Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (TIAR or Rio Pact), firmed in 1942 and still in effect, was the expression of the influence exerted by the US on the continent, rooted in the 19th century Monroe Doctrine and the Pan-American conferences (Bianculli, 2016). In 1948, the Organization of American States (OAS) was also built as a strengthened and institutionalized body for the promotion of peace in the continent under US hegemony (Nolte, 2018). The OAS creation met the traditional interest of the Latin American countries in formalizing the principle of non-intervention, against possible actions of great powers (including the US) (Herz, Hoffman & Tabak, 2015). The organization reached universal, regional membership of 35 states in the early 1990s. Over time, OAS also expanded its mandate to include economic development, human rights[1], and the defense of democracy.

The Pan-American integration perspective has been balanced by a regionalism based and focused on Latin America. Rather than in political terms, as envisioned by Simón Bolívar in the late 18th century, the first wave of Latin American regionalism was marked by a goal of integration in economic terms. In the 1940s, the UN Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA/CEPAL, part of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)) started promoting multilateral mechanisms based on economic cooperation. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) was founded in 1959, and the Latin American Free Trade Association (LAFTA/ALALC) in 1960. After some failure regarding the expected alignment with the South Cone countries, in 1980, LAFTA was reorganized into ALADI, with the aim of expanding the number of members and flexible free trade agreements. Established in 1975, the Latin American Economic System (SELA) was also created with an economic mandate, though with limited capacity and impact.



In other sub-regional contexts, this initial wave of regionalism also gave rise to the establishment of the Common Market of the Central America (MCCA) (1960), the Andean Pact (1969), the Caribbean Community (1973), and the Organization of the East Caribbean States (1981). These economic integration processes had different initial objectives: creating a free trade zone, a customs union or a common market. This was at the time seen as a gradual and linear movement, following the European Community developments.

The economic crisis of the 1970s, marked by the collapse of the Bretton Woods system and the debt crisis in the Third World, together with multiple military dictatorships, led to a shift in Latin America's countries' strategy away from regional integration. In economic terms, they embraced a model of import substitution-based industrialization in a "closed" regionalist perspective, with emphasis on liberalized intra-regional trade and the promotion of internal industrialization in order to achieve import substitution combined with regional protectionism. In this period, Latin American countries started focusing more on domestic industrial development, reducing foreign imports, and shielding national economies from global market fluctuations.

Since the end of the Cold War, a period of economic recovery and accelerated economic globalization has also impacted Latin America. At the same time, a push towards consolidation of democracy was placed higher on the political agenda. At this point, there was a resurgence of regional integration, as countries sought to enhance their collective competitiveness. This second wave of regionalism was characterized by a shift towards trade liberalization, in an "open" regionalism, aimed at improving national competitiveness not only in the region but also opening it to the rest of the world (Bhagwati, 1988). Some integration processes in this wave resulted in the signature of free trade agreements: the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1989, Mercosur in 1991, and Free Trade Area Group of 3 (G3) (1995). The US also put forward a proposal for the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA/ALCA), but it was met with significant resistance from other Latin American countries.

The creation of Mercosur was very well-received by the European Commission as it envisaged this regional initiative as an opportunity to pursue its global region-building strategy through the establishment of interregional relations in various policy areas. Engaging with Mercosur would also enable the European Community (EC) to compete with US trade activism on the American continent in the context of NAFTA and the FTAA (Doctor, 2007; Malamud, 2022). This was welcomed by many European states which had been increasing their investment in the region following Mercosur states' liberalization policies and democratization in the 1990s (Dudek, 2013). On their part, Mercosur member states sought to improve their autonomy from the US which was at this time their primary trading partner (Alvarez, 2024: 5). They offered, almost immediately after the creation of Mercosur, the prospect of a future cooperative agreement (Saravia, 2004). Initially, their explicit reference to the 'European model' as a baseline to develop their institutional framework (Bajo 1999; Klom, 2003; Doctor, 2007). They decided to start a 'community-building process' based on the European Community model, including becoming an (unperfect) custom union and acquiring international legal personality (Lenz, 2012: 160-161; see also Bajo, 1999).[2] The EU thus viewed Mercosur 'as a promising partner to export its integration experience and strengthen its economic model, a potential mirror of its own successful integration process' (Alvarez, 2024: 7).



From there on, the aim of Mercosur-EU interregional partnership has been to create a bi-regional strategic partnership based on three main pillars: liberalization of trade, political dialogue and cooperation (Alvarez, 2024). To pursue this objective, the EC decided to support its integration process and institutionalization through dedicated funding with the aim to build Mercosur's capacity (Bajo, 1999).

In this context of evolving economic dynamics, other organizations were formed, and existing ones were renovated to promote regional integration and a free-trade environment across the continent: the Central American Integration System (SICA) in 1991 (successor of MCCA), CARICOM in 1994, and the Andean Community (CAN) in 1997 (as a successor of the Andean Pact). These initiatives reflected a broader trend of re-engagement with regionalism. Processes of regional integration became intermediary steps for the liberalization (not exclusively intra-regional, but also inter-regional) following the European Union process.

In the 2000s, a third wave emerged, described as a “post-liberal” or “post-hegemonic” regionalism (Riggirozzi & Tussie, 2012). This shift marked a move away from economic liberalization toward political and social integration in Latin America, seeking to different degrees greater autonomy vis-à-vis the United States. The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) was created in 2004, led by Venezuela, and had a confrontational political identity against the US. In parallel, the South American Union (UNASUR) was formed in 2008 and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), in 2010. Security became a central issue through the establishment of UNASUR Defense Council as a platform for South American states to deal with traditional and non-traditional security challenges, while reducing the influence of OAS in this agenda (Weiffen, Wehner & Nolte, 2013). Facing gridlocks in intensifying economic integration, the Mercosur also began pursuing an expanded agenda centered on deeper political integration. This third wave of regionalism is connected to the rise of the domestic elites elected in multiple countries, signaling the onset of the “pink tide” across the continent (Weyland, Madrid & Hunter, 2010; Levitsky & Roberts, 2011). Late in the 2010s, this political alignment spurring regionalism among the countries was rearranged. Following the political crisis in many states and the deepening of the democratic backsliding of Venezuela, in 2017, UNASUR went through institutional paralysis and a full breakdown when six member states suspended their participation and contributions (Agostinis & Nolte, 2023). In 2019, the Forum for the Progress and Integration of South America (PROSUR) was established as an also political response and replacement to the UNASUR, led by right-wing governments in the region.

A final dynamic worth highlighting is the trend of inter-regionalism. The Pacific Alliance, created in 2011, responds to the politicized agenda on the continent at the same time as it aims to shift regionalism back to economic terms. Hence, the Alliance reflects the increasing relevance of the Asia-Pacific connections for Latin America. In fact, China's presence in the LAC region has grown immensely over these past two decades, politically, through the China-CELAC forum, and economically. China has become the second biggest trading partner behind the US, while the EU has been relegated to the third place (Verdes-Montenegro and Jeger 2022). China has signed several comprehensive strategic partnerships with key countries such as Mexico, Chile and Brazil (Jütten, 2023). With Mercosur, China has become its first trading partner (25.3% of its total trade in 2021), demoting the EU to the second place (16.2% in 2021) (Dominguez, 2024). China's investments across the region have surged in recent years in various sectors such as extractive industries and infrastructure, energy, agribusiness projects, and even in services (Malamud, 2022, Pelaudeix, 2023).



A second inter-regional process is related to the Association Agreement between the EU and Mercosur, finalized after two decades of negotiations. Talks began in 2000, but they halted from 2004 to 2010 for various reasons. While methodological disagreements played a role (Dominguez, 2024), the political and economic context changed in both regions. On the one side, the EU was in the midst of the enlargement process towards Eastern European states and the failure of the FTAA reduced the competitive pressure with the US that had been driving these negotiations. On the other side, the wave of post-hegemonic regionalism resulted in a deviation from the liberal EU and WTO-plus model of trade agreements (Alvarez, 2024). The economies of Mercosur countries were also weakened by the 1998 Brazilian and 2001 Argentinian economic crises which triggered intra-Mercosur conflicts and disagreements in the absence of institutional mechanism to deal with such conflicts (Mata Diz & Almeida Luquini, 2011; Mattheis & Wunderlich, 2017). This institutional deficit was part of a broader disappointment for the EU which came to understand that Mercosur was not about to replicate the EU institutional model as it embraced a purely inter-governmental framework (Mattheis & Wunderlich, 2017; Nolte & Neito, 2021).

Trade negotiations resumed in 2010. A central reason for this on the EU's side was the increasing presence of China in Latin America (Malamud, 2022), but changes in the global context also contributed to this resumption, in particular the challenges to the liberal international order and the 2008 economic crisis showing the importance of strong and diverse economic partnerships to counterbalance global trade uncertainties (Caetano, 2022; Alvarez, 2024). The negotiations were nevertheless complicated by trade sensitivities: the EU was reluctant to open its agricultural markets, while Mercosur, Brazil and Argentina in particular, resisted industrial market liberalization (Caetano, 2022). Internal political and economic issues on both sides and the pandemic also slowed down the negotiations (Jarrin & Aramayo, 2023; Alvarez, 2024).

The trade pillar of negotiations was finalized in 2019, covering trade in goods, rules of origin, trade facilitation, government procurement, intellectual property, and sustainable development. The political pillar was finalized in 2020 and has not yet been publicly released. It introduces key areas such as environmental protection and climate change policies, labor rights and corporate social responsibility, security, governance, and the rule of law, digital economy and cybersecurity. Compared to previous agreements, it also has stronger provisions for sustainability and civil society participation (Malamud, 2022). However, Alvarez (2024: 11) underlines that this pillar is threatened, since the promotion of regulatory norms by the EU are met with a level of skepticism from Mercosur nations, 'as they seek to assert their own agency, autonomy and national interests'.

The ratification of the agreement[3] has, however, become a problem and a long process as it has faced resistance from EU member states, particularly France, Ireland, Austria, and the Netherlands, due to concerns over deforestation in Brazil and competition for European farmers. Additional negotiations have thus taken place and a political agreement on the trade pillar was reached in December 2024 after some amendments. The Commission will now release a proposal in mid-2025 on the ratification process (Grieger, 2024). If successfully implemented, this agreement could serve as a model for future trade deals that balance economic growth, environmental responsibility, and geopolitical strategy (Caetano, 2022). On Mercosur's side, the deal represents an opportunity to diversify trade partners and strengthen regional economic integration (Caetano, 2022), thus enabling a balanced foreign policy amidst the pressure of the US and China (Malamud, 2022).



The relationship between the EU and the Latin American region has fluctuated over time. Compared to other interregional relationships, and in particular with African regional organizations, the EU has much less leeway as the material asymmetry with these states is less important and development aid not very substantial. Moreover, two centuries of post-colonial relations are less characterized by direct dependency and clientelism, even if some degree of asymmetry has enabled the EU to dominate negotiations (such as the ones with Mercosur) on some occasions (Nolte & Neito, 2021). This relationship has become particularly important during the last years in the context of the challenges to the multilateral order, Russia's war in Ukraine, and US-China rivalry (Nolte, 2023). Indeed, EU and LAC countries together account for 60 out of 193 UN member states and explicitly share similar values and interests concerning democracy, the respect of human rights, and the support for the multilateral order.

Asia – regionalism shaped by variation in ties to great powers

The development and activity level of regional organizations in Asia is quite dynamic, especially in the years after 1990. However, most organizations' agendas are dominated by economic and financial issues and the cooperation around other topics remains limited with little appetite to bring political disputes into regional organizations. Considering more recently established organizations, China - the region's leading power - has become an organizational innovator with demonstrated will and ability to establish new institutions.

Asia, the world's largest region in terms of geographical reach and population, is home to a multitude of organizations, but these organizations are marked by a comparatively low degree of formalization and institutionalization. This reflects the considerable variation in the economic and political characteristics of the countries involved and their varying relations to the two rivalling global powers, China and USA, which retains a strong position in Asia, and other regional powers like India and Japan. While economic interest appears to be the main driver of organizational memberships in the region, Asian states have also been motivated to join multiple institutions to hedge against the domineering influence of any one power (Panke, Stapej & Starkmann, 2022; Cheng, 2015; Goh, 2007). That said, many regional organizations have a long history, several newly established organizations are growing, and we should expect more organizations to emerge in the coming years. Although the EU and its members are active partners in some organizations, European linkages across Asia remain relatively weak considering the economic growth and overall dynamism that this region represents.

Starting with one of the most active and comprehensive regional organizations, ASEAN, its history and limitations speak to the difficult terrain that many multilateral institutions in Asia must navigate (Nair, 2019). From being created as a front against the spread of communism in 1967, by the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, it has since moved away from any ideological orientation and added Brunei, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar as members. Although it covers many aspects of cooperation, its most active work is on economic interaction and trade. This include overseeing the ASEAN Free Trade Area and various agreements with additional partners, like the mentioned Chiang Mai Initiative, which also involves China, Japan, and South Korea, that are countries to which ASEAN maintains especially close ties (Goh, 2007). ASEAN is host to several discussion forums, in which both regional and global partners participate, including the EU, which in 2015 established a designated Delegation to ASEAN in Jakarta, where the ASEAN secretariat is based (EU, 2022).



ASEAN coordination is often characterized as weak, which should be viewed with consideration to the varied interests across its members, among which the Philippines is a US ally, and others are known for close ties to China, like Cambodia and Myanmar. However, ASEAN is nonetheless important in conditioning the role played by influential non-members, notably the US, China, and the EU (Goh, 2007).

The largest and among the oldest regional organizations in Asia, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), was established in 1966, which still reflects the regional and global power dynamics of its origins. Japan and USA remain its biggest shareholders, its president continues to be a Japanese national, its headquarter is in Manila (Philippines), and the ADB is one among a limited list of organizations in which Taiwan is a member, although it remains referred to as “Taipei, China” and is recognized as an economic area and not a country. However, the ADB is known for its diplomatic and pragmatic work culture and its overall focus is development finance, and not overtly sensitive political issues (Gåsemyr, 2018). Its members come from all areas of what is typically considered Asia, including several island states in the Pacific. The ADB now has 69 members, among which 20 are non-regional. The ADB is part of the network of collaborating international financial institutions (IFIs), among which the World Bank (WB) and IMF coordinate many joint activities.

The Asian Infrastructure Development Bank (AIIB), established in 2015 and located in Beijing, is reflective of China's increasing economic clout and organizational innovation, in both regional and global terms (Randsell, 2018). The AIIB now has 48 regional members, including Hong Kong, which is part of China, and Russia, which is here counted as a regional party. Additionally, the AIIB has 50 non-regional members, which is twice as many as in the ADB. USA, Japan, and Taiwan are not members, but several US allies are, including South Korea and the Philippines and multiple European states. Importantly, the AIIB is quite integrated within other IFIs and is expanding its cooperation with both the WB and the ADB (Gåsemyr, 2024). Although the AIIB is not profiled as a Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) institution, many of the projects it finances will, in a Chinese government perspective, be considered part of a loosely defined portfolio of BRI activities. Moreover, the AIIB has strong ties to the New Development Bank (NDB), which was established by the original BRICS members in 2015 and is headquartered in Shanghai. Due to Brazil and South Africa's involvement, the NDB is not considered a regional organization.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which, despite its name, is headquartered in Beijing, is a particular case. Firstly, formally established in 2001, but building on the Shanghai Five group created in 1996, it is an early example of joint China-Russia initiatives. Secondly, the SCO's focus on security and anti-terrorism issues (Shambaugh, 2004), making it stand out from most other China-initiated organizations, which tend to emphasize economic interaction (including infrastructure). The SCO's origins were clearly related to increasing Chinese, and remaining Russian, interests across Central Asia, where most of its members are from, but its membership has since expanded to include other Asian, and, in some ways, competing, powers, India and Pakistan, in particular (Cheng, 2015). It currently has 10 members plus numerous observers and dialogue partners, several of which are also associated with the expanded BRICS group. Although the SCO is known for practicing less transparency and public communication than many other organizations, it does interact with ASEAN, AU, various UN entities and other international institutions. The UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs established an SCO liaison office in 2017 (Gåsemyr, 2025).



Other areas of Asia, including South-, Central- and West Asia, and parts of what is often referred to as the Pacific, are home to more organizations, but their evolution has been less dynamic than the above-mentioned institutions headquartered in East and Southeast Asia. In South Asia, the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation, established in 1999 and comprising 23 states, works on strengthening economic ties and preventing environmental degradation and crime (Panke et al., 2022).

In the Middle East, maybe more than many other regions in the world, is governed by grievances, historical and contemporary. Those multi-axes grievances shape the politics in the Middle East and also the design and functioning of regional organizations in the region. All countries in the region are, in different ways, marked by these overlapping grievances; between Arabs and Jews, between Hamas and Fatah, between Shia, Sunni, Druze and Maronites. On top of all these domestic grievances are regional conflicts that are weaved into the domestic grievances. Regional powers like Iran, Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar try, sometimes successfully, to mobilize the schisms and grievances to their benefit. So, too, do great powers. These powers compete with each other for the support of the different countries and warring factions within the countries, establishing patron-clients with them, providing arms, money, and diplomatic backing.

Because most conflicts involve different sets of grievances, addressing some of them becomes difficult because such efforts are likely to inflate grievances that are not addressed. A case in point is the 2022 maritime border agreement between Israel and Lebanon. Arguably, the agreement settled a thorny issue with the potential of reducing tensions, even paving the road for resolution of many of the other conflicts between Israel and Lebanon. But in a series of political maneuvering that mobilized grievances, Netanyahu succeeded in portraying the agreement as an unforgivable compromise giving up economic and security national interests, and even as a surrender to the Hezbollah. And in Lebanon a mirror image developed, ensuring that the agreement would not be a springboard for peace, but rather an open wound paving the way for increased tensions and more violence. All conflicts in the Middle East are similar in that regard, involving multi-axes grievances.

In other regions, regional organizations and international organizations can function as arenas and sometimes also as actors that can overcome obstacles and organize political processes aimed at addressing grievances. In the Middle East, however, the oldest and most prominent regional organization – the League of Arab states (LAS) established in 1945– is weak and fraught with regional politics, reflecting, precisely, the various grievances that characterize politics in the region. It also excludes membership of important states in the region, like Iran, Turkey, and Israel. The weakness of the League is reflected, for example, in the fact that decisions are binding only on those member states that voted for the decision. It has been famously commented by Barnett and Solingen (2007) that the league was designed to fail, and it is most and foremost occupied with the survival of the regimes of its member states. Accordingly, the League has not achieved much. Most noticeable among the sub-regional organizations is the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), with its six member states. But even though the GCC has had some success in fostering economic cooperation, it has failed to achieve anything but symbolic progress in security. There are several efforts by outside actors to forge more institutionalized cooperation, such as the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) between the EU and sixteen states in the southern and eastern mediterranean, and also the cooperation between China and LAS, and the EU-LAS Strategic dialogue.



Neither of these arrangements are, however, significant for the political developments in the region. In all, the weakness of regional organizations in the Middle East reflects the grievances that shape regional politics and the core interests of states in the region, offering few prospects for either regional or international organizations to be effective in shaping regional politics.

Finally, if expanding the focus to forums and activities based on regular interaction but less structural, organizational resources, the list of Asian regional organization turns expansive. If various types of trade agreements, backed up with some organizational resources, are included, plus security-related mechanisms involving regional and other international partners, the number naturally grows further (Panke et al., 2022). All in all, Asia is home to a multitude of organizations, but while many serve vital functions in fostering economic cooperation, all remain relatively weak when it comes to effectively addressing or agreeing on political issues that involve contested interests, of which there are many within and across the geographical areas that make up the vast Asia region.

Africa – uneven institutionalization, increasing informality

Africa, comprising 55 countries and a rapidly growing population of approximately 1.5 billion people, hosts a diverse array of regional organizations, many of which overlap (Chacha, 2014; Tavares & Tang, 2011). The AU serves as the continent's political and diplomatic hub, providing a platform for articulating continental aspirations that prioritize internal development while also engaging in external cooperation through Africa+ summits. The increasing global significance of Africa is reflected in the proliferation of these summits, with nearly all major global powers establishing bilateral forums with the AU. Among these, China and the EU coordinate the two most established frameworks. The AU's flagship initiatives include the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) and the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA)—both of which are directly and indirectly influenced by the EU.

Despite ongoing integration efforts, African countries continue to trade predominantly with external partners rather than with one another. The continent primarily exports raw materials while importing manufactured goods, making international trade arrangements more economically attractive than regional ones (Brosig, 2022). The EU remains Africa's largest trading partner, followed closely by China. In recent years, African countries have recorded a trade surplus with the EU. However, the AfCFTA, launched in 2021, remains a work in progress, with more ambitious integration schemes evident at the sub-regional level. The most prominent among these are the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the East African Community (EAC), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). The pace and depth of integration, particularly in areas such as free trade zones and customs unions, vary significantly across these regions (Muntschick, 2022).

The EU's influence on continental and sub-regional integration remains substantial yet ambiguous. Currently, trade relations with the EU are partially governed by Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), which have been negotiated at the sub-regional rather than the continental level. Five EPAs, covering 14 AU member states, are in operation. However, this fragmented tariff and regulatory framework complicates the implementation of the AfCFTA. Additionally, approximately 30 African countries, categorized as Least Developed Countries (LDCs), benefit from tariff-free access to the EU market.



Despite these arrangements, the existing trade structure continues to incentivize trade with the EU at the expense of intra-African trade.

Further challenges relate to the AU's administrative and legal capacity to effectively manage a continent-wide free trade area. Historically, African states have been reluctant to delegate power to supranational institutions. While Pan-African ideology remains a recurring theme in AU rhetoric, the predominant mode of cooperation remains intergovernmental, rather than fostering stronger supranational institutions. The AU's acceptance as a regulatory actor depends not only on its political legitimacy (rooted in Pan-Africanism) but also on its ability to function as an effective and impartial administrator.

While the EU's EPA approach can be criticized for further fragmenting Africa's economic integration waiting for the full implementation of the AfCFTA was no realistic option either. Globally, large-scale trade agreements have been receding, giving way to a growing trend of bilateral agreements. This shift is also evident in EU-Africa relations, where countries or smaller groups within and outside established institutions increasingly pursue independent trade arrangements.

The APSA is a hybrid structure that combines continental and sub-regional mechanisms. At its core are the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC), the AU Commission, and the five regional African Standby Brigades (ASF). Since its inception in 2002, the APSA has been involved in conflict mediation, peacekeeping, peacebuilding, and peace enforcement across multiple conflicts. Its role underscores African agency in addressing the continent's armed conflicts through homegrown solutions.

The early engagement of the APSA and sub-regional organizations such as ECOWAS often facilitated the later deployment of UN peacekeeping operations and EU training missions. The EU's support for AU capacity-building has been particularly significant, with the African Peace Facility (APF) disbursing €2.7 billion from 2004 to 2019 to strengthen APSA's operationalization (International Crisis Group, 2021: 2). This funding has supported both headquarters-level capacity-building and AU-led peacekeeping operations. However, the AU remains partially dependent on external donors, with approximately 58% of its total budget and 78% of its program budget in 2025 originating from international sources (AU Executive Council, 45th session, 18-19 April 2024, para. 4). Although the AU has gradually reduced its dependency over time, the figures represent a notable increase from the previous year, highlighting the financial constraints of both the AU and many sub-regional organizations.

With the APSA's evolution since 2002, a division of labor has emerged among the AU, EU, and UN. African organizations often serve as first responders, laying the groundwork for larger UN peacekeeping operations, while the EU deploys smaller training missions alongside the AU and UN. Scholarship has described this as an African Security Regime Complex, where multiple interlinked organizations operate in overlapping security frameworks (Brosig, 2013).

The EU, particularly France, has played a facilitating and steering role in African security interventions. In Mali (2013), France's military intervention paved the way for a UN peacekeeping mission (van der Lijn et al., 2019), two EU training missions, and the G5 Sahel Joint Force, later complemented by the EU Task Force Takuba. Despite the increasing complexity of security interventions, many have fallen short of stabilizing conflict zones.



In fact, in Mali the shift from multilateral peacekeeping to bilateral security arrangements has been most dramatic. Following several military coups the new government expelled all international peacekeepers and turned to Russian mercenaries for support.

Africa's security architecture is undergoing a fundamental transformation. Several peacekeeping missions have closed or are in drawdown. In Mali, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), peace operations have failed to reduce violence sustainably after decades of deployment, while terrorist insurgencies, rebel movements, and military coups have intensified—particularly in the Sahel.

Since 2020, 16 military coups have led to takeovers in Burkina Faso, Chad, Gabon, Guinea, Niger, Mali, and Sudan. Groups like Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab continue to pose major security threats. The protracted nature of armed conflicts and the limited effectiveness of multilateral peacekeeping have eroded public trust in regional and international institutions. In response, many African states are increasingly turning to alternative security arrangements. Military governments in West Africa have ceased to cooperate in established regional organizations such as ECOWAS and started setting up their own institutions weakening existing multilateral institutions.

A key development is the rise of military ad hoc coalitions (AHCs), which operate as short-term, task-specific, and temporary security initiatives (Reykers et al., 2023). Examples include the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) against Boko Haram, Task Force Takuba, and the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB). The EU's transition from the APF to the European Peace Facility (EPF) has accelerated this trend by directly financing AHCs rather than channeling funds through APSA. As a result, the AU's central role in African security governance is diminishing, leading to concerns about its loss of focality (Brosig & Karlsrud, 2024). Great power rivalry at global level is aggravating the situation. Countries like Russia are increasingly pro-active and happy to cozying up with military governments closing down international peacekeeping missions, abandoning sanction regimes and relieving coups leaders from pressure of democratic transition.

Europe – advanced institutionalization and differentiated integration

Europe's recent history is in many ways a history of institutionalization and differentiated integration (see e.g. Sandholtz & Sweet, 1998; Schimmelfennig, 2016; Leuffen, Rittberger & Schimmelfennig, 2022). The dense institutionalization of Europe has resulted in institutional overlap in areas such as defence and security, but as the EU has moved relatively slowly on this dimension, the inter-organizational relationship between the EU and NATO has been characterized by both “competitive and cooperative dynamics” (Hofmann, 2019).

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine crystallized the EU's resolve and has accelerated accession processes for eastern European countries, with Ukraine being granted candidate status in June 2022. With this move, the war in Ukraine has functioned as an engine of European integration and the EU has acknowledged its role as a geopolitical actor (Håkansson, 2023). The EU has upgraded its foreign and security policy instruments (Håkansson, 2023; Raik et al., 2024), inter alia by establishing a new Commissioner for Defence and Space and creating a €500 million European Defence Fund.



The war has facilitated a strengthening of the union, and it has shown increased decision-making ability and strengthened its common identity (Riddervold & Rieker, 2024), particularly in the area of defence (Hoeffler, Hofmann & Mérand, 2024). However, the risk is that renewed optimism for EU enlargement will once again be quashed by new roadblocks in the accession process.

Furthermore, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has amplified the mix of centripetal and centrifugal forces that marks regionalism in Europe. Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO has changed and accelerated integration across the Nordic region, and the common threat in the east has also given momentum to stronger integration between the Nordic and the Baltic countries. Conversely, the Visegrad group has faced headwinds due to the variegated impact of the war in Ukraine on its member countries, with Czechia and Poland maintaining a strong stance against Russia, while Hungary and Slovakia are more Russia-friendly. Similarly, the Western Balkans is also an area of competition between Russia and the West (De Waal, Bechev & Samorukov, 2024; Daniel et al., 2024). Although Brexit was a blow to European cooperation, the UK has strengthened its engagement with the EU in the wake of the Russian invasion and the signal from the Trump administration in February 2025 for European states to take more responsibility in NATO. Norway signed a Security and Defence Partnership pact with the EU in May 2024, and is deepening its integration on issues like energy and health.

While Europeans see Trump's second term as US president with trepidation, the rest of the world has more mixed feelings, according to a recent survey by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) (Ash, Krastev & Leonard, 2025). Under the first Trump administration, the EU sought to shore up support to multilateralism, inter alia putting in place the Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement (MPIA) when the US stopped nominating members to the Appellate Body of the WTO in 2019.[4]

When Trump entered his second term in January 2025, he put further pressure on European partners in NATO to increase their defence spending, increasing the 2% target from his first presidential term to 5% and initiating bilateral negotiations on the war in Ukraine with Russia, without neither Ukraine nor Europe at the table. The unpredictable style of Trump has led to the US and Europe to drift further apart (Bolstad & Riddervold, 2023), accelerated EU defence cooperation (Riddervold & Rieker, 2024) and strengthened the European Commission's role in security and defence (Hoeffler & Hofmann, 2024).



EU and other great powers' engagement with regional organizations

To assess the role of regional organizations, it is helpful to also include an analysis of perceptions of the efficacy and importance of these organizations. To get at this, we use two data strategies. The first is to look at public opinion surveys with a focus on key regional (Mercosur, ASEAN, AU and EU) and global international organizations (UN and IMF) over time. The second strategy examines elites' perspectives, drawing on high-level speeches from regional powers/emerging powers in the respective regions. For this, we use data on how select states (Brazil, Indonesia, India, and South Africa) mentions international or global organizations (such as the UN, the World Bank, and the IMF) and regional institutions in three moments in time over the last decade.

The first strategy relies on data from the World Values Survey (WVS). The WVS has conducted representative comparative social surveys in over 100 countries since the 1990s.[5] Figure 1 shows respondents' levels of confidence in the UN. As we can see, confidence in the UN has retracted in the past 30 years. Examining the responses grouped by continents, the most significant change is in Africa, with a marked decrease over time in confidence. By contrast, we see that confidence in the UN in Asia has in fact increased somewhat over time. One reason for the decline in confidence in the UN in Africa may be the persistence of violent conflicts that the UN and its peacekeeping forces have not been able to address. But other factors such as trust or confidence in political institutions domestically are also important (Dellmuth et al., 2022; Keefer & Scartascini, 2022). In general, confidence in the UN is relatively stable, at a low level, and it is interesting to note that despite different socio-economic and political contexts, as well as highly differentiated influence over the UN, there is similarity in how the UN is viewed across different regions.



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Figure 1 – Confidence in the UN

The WVS included in its last round – 2017-2022 – a question about the International Monetary Fund (IMF). This allows us to compare the UN and the IMF in this period. Figures 2 and 3, below, summarize views of the IMF. From this, we can observe that the UN is viewed slightly more favorably than the IMF, and that – as with the UN – Asia expresses more confidence in the IMF than is the case in other regions. Figure 3 shows responses from specific countries: Countries that have seen extensive austerity measures imposed by the IMF – such as Greece and Argentina – have relatively low confidence in the IMF. More surprisingly, respondents from countries that have considerable influence at the IMF, such as the US, UK and Germany, also have quite low confidence in the IMF. Conversely, countries such as Kenya (even though mass protests occurred in 2024 against the institution), Myanmar, South Korea, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe are markedly more positive.

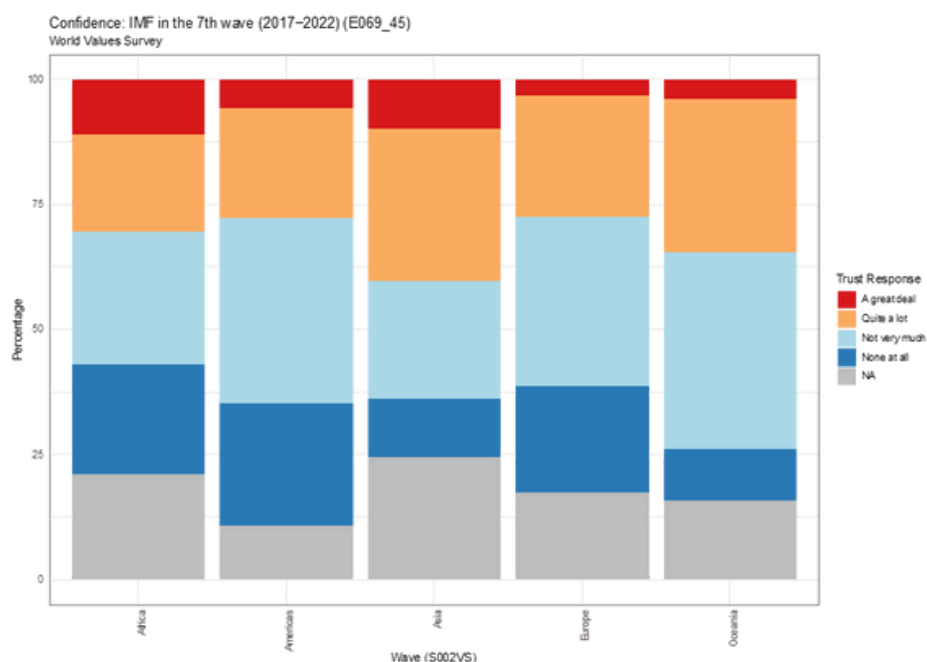


Figure 2 – Confidence in the IMF – WVS

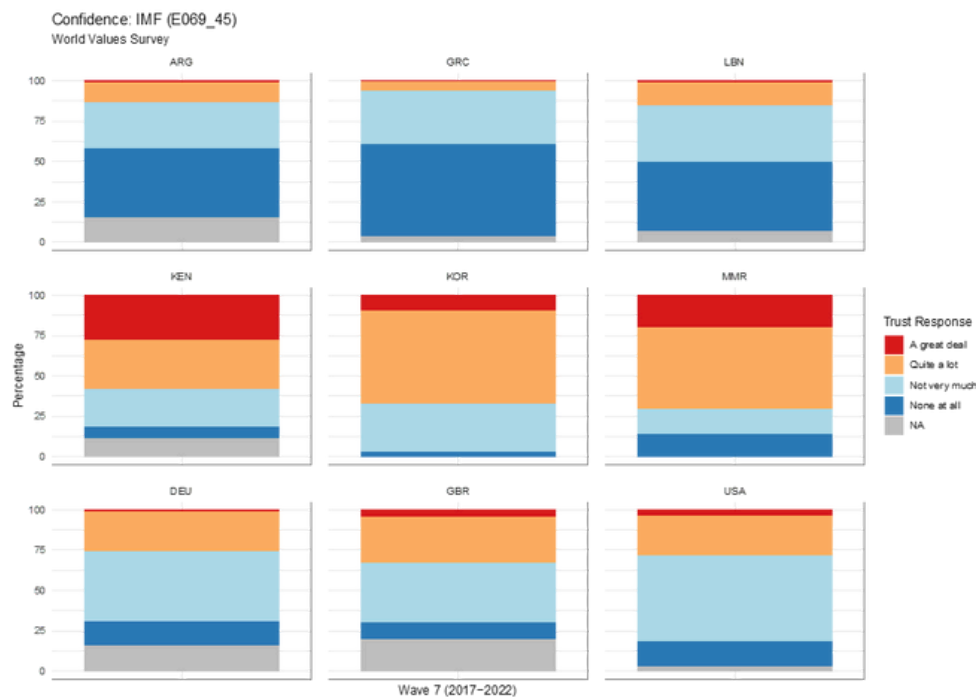


Figure 3 – Confidence in the IMF – WVS (country level)

Note: The abbreviations correspond to the following countries: ARG (Argentina), GRC (Greece), LBN (Lebanon), KEN (Kenya), KOR (South Korea), MMR (Myanmar), DEU (Germany), GBR (United Kingdom), and USA (United States)

If we now shift our focus to regional organizations, we see some interesting variation. [6] This data should be treated with caution, as they are based on a select number of countries in each region where surveys have been conducted during two periods or more. In the case of ASEAN, a generally positive perception emerges, as seen in Figure 4, with high levels of trust.



Figure 4 – Confidence in the ASEAN – WVS

Note: The abbreviations correspond to the following countries: IDN (Indonesia), MMR (Myanmar), MYS (Malaysia), PHL (Philippines), SGP (Singapore), THA (Thailand), and VNM (Vietnam).



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A relatively high level of trust is also observed in the OAU and AU, as seen in Figure 5.

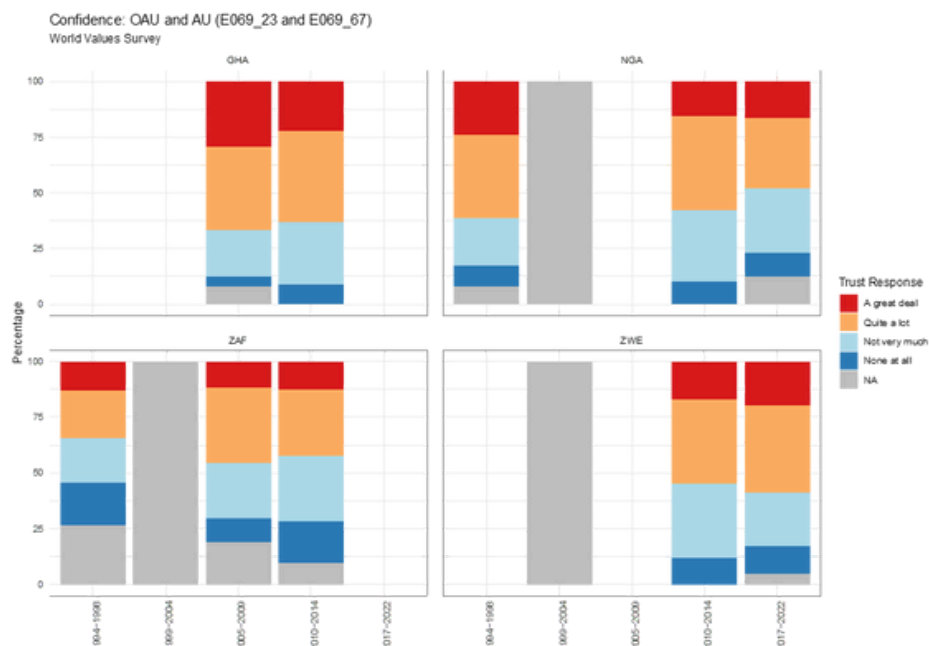


Figure 5 – Confidence in OAU and AU – WVS

Note: The abbreviations correspond to the following countries: GHA (Ghana), NGA (Nigeria), ZAF (South Africa), and ZWE (Zimbabwe).

As seen in Figure 6, below, the level of trust in regional organizations in Latin America is lower. This corresponds to the level of trust in the UN and IMF, as noted above, and may reflect a more general level of trust in political institutions, domestically as well as internationally.

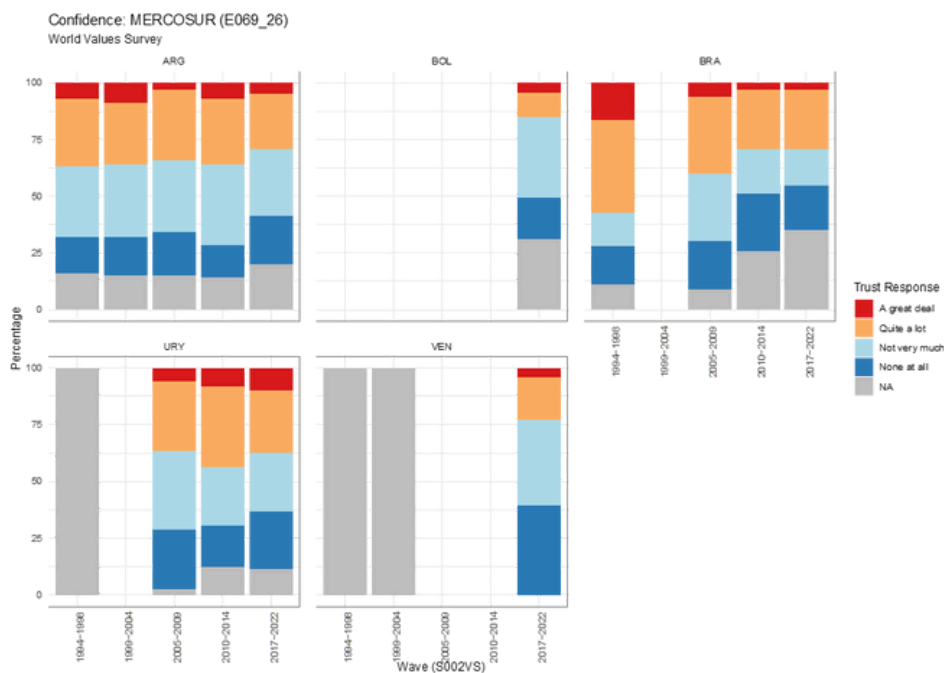


Figure 6 – Confidence in MERCOSUR – WVS

Note: The abbreviations correspond to the following countries: ARG (Argentina), BOL (Bolivia), BRA (Brazil), URY (Uruguay), and VEN (Venezuela).



Finally, in Europe, Figure 7 display trust levels in both member states and candidate states where more than one WVS wave of surveys was conducted. Overall, Eastern and Central Europe countries exhibit more positive views toward the EU: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia have around 50% of their respondents expressing confidence in the EU. In contrast, trust in the EU has declined over time in Poland and Slovenia. A trend of increasing confidence can be observed also in Western European (Germany, Spain and the Netherlands) and Northern European countries (Finland and Sweden).

Confidence in the EU is mixed in candidate states. In the Balkans, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina maintained high levels of trust in the EU until the mid-2000s, while respondents from North Macedonia and Serbia exhibit distrust levels exceeding 60%, a perspective also mirrored in Turkey. In contrast, Georgia and Moldova show high levels of confidence in the institution. Ukraine, tough with less than 50% of trust, has shown an increasing trend over time. Finally, the UK (a former EU state rather than a candidate) respondents experienced a rise in trust in the EU between the 2005-2009 and 2017-2022.

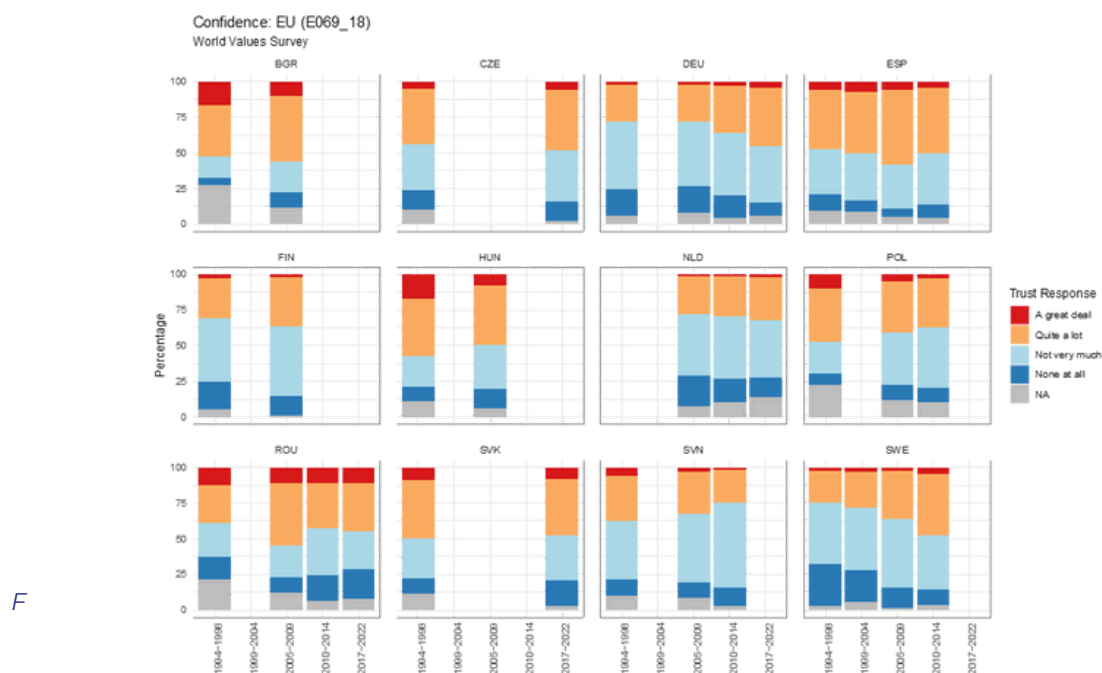


Figure 7 – Confidence in EU (member states) – WVS

Note: The abbreviations correspond to the following countries: BGR (Bulgaria), CZE (Czechia), DEU (Germany), ESP (Spain), FIN (Finland), HUN (Hungary), NLD (Netherlands), POL (Poland), ROU (Romania), SVK (Slovakia), SVN (Slovenia), and SWE (Sweden).

The data provided by the WVS reflects the citizens' perspectives around these organizations. In order to also consider the official views of governments, we also look at data from speeches by heads of government of Brazil, India, Indonesia, and South Africa. These are all regional powers in Latin America, Asia and Africa, and are thus of interest not least due to their role in potentially shaping regional governance arrangements.

The corpus of speeches was collected from national websites,[7] focusing on those delivered by presidents/prime ministers and foreign ministers in three specific years – 2013, 2018, and 2023 – in an international setting. The texts are either from multilateral settings or from bilateral meetings with established major powers, such as the United States, China, Russia, France, the United Kingdom, and Germany. The corpus comprises 367 speeches, with South African representatives contributing a maximum of 102 speeches.



This data strategy uses quantitative text analysis to count relative word frequency of specific keywords in order to identify patterns and trends in word usage over time. This provides tools and insights to examine changes in themes and topics by different states and their representatives over the past decade. This methodology offers a way to capture how different governments prioritize different international and regional organizations. Figure 9 shows data for ASEAN, Mercosur, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the IMF, World Bank, the New Development Bank, BRICS and the UN. The most striking pattern from Figure 9 is that of the regional organizations, only ASEAN figure prominently (and do so because Indonesia is foregrounding it). Moreover, BRICS – which is an informal club structure - feature much more prominently than regional organizations, the IMF and the World Bank, and also more than the UN. The upshot of this is that the BRICS is emerging as a much more important actor in global governance, as seen by these emerging powers, and that regional organizations are not seen as particularly important when assessed in terms of how often these are referenced in key speeches by these regional powers.

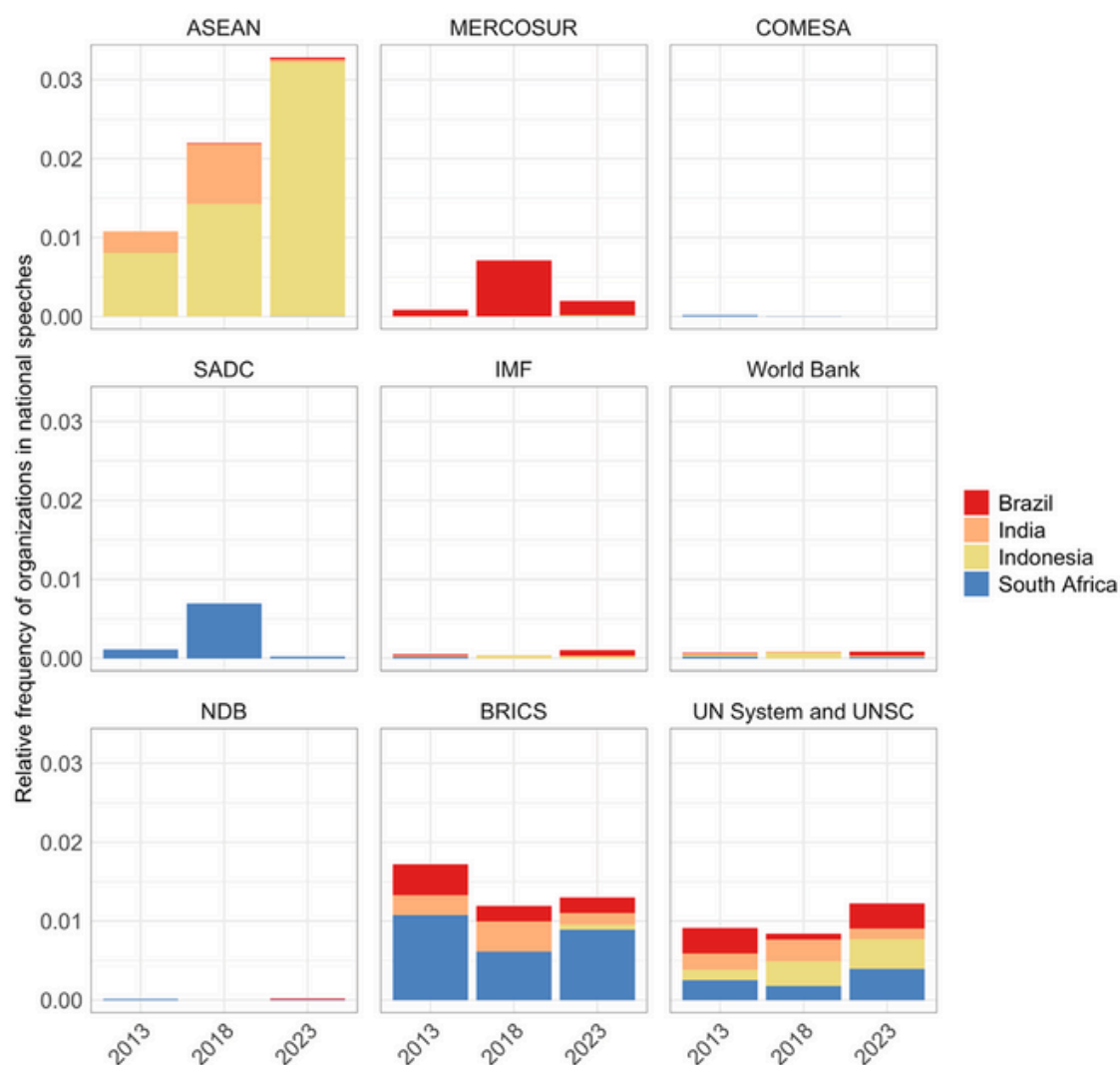


Figure 9 – Relative frequency to regional and global organizations in high-level speeches



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Our survey of the VWS and analysis of speeches indicate at least two things: First, there is significant variation between regions in terms of confidence or trust in both regional and international organizations. Second, regional organizations are no panacea for strengthening multilateralism and global problem solving. If anything, these data suggest that the broader trend towards club governance (G7, G20, BRICS) and informal and ad-hoc governance arrangements are mirrored in both citizens' trust in established international and regional organizations, and also in the views advanced by the governments of key regional powers.



The role of the EU in shaping regional governance. The case of EU-AU relations

Given that the question here concerns how regional organizations may contribute to global governance and multilateral decision making, it is of interest to explore in some detail how the EU is trying to help strengthen regional cooperation in other regions. Here, we focus on the EU's relations with Africa and on EU-AU relations in particular. We do so because this is the region where the EU has been most heavily invested and is thus a good “test” for how support for regional organizations in another region can be seen to strengthen, or not, multilateral decision making and international rules.

Since the early 2000s, relations between the EU and the AU have grown in intensity and scope. The AU's institutional architecture has become more complex, and the organizations' ambitions are higher. This includes, notably, the role of the AU in Africa but also beyond the continent, as reflected in its recent membership in the G20. The EU's engagement with the AU reflects this development as it has diversified its engagement and expanded its focus from trade and development relations within the EU-ACP framework to a growing concern with security and governance-related political issues.

The increased engagement between the AU and the EU is nonetheless taking place against the backdrop of colonial legacies and a significant resentment that has shaped the donor-recipient relations established since the 1960s through the EU-ACP framework (Hansen & Jonsson 2014; Kotsopoulos & Mattheis, 2020). This structural asymmetry is also anchored in the two organizations' differences in capabilities and resources and in the political conditionality of the EU's development aid (Nzau, 2022). Even if referred to as ‘partnership’ and framed by concepts such as ‘ownership’, the EU-Africa and then EU-AU relationship has been one-sided as interventions have been characterized by a lack of proper inclusion of African actors in policy-making processes (Carbone, 2023). This asymmetry has led to many frictions in the relationship fueled by a paradox that Staeger (2023: 505) rightly underlines: while the EU operates on the assumptions that “it is a post-colonial entity whose normative power entitles it to assume a leadership role in Africa's pan-African integration process,” its involvement in African integration “can be framed as a continuity of practices from colonial times.” The AU and African states, however, are increasingly less inclined to accept this structural dynamic and the current international context and interests of various other external partners is giving them the opportunity to gain more autonomy from the EU, and western states more generally.

Relations between the EU and the African continent pre-date the AU: since the 1960s, the EU and ACP countries have developed dense interactions concerning mostly trade and development in the framework of various conventions Yaoundé 1(1963-1975), Lomé (1975-2000), and the Cotonou Agreement (2000-2023) which marked a turn towards a more political relationship.



After the creation of the AU in 2002, the EU started establishing ties with the new organization with the ambition to begin a more equal partnership away from donor-recipient dynamics (Carbone, 2023). These ties started with the EU-Africa summits in 2000 which in 2017 became the high-level EU-AU summits in recognition of the increased centrality of the AU. They serve to define the framework of the relationship and maintain the political dialogue.

In addition to the summits, two important spaces of dialogues are the Commission-to-Commission and the Political and Security Committee-to-Peace and Security Council meetings. Both organizations also maintain a permanent representation or delegation at their partner's headquarter, in Addis Ababa and in Brussels. Since the 2000s, the EU-Africa's agenda has been strongly framed by the EU's interests in the continent which have mostly concerned the access to natural resources and markets, the fight against violent extremism and terrorism, improving political governance and the respect of human rights, and a collaboration towards shared interests in the international system (Nzau, 2022). African states, have, for their part, demanded better terms of trade and support for development and peace and security (Carbone, 2023). Migration has more recently become increasingly important in this agenda (Venturi, 2017), as well as the ambition to establish an African Continental Free Trade Area (CFTA) (Kell & Vines, 2021).

The 2007 Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES) was part of the EU's attempt to establish a partnership of equals: it aimed to take the relationship based on “a Euro-African consensus on values, common interests and common strategic objectives” to a “new, strategic level with a strengthened political partnership and enhanced cooperation at all levels”, including peace and security, democratic governance and human rights, gender equality, sustainable economic development, and regional integration in Africa (Council of the EU, 2007: 2). It also committed both organizations to collaborate towards a more effective, representative and legitimate multilateralism (including a reform of the UN and other international institutions) and jointly address global challenges (Council of the EU, 2007: 3).

However, the JAES and its action plans and roadmap have been much criticised on the African side, revealing a general dissatisfaction with the complexity of the coordination modalities and a continuous asymmetry in the European approach (Mattheis, Deleglise & Staeger, 2023: 36; ONGD, 2021). More recently, at the 2022 EU-AU summit, the EU and AU heads of state and governments agreed on a declaration “A joint vision for 2030” committing both parties to a “renewed Partnership,” adding to the usual priorities topics such as access to Covid-19 vaccines, combatting illicit financial flows, and an Africa-Europe Investment Package of at least €150 billion to boost large-scale sustainable investments in energy, transport and digital infrastructure, digital transformation, and human development. It also announced a “renewed and enhanced cooperation for peace and security”, an “enhanced and reciprocal partnership for migration and mobility”, and re-emphasised their commitment to effective multilateralism. This latter ambition includes working towards more converging positions in multilateral fora to reduce global inequalities, fighting and mitigating climate change, improving the delivery on global public goods, and reforming the WTO and the UN (EU-Africa, 2022).

So far, deliverables since the adoption of the 2007 JAES have been scarce except in the area of peace and security. In spite of the validity of its objective to work towards an equal partnership, it has been hindered by its overambition and differences in capacities and priorities (Miyandazi et al., 2020).



In particular, important disagreements on key questions of the role and functioning of global organizations have hampered progress. This includes disagreement on relating to the the International Criminal Court, reform of the UN Security Council, responses to migration,[8] the availability of Covid-19 vaccines, sexual rights and human rights promotion, and funding of climate change efforts (Carbone, 2023; Mattheis et al., 2023; Maglia, Brosig & Karlsrud, 2024). These issues reveal significant differences between the EU and African states, indicating that global political questions impact on regional cooperation, which combine with the persistence of asymmetry and donor-recipient logics to hamper inter-regional (Kell & Vines, 2021).

Nonetheless, the area in which EU-AU relationship has been considered more successful is – perhaps paradoxically – in the field of peace and security. The respective agendas of the AU and the EU are similar, as highlighted in their 2018 MoU on Peace, Security and Governance. There is a shared understanding of conflict that focuses on root causes linked to underdevelopment and poor governance, and an emphasis on creating synergies between security, development, humanitarian and peacebuilding activities. There is also a also shared focus on violent extremism, maritime piracy, cross-border crime including drug trafficking and so forth (Council of the EU, 2018). On the basis of this shared agenda, the EU has provided extensive funding and assistance to operationalise the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) including the security capacities of the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) (secretariats, mediation activities, early-warning, programme support, etc.), support African-led peace support operations (PSO) (troop stipends, logistics, equipment, etc.). The African Peace Facility (APF) has been, until 2020, the main instrument through which the EU provided more than €3,5 billion for the African Peace and Security Agenda (EEAS, 2022). Other lines of budget in the European Development Fund (EDF) and the Instrument for Security and Peace (IfSP) were also used to support security programmes and the RECs. Hence, from 2014 to 2020 the EU has given €650 million across the continent for crisis response actions (e.g. the Sahel and Libya, Somalia), peacebuilding and conflict prevention (EEAS, 2022). The EU is also advising and training African military forces, police and judicial personnel through 7 CSDP missions in the Sahel, Central Africa, Libya, Horn of Africa/Somalia, and Mozambique, and has one maritime security operation mission in the Horn of Africa focused on counterpiracy (Operation Atalanta).

This EU institutional structure was, however, modified by its 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework. The APF was replaced by the European Peace Facility (EPF) reflecting the EU's ambitions to become a bigger geopolitical player. Contrary to the APF, the EPF is not solely focused on Africa and can provide all types of equipment, including lethal one – a demand made by many Africa actors – and infrastructure to the armed forces of partner countries, and fund ad hoc security coalitions. Besides this major change, the European Development Fund (EDF) was replaced by the new Neighborhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) which funds capacity-building activities directed to the peace and security architecture (APSA), non-military support to PSOs, and the rapid response mechanism. For 2021-2027, the EU has allocated 1,5 EUR billion to support Conflict prevention, Peace and Security initiatives at national and regional level in Sub-Saharan Africa (EEAS, 2022).



These changes have generated tensions between the EU and the AU as the EPF can fund PSOs and ad hoc coalitions without necessarily coordinating with, nor channeling the money through the AU, which was not possible under the APF. This has been seen as a change that could possibly undermine the APSA and the role of the AU and the RECs and diminish their funding (Baldaro & Lopez-Lucia, 2022). They also reflect new dynamics within the APSA that have challenged its structure and functioning: the emergence of ad hoc security coalitions such as the G5 Sahel and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in the Lake Chad Basin, taking over the peace and security role previously attributed to the RECs, and which the AU has somehow been trying to keep under its umbrella (Baldaro & Lopez-Lucia 2022; Reykers et al., 2023; Brosig & Karlsrud, 2024). These coalitions have been favoured by the EU, due to flexibility that ad-hoc approaches to transnational conflicts that cut across the borders of the RECs (Lopez-Lucia, 2020), and have fueled its decision to establish the EPF. African states have also feared with the EPF that some of the funding dedicated to the African continent for peace and security would be reallocated to Ukraine; a fear partly assuaged by the EU's allocation of €600 million from the EPF in support of the AU for 3 years (Council of the EU, 2022).

An important issue in this peace and security partnership has been the dependence of the RECs and, to a lesser extent, the AU on EU funding for the deployment of PSOs and other security programmes (Engel, 2020). In the case of the RECs it generally accounts for more than 60% of their operational funding (Mattheis et al., 2023). This dependence fuels the structural asymmetry of the relationship which might be further reinforced by the creation of the EPF and the NDICI, as well as the growing prominence of trust funds such as the EUTF, none of which rely on joint governance and decision-making, thus implying less African participation (ONGD, 2021). Interestingly, while this asymmetry in the peace and security partnership has led to complaints from African actors that the EU is forcing their hands and seeking to shape the African security agenda, there has been a perception in EU circles that the EU has little influence relative to their status as the largest funder (Staeger, 2023).

The EU-AU relations in a global context

The tensions underpinning the EU-AU relationship are becoming more impactful for the EU as the AU and African countries now have the opportunity to diversify their relations with EU competitors such as China and Russia, thus gaining a leverage and room for maneuver that they did not have before (Carbone, 2023). More generally, changes in the international context are re-shaping the possibilities of this interregional relation. Abrahamsen and Chimhandamba (2023) point to the fact that the democratization of African states in the 1990s enabled their convergence with the post-cold war liberal order and the birth of an AU that enshrined liberal norms of democracy, human rights and the rule of law in its founding status and institutions. However, the current challenge of the liberal international order both outside and also inside the West, is providing African states with new options that speak to a pan-African view challenging the domination of the West, as well as new economic and investment opportunities, and political alliances among a broader pool of partners. This situation has enabled African states to become more autonomous in their economic and political strategies, avoiding for instance the political conditionalities imposed by the EU and reducing their dependence on former colonial powers (Abrahamsen & Chimhandamba, 2023; Carbone, 2023; Shiferaw & Di Ciommo, 2023).



The EU has been particularly concerned with African states' increased relations with China and Russia, in the context of a more intense competition for markets and natural resources in the continent, qualified by some as a new 'scramble for Africa' (Okeke, 2008). While Russia's presence on the African continent is rooted in the legacy of the USSR's ties with African states in the 20th century, it is only since the annexation of Crimea that Russia intensified its engagement again after the break that followed the fall of the Soviet Union (Lanfranchi & de Bruijne, 2022). This renewed engagement was motivated by a necessity to circumvent its diplomatic isolation and find new business opportunities for its companies harmed by Western sanctions (Carbone, 2023). In recent years, Russia has gained a notable diplomatic presence on the continent with 39 embassies and 36 security cooperation agreements. It has also become the continent's first supplier of weapons (Shiferaw & Di Ciommo, 2023). The EU is particularly uneasy with Russia's security presence, including through the Africa Corps (formerly known as the Wagner Group) which is selling its mercenary services in exchange for access to mineral resources in various African countries. In the Sahel, for instance, the EU's security partnership with Sahelian countries has been mostly replaced by military cooperation with Russia and the deployment of the Africa Corps/Wagner Group. In Mali, this shift took place after the expulsion of French forces by the military junta, and the end of the EU mission EUCAP Sahel Mali and of the UN mission in the country, followed not long after by a similar process in Niger. Nevertheless, in spite of Russia taking advantage of the situation to disrupt Western actors and showcase to Africa states its colonial-free past (Carbone, 2023), its engagement, in particular in the area of economic cooperation and even in the military sector, remains limited in Africa compared to those of European states, the EU, the US, and China (Faleg & Secieru, 2020; Lanfranchi & de Bruijne, 2022). This is even more the case at the AU level and in the APSA, where Russia's involvement remains minimal (Mattheis et al., 2023: 30). Indeed, Russia's engagement remains opportunistic: it grows when relations between the West and African governments deteriorates, often at the occasion of authoritarian turns such as in the Sahel (Lanfranchi & de Bruijne, 2022).

China, on the other hand, is Africa's largest trading partner and bilateral creditor, a major source of infrastructure investment, and is investing in the development of military cooperation through the China-Africa Security Forum. It is seen as 'a strategic rival and competitor to the EU on the continent' (Haastrup, Duggan & Mah, 2021: 549). Most importantly, it has shown that a collaboration beyond aid is possible with African states which has increased the demand for trade and investment in the EU-Africa partnership (Shiferaw & Di Ciommo, 2023). Overall, China has become the third largest investor after France and the Netherlands as its FDI flows to Africa rose from 75 million dollars in 2003 to 5 billion in 2021 (Shiferaw & Di Ciommo, 2023). A recent report underlined that the EU's current view of Africa as a battleground for EU-China rivalry is not "the most effective way to build a "partnership of equals", thus recommending the EU to instead focus on its added-value and comparative advantage (ONGD, 2021: III).

In spite of these developments, the EU-AU relationship "remains unrivalled in terms of funding as well as the density of interregional formats and cooperation mechanisms" (Mattheis et al., 2023: ix). However, it should be noted that a priority area of the EU-AU's partnership, the commitment to democracy and human rights, is indeed threatened as these authoritarian states' support to (often newly) authoritarian African regimes strengthen their control on the states and embolden them to abandon this commitment (Haastrup et al., 2021). It also undermines the ability of the AU to play the role of norm entrepreneur in this area and divides its membership (Haastrup et al., 2021; Abrahamsen & Chimhandamba, 2023).



The response to the Covid-19 pandemic has also been controversial due to the EU twofold positions of being one of the largest contributors of the COVAX initiative focused on equitable access to vaccines, and at the same time against the initiative launched by more than 80 countries at the WTO to suspend patent rights on vaccines (ONGD, 2021). More generally, African states tend to vote more in alignment with the G77+China than with the EU in the UNGA, including for the candidacies for international office (ONGD, 2021). Further, as noted by Mattheis et al. (2023, 29), the AU does not have a mandate to represent its member states in multilateral fora. The war in Ukraine has been particularly contentious for the relationship, as many African states and the AU have not adopted clear positions in favour of Ukraine and against Russia.[9] This partly reflects African countries' historical ties with Russia and their desire to preserve their current economic, political and military ties with the country, and also a resentment based on anti-colonial and non-alignment principles (Garonna, 2022; Carbone, 2023).

At the level of global governance, the EU and the AU have committed to cooperate on reform of the multilateral system which, both agree, is increasingly under threat. The fact that the AU is gaining geopolitical clout on the international stage as illustrated by its recent membership to the G20 could be seen as an advantage for the EU, but many frictions are also challenging this area of the relationship. This is particularly evident in the case of the UNSC: on paper, the EU supports a reform of the UNSC that would make it “more effective, inclusive, transparent, democratic and accountable, better reflecting today's realities by strengthening the voice of underrepresented regions, especially but not limited to Africa” (EU, 2024). However, it does not back the AU's position on UNSC reform, defined by the 2005 Ezulwini Consensus which calls for two permanent and five non-permanent African seats on the UNSC.

Supporting Africa's proposals to reform multilateral institutions could “address some of the structural grievances Africa and the rest of the global majority express vis-à-vis the current global order” (Shiferaw & Di Ciommo, 2023:13). This is particularly salient given the long-lasting asymmetries between the Europe and Africa, and the proper lack of representation and participation of African states in key multilateral organizations. Lack of progress on this front is likely to hamper further EU-AU collaboration on a range of other important issues.



Conclusion

Regional organizations became markedly more prominent – and grew in numbers – after the end of the Cold War (Börzel, 2011). At one level, this development introduced an expectation that regional organizations would serve as hubs for a strengthened system of global governance, where regional solutions would be developed for regional problems, and global ones would be addressed at the global level. However, as we have seen, there is considerable variation between regions in terms of the history of political cooperation, degree of institutionalization of cooperation, ties with great powers, and political views on the proper place of regional organizations relative to both formal international organizations and more informal club formats such as e.g. BRICS and G20.

Moreover, regional organizations do not escape broader political fault lines and events: The EU's approach to the Covid pandemic has been met with fierce criticism from countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Moreover, the insistence by European political leaders on the importance of mobilizing against Russia's war in Ukraine has been met with charges of hypocrisy in many regions, especially in light of a perceived lack of concomitant criticism of Israel's war in Gaza (Nadkarni et al., 2024). Add to this the criticism from low- and middle-income countries of non-existent progress on reform of international organizations and lack of promised "new and additional" funding for climate efforts. Add to this that the US is moving away from Europe and the global order it was central in developing, while Russia tries to reclaim a zone of interest in Eastern Europe and China is increasing its direct and indirect influence in global and regional institutions through political, financial, and discursive means. These developments do not directly affect the role of regional organizations, but they define a global political context within which the role of these organizations must be understood.

At the same time, global governance arrangements are also changing (Faude and Karlsrud, forthcoming): Informality, ad hoc and club governance is advancing. Powerful states form smaller exclusive arenas where decisions can be made – like the BRICS and the G20. The G20 is orchestrating global governance, moving traditional multilateral institutions like the UN, IMF, WB and WTO one step down the institutional ladder. With recent political developments in mind, this is likely to continue.

There is significant variation between regions in the investment in regional organizations. In Europe, the EU is becoming more important. Looking outside of Europe, the African Union is where there have been most investment. ASEAN is also an important arena, but with more focus on diplomacy. Latin America is arguably the region with least support for regional organizations.

Geopolitical competition is likely to continue to increase. States in Africa, Asia and Latin America and elsewhere want a larger say in multilateral institutions, challenging the incumbents of the liberal world order, but reform is slow.



This will continue to be an area of contestation with the EU and its western partners. As long as there is little progress in the discussions about reform of the UN, IMF, WB and WTO, this is likely to block progress also on regional cooperation. Geopolitical competition thus has diverging effects – while it is likely strengthening the legitimacy of the EU in Europe, it is weakening the legitimacy and perceived effectiveness of global institutions.

Regional organizations cannot substitute for the diminishing role of global institutions. Nor can they withstand increased geopolitical tensions. They do, however, fill important governance functions, and the trend towards investing in regional organizations is not – as far as we can tell – being reversed: While regional organizations in Africa, Asia and Latin America are not necessarily geared towards political integration, they are arenas for regionally specific diplomacy and cooperation on key regional issues. Our review of organizations in Africa, Asia and Latin America shows that these organizations have a role to play, albeit one that varies between these regions. While the increased trend towards “orchestration” and club governance would suggest that regional organizations become less important, this also represents an opportunity for the EU and other actors to offset imbalances in global governance arrangements. The EU can continue to support and partner with regional organizations, but also – by virtue of its role in club formats like the G7 and the G20 – seek, together with newly minted G20 member AU, to enroll them and anchor governance solutions that are aligned with regional organizations competence and agendas. While this will in no way reduce the pressure for the EU to support broader reforms of international organizations, it may help to integrate regional organizations in global governance and thus ensure stronger participation and reflection of a broader array of regional perspectives.



Endnotes

[1] With the creation of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) in 1979.

[2] Mercosur member states used European Community terminology and objectives and elaborated a list of common policies to be coordinated that were very similar to the list featuring in the 1986 Single European Act.

[3] This Agreement is a mixed one necessitating not only the Council and the EP's ratification, but also the ratification by the EU member states.

[4] However, the MPIA only has 53 members and has only resolved one case since its founding (Titievskaja, 2024). A significant amount of disputes are now appealed into the “legal void”, meaning that when they are appealed, there will not be a resolution to the dispute. For more on this, see e.g. Bown and Mavroidis (2021) or Hopewell (2024).

[5] A caveat is important: Whereas the information presented here is grouped in geographical regions, WVS data is a representation of national levels, which means this data is not representative of the population on each continent. Even though WVS applies its own sampling weights to ensure national representativeness, enabling comparison of regions or continents, the national-level data is more precise.

[6] It is important to note that the WVS did not conduct the survey in all waves in every country or ask all questions consistently. This limits our ability to draw definitive comparisons between countries. However, the data remains systematic, providing valuable insights, making it possible to identify trends, regional patterns and, at some point, shifts in public opinion and trust over time.

[7] For Brazil, the websites of the Presidency (<http://www.biblioteca.presidencia.gov.br/>, <https://www.gov.br/planalto/>) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (<https://www.gov.br/mre/>). For India, the websites of the Prime Minister (<https://www.pmindia.gov.in/>) and the Ministry for External Affairs (<https://www.mea.gov.in/>). For Indonesia, the websites of the Presidency (<https://www.presidentri.go.id/>), the Cabinet Secretariat (<https://setkab.go.id/>), and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (<https://kemlu.go.id/>). For Nigeria, few speeches were available on the State House website (<http://statehouse.gov.ng/>). For South Africa, the websites of the government (<https://www.gov.za/news>), the Presidency (<https://www.presidency.gov.za/>), and the Minister of International Relations and Cooperation (<https://www.dirco.gov.za/>).

[8] Migration has been an increasingly contentious point in the relationship since 2015 following the developments in migrations (more than a million refugees and migrants from Africa and the Middle East arrived in Europe by sea). EU and African leaders met at the Valletta summit in November 2015 and agreed to an approach that would tackle the root causes of irregular migration, and the launch of the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTFa) which was allocated initially €1.8 billion to fund programmes across the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and North Africa. However, many African partners perceived it as an externally imposed agenda without much ownership on their part (Kell & Vines, 2021).



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[9] The 2022 UNGA resolution ES-11/1 deploring Russia's invasion of Ukraine and demanding a full withdrawal of Russian forces passed with 141 voting in favour, 5 against, and 35 abstentions. 17 out of the 35 abstentions were from African states, 1 out of 5 votes against was from an African state Eritrea, and 8 African states were absent. It got even worse in the 2022 UNGA resolution ES-11/3 on the suspension of the membership of Russia in the UN Human Rights Council which passed with 93 voting in favour, 24 against, and 58 abstentions. 24 out of the 58 abstentions, 9 out of the 24 votes against were from African states and 10 African states were against.



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NAVIGATOR

NAVIGATOR is a 4-year research project set to examine how the EU shall navigate the increasingly complex – and conflict-laden – institutional spaces of global governance to advance a rules-based international order. What factors should be emphasized when considering which institutions to strengthen, which to reform, and which to by-pass when revitalising multilateralism? NAVIGATOR's main objective is to answer these questions and deliver a ready-to-use "search mechanism" and associated pathways of action that the EU and its member states can use as it seeks to strengthen a rules-based international order.

To achieve this, NAVIGATOR comprises a strong, global and inter-disciplinary team of researchers that explores institutional variation on six policy issues – climate change, digitalisation, finance/tax, health, migration and security – to identify what institutional mixes that enables the EU to have optimal impact in a given policy issue.

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