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# “Nobody Wants to Be on the Wrong Side of History”

Systemic Rivalry and Unity in Defence of the UN Charter

Andrea Ellen Ostheimer

In view of the Russian attack on Ukraine, a clear majority of states around the world are demanding the withdrawal of Russian troops from the neighboring country when called to vote in the United Nations General Assembly. And yet there are considerable differences in their willingness to impose sanctions and in the interpretation of the conflict and its geopolitical background. Many countries see no reason to clearly choose one global political camp. Their UN representatives present various arguments to explain that position – and the West should listen to them.

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The debate and voting during the Emergency Special Session on Russia's invasion of Ukraine at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) on 23 February 2023 has shown that the international community remains overwhelmingly united in condemning Russia's violation of the UN Charter in its aggression against Ukraine. A total of 141 states voted in favour of resolution ES-11/6, demanding "that the Russian Federation immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw all of its military forces from the territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders, and call[ing] for a cessation of hostilities".<sup>1</sup> But beyond this show of solidarity in defence of the principles of territorial integrity and sovereignty, positions and opinions have begun to differ one year after the invasion.

Sanctions on Russia have largely been imposed by the United States, the EU and EU member states, while others have decided not to follow this path. Many countries in the Global South perceive the war as a conflict between the West and Russia. They do not want to be dragged into one camp but would rather remain neutral. For more than a year now, the US and European governments have tried to canvass support from the international community for Ukraine, shaping the narrative that defending Ukraine means defending the rules-based order and the future of freedom itself. In recent months, various European leaders have also argued that neutrality in this conflict is tantamount to supporting the aggressor.

The present article summarises eleven confidential background conversations held in New York between March and May 2023 with permanent representatives to the United Nations from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East.<sup>2</sup> The overall guiding question was how states that are represented in the G77 group,<sup>3</sup> are members of the Security Council or are the subject of discussions in the Security Council perceive the narrative, promoted by the West, of a systemic conflict in relation to the war in Ukraine and to the increasing rivalry and tensions between the United States and China in the multilateral context.

The author examined whether the United States and Europe are perceived as putting too much pressure on other states to take sides, and whether the argument of the West about defending freedom and human rights might alienate those governments who themselves do not honour these values in their own domestic context. Should those states who align their foreign policy with particular values show more flexibility and seek closer cooperation with those states who do not share their values-based orientation in order to address global challenges? The author also wanted to know why a group of more than 30 states abstained from the voting on the UNGA resolutions relating to the war in Ukraine. In relation to the systemic rivalry between the United States and China, which now goes beyond mere competition, the author also asked the interlocutors how they perceive this situation.

The following summary reflects the opinions and positions of the interviewed permanent representatives at the United Nations in New York. Factual information has been added by the author.

## Neither the Arab world nor African countries want to confront Russia.

### The Charter of the United Nations: The Lowest Common Denominator

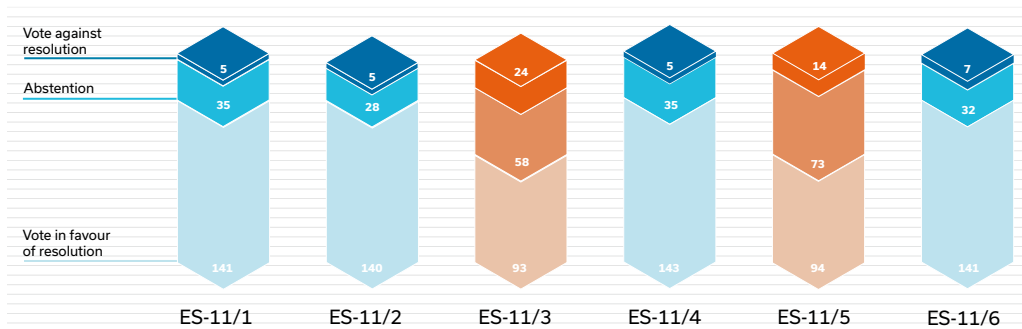
As the six votes on Ukraine in the UN General Assembly have shown, the international community largely stands united behind the UN Charter and in defence of the principles of territorial integrity, sovereignty and non-interference. A closer look at the six corresponding resolutions tabled in 2022 and 2023 reveals that resolution ES-11/3 on Russia’s suspension from the Human Rights Council and resolution ES-11/5 demanding accountability and compensation did not find

the same overwhelming support that the other four resolutions garnered.

On the suspension of Russia from the Human Rights Council, permanent representatives highlighted that a) states with a questionable human rights record themselves did not want to create a precedent; and b) they saw the measure as counterproductive for keeping channels of communication open with Russia. From a diplomatic perspective, the objectives of multilateralism are to have everybody around the table and to find a solution to problems through negotiations. Along these lines, exclusion as an act of punishment is not seen as an adequate way to proceed as it precludes diplomatic engagement. Moreover, from a diplomatic point of view, the arrest warrant for Putin issued by the International Criminal Court is considered to be detrimental. It is seen as further cornering the Russian leader and as a potential burden for a negotiation process.<sup>4</sup>

A majority of the G77 states sees the “rules-based order” as a concept of the West, and some of them perceive it as an instrument to cement the dominance and influence of the United States.

**Fig. 1: Voting Pattern in the UN General Assembly on Resolutions on the Russian War against Ukraine**



Sources: own illustration with data from UN 2022: Aggression against Ukraine: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, A/RES/ES-11/1, 2 Mar 2022, in: <https://bit.ly/43jJ6js> [31 May 2023]; UN 2022: Humanitarian consequences of the aggression against Ukraine: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, A/RES/ES-11/2, 24 Mar 2022, in: <https://bit.ly/43h0ipZ> [31 May 2023]; UN 2022: Suspension of the rights of membership of the Russian Federation in the Human Rights Council: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, A/RES/ES-11/3, 7 Apr 2022, in: <https://bit.ly/44yfEr7> [31 May 2023]; UN 2022: Territorial integrity of Ukraine: defending the principles of the Charter of the United Nations: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, A/RES/ES-11/4, 12 Oct 2022, in: <https://bit.ly/44ANBHI> [31 May 2023]; UN 2022: Furtherance of remedy and reparation for aggression against Ukraine: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, A/RES/ES-11/5, 14 Nov 2022, in: <https://bit.ly/44fOxkX> [31 May 2023]; UN 2023: Principles of the Charter of the United Nations underlying a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, A/RES/ES-11/6, 23 Feb 2023, in: <https://bit.ly/3D1FQ1t> [31 May 2023].

To those states, China's narrative that international law, and thus the Charter of the United Nations, needs to be upheld is more appealing.

The West therefore succeeds in rallying support only in cases where it calls for the defence of the UN principles of territorial integrity, sovereignty and non-interference. This is the lowest common denominator that unites the international community. Any attempt to condemn and hold Russia accountable in a multilateral context at the current stage of the conflict meets with limited support. Neither the Arab world nor African countries want to confront Russia. For the attentive observer, this division between the United States, Europe and their closest allies on one side and the remaining countries on the other became clear during the debates in the UNGA and the Security Council on the anniversary of the Russian invasion in February 2023. Whereas all European foreign ministers and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy spoke in both UN bodies, the voices from Africa and Asia were only sporadic and at ambassadorial level. In the Security Council, this divide was even more obvious as, apart from members of the Security Council, only European representatives took the floor as external speakers. Even though resolution ES-11/6 does not explicitly condemn the invasion, as this had been a point of controversy in the negotiations, many European speakers in the UNGA debate in February 2023 emphasised the need for a united condemnation of the invasion.

## Rising food and energy prices are jeopardising progress on the Sustainable Development Goals.

### **Abstentions in Voting: A Tell-all of Geopolitical Dynamics, Perceptions and Grievances**

Irrespective of the argument that the international community must unite in defence of the

UN charter, a group of more than 30 member states has decided to abstain in the voting on those resolutions that put the protection of UN principles at the heart of their message.

Four recurrent motivations for abstaining can be identified:

- economic ties and financial implications of the war;
- security considerations and historical ties;
- alleged application of double standards by the West;
- need for keeping a back door open for negotiations.

### *Economic Ties and Financial Implications of the War*

Although at this point it is still largely just an impression, the war in Ukraine comes at a high cost for countries that depend on Official Development Assistance (ODA), particularly those in Africa. Rising food and energy prices in those countries are already jeopardising commitments and progress on the Sustainable Development Goals. As one interlocutor put it: "Your perception of the world is universal, but my problems are not necessarily. My priorities are getting food on the table, climate change and global trade."

With regard to the positioning of Latin American countries, and in particular their lack of support for a sanctions regime against Russia, the twofold dependencies to which they are subject must be taken into account. For them, Russia is not only an important sales market for their agricultural products; they also need Russian fertiliser for their own agro-industries.

While budget allocations in Western countries so far do not indicate any cuts in aid to Africa or other regions, the proportions alone create the feeling among developing countries that their problems have become secondary. The US Congress approved a package of 113 billion US dollars in aid and military assistance to Ukraine and allied nations in 2022.<sup>5</sup> For the African



Further cornering the Russian leader? The arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court against Vladimir Putin is deemed counterproductive by some UN member states. Photo: © Allison Bailey, NurPhoto, picture alliance.

continent, the Biden administration proposed to Congress an increase in the State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs (SFOPS) budget from 7.65 billion US dollars (2022) to 7.77 billion US dollars in the fiscal year 2023.<sup>6</sup> Another example is the assistance to Mexico in the context of the U.S.-Mexico Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities (a security partnership that also addresses border and migration management issues). Funding for the International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement cooperation remained stable at 64 million US dollars, and the Economic Support Fund was actually increased from 57.8 million US dollars in 2022 to 75 million US dollars in 2023.<sup>7</sup>

The situation in the European context differs, however. From the European Peace Facility, a newly created EU instrument designed to

address security challenges mainly on the African continent, 3.6 billion euros (or 64 per cent) of the 5.6 billion euro allocation for the financial period from 2021 to 2027 have already been dedicated to Ukraine (up to February 2023).<sup>8</sup> Since the start of the war in Ukraine, a total of 698 million euros has been given to the African Union (AU), Niger, Mauritania and the Gulf of Guinea countries, with the largest share going to the AU for its peace and security architecture (600 million euros for the period from 2022 to 2024).

Although EU representatives often profess their support for developing countries in their UNGA speeches, the feeling prevails among permanent representatives that more understanding must be shown for the concerns of others. More outreach and action are needed to enhance food security and to address issues such as debt sustainability for developing countries in an age

of economic and geopolitical turmoil. As one permanent representative noted, “sucking the air out of the UN system by focusing solely on Ukraine is not healthy for Europe. Don’t fix a problem by creating a new one further on.”

## Old and new loyalties of those countries for which Russia is an economic partner prevent them from supporting the West.

### *Security Considerations and Historical Ties*

For countries in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus located in Russia’s immediate vicinity – thus directly affected by Russian power projection –, abstention is the most they can do. For them, abstaining and not voting with Russia, as they might have done in the past (for instance, in regard to the annexation of Crimea), is an act of support for the UN Charter. In the words of an ambassador from the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood, “[t]he violation of the UN Charter comes at face value and there is no justification for it.”

African states that either currently receive Russian military support (e.g. Central African Republic and Burkina Faso contracting private mercenaries of the Wagner Group<sup>9</sup>) or whose governments cultivated close ties with the Soviet Union during their own liberation struggles (countries of the South African Development Community, SADC) also prefer to abstain. Old and new loyalties of those countries for which Russia is an economic partner prevent them from supporting the West.

### *Alleged Application of Double Standards by the West*

Most permanent representatives interviewed have criticised the ignorance on the part of the West in relation to other conflicts and its ambivalence towards violations of human rights and international law, as well as the United States’

power projection when it serves its own interest. In the conversations, this was often summarised as “double standards by the West”.

The situation in the Palestinian territories and the silence on Israel’s illegal settlements seems to be a subject of grievance and controversy underestimated by the West. The criticism of the West’s acquiescence appeared in almost every conversation with African and Arab ambassadors. Particularly in the Arab world, it stirs up emotions against the West within societies. But on the multilateral stage, too, it can become an obstacle for the West in achieving policy goals that require broad international support. The Europeans’ hesitancy in adapting their positions on Israel’s settlement policies is seen not only as a point of critique but also as ammunition for Russia and China to accuse Europe of double standards.

In other cases, too, such as Rwanda’s interference in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo or Turkish power projections in Iraq, Libya and the Caucasus, the West is seen to be turning a blind eye. Many permanent representatives thus highlighted the need for a more even-handed approach by the international community. In addition, the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the dissolution, within days after the seizure of power by the Taliban, of a state built on a Western model has delegitimised the West in the eyes of interviewees: “Don’t trust the West, they will give up on you.”

### *Need for Keeping a Back Door Open for Negotiations*

Some countries abstained in the voting as they are trying to remain neutral, arguing that they could be of use at a time when both sides might feel that they are ready for peace negotiations: “We will serve when peace comes. Then we can try to help.” Others did not vote with the West if they thought that it might not be helpful for the dialogue with Russia within the UN as a primary space for negotiations. In this regard, the criticism was raised that not a single session on Ukraine in the Security Council has been a

closed session, even though there is an urgent need for a real dialogue behind closed doors. In all meetings with permanent representatives, the need for talks between Ukraine and Russia was reiterated. But they also acknowledged that the time may not yet have come, as parties to the conflict do not seem open to the idea and are still betting on a military win.

## China is the main concern for the US, more so than Russia and its aggression in Ukraine.

However, if the West wants to retain the support of a broad majority, it is expected to pursue a moderate approach and to show initial signs of willingness to negotiate some sort of ceasefire. Representatives also stressed that it might become necessary to start peace negotiations while the war is still ongoing. While Russia is seen as having manoeuvred itself into a precarious position, it was also noted that it will always remain a key player in the international system. Following this point of view, the West should therefore think ahead and weigh up its options, taking into account that Putin is primarily concerned about his legacy, while at the same time considering what a defeated and disintegrating Russia would mean for the West and Eurasia.

### The West's Moral High Ground and Diplomatic Pressure

Similar to the aforementioned “double standards” argument, points were also raised in relation to the diplomatic culture currently prevailing within the United Nations. Permanent representatives emphasised that respectful relations should preclude pressure to align – even if circumstances might seem to make this necessary. Values cannot be projected and instilled by exercising pressure. If pressure becomes too strong, a natural reaction will therefore be to retreat: “Lecturing and calling out states does not work anymore. The West has to learn that they cannot have the influence any longer.

International relations are not a one-way street. There is always the need to make concessions to the other side. There is the need to show respect.” It is also considered disrespectful if a country is discussed in the Security Council and its permanent representative is not allowed into the room but has to beg for information from other Council members.

Most states in Latin America see themselves as part of the West, sharing the same cultural values. But even so, Latin American countries do not want to be in a position in which they have to pick a side. The more pressure is exerted to “choose”, the more likely it becomes that there will be a reaction in the form of withdrawal or rejection. Historically, Latin America has predominantly supported the West, but it is uncertain how long this will continue to be the case: “Europe has to understand that Latin America is an ally of the West but that does not imply that we go along with everything. We draw our own conclusions and weigh up national interests.”

### Systemic Rivalry – Are We Onlookers or Are We Becoming Pawns?

In the systemic rivalry between the West and Russia/China, one concern for some countries is whether they are onlookers or becoming pawns in a geopolitical game of chess. This clearly shows their uneasiness about either getting drawn into one camp or remaining disempowered on the sidelines of history. Within the rivalry and competition between the United States and China, they identify a dangerous trend, an aggressiveness in tone and the push to choose sides. Mass media on both sides are understood as having a catalysing effect in aggravating antagonism. China has been identified as the main concern for the United States, more so than Russia and its aggression in Ukraine. Although seen as a military challenger, it has been argued in the interviews that Russia has never posed a threat to US hegemony, even during the Cold War. As such, the Russian challenge is seen as standing in sharp contrast to China, which competes with the United States on multiple levels.



It is considered to be absolutely imperative for Europe to define its role in the multipolar world and demonstrate a global foreign policy profile. Although people understand why Europe remains steadfast on the side of the United States in the face of the existential threat on its borders, there is a growing perception that Europe is beginning to fight China because of the United States: “Europe needs to be careful and should not make itself an enemy of China.”

### *Perception of China and Its Intentions*

An explanation given for China’s assertiveness and determination to redefine its role on the global stage lies in China’s feeling of being confronted with Western hegemony within the UN system, with the United States interfering with Beijing’s global ambitions. The assumption is that China does not want to remain at the fringes of the international system any longer



Quick delivery on promises: China is increasingly seen as a less cumbersome partner than Western countries by numerous governments in Africa and elsewhere. Infrastructure and industrial projects like this one in Senegal are usually completed swiftly, with local politicians often not caring about the long-term risks of Chinese engagement. Photo: © Pang Xinglei, Xinhua, picture alliance.



and that it is frustrated about not being recognised as it believes it deserves to be. It has thus been concluded that China does not perceive itself as a threat to the international system and wants to be recognised as a power. The United States, however, does not seem ready to grant this recognition.

The threat perception regarding China's ambitions is clearly not shared by all. Moreover, the growing financial dependencies of developing countries on China and the sell-out of their natural resources for generations to the People's Republic was not brought up in the conversations. Instead, its rise to global power is acknowledged by the Global South: "Nobody can stop China from becoming relevant – irrespective of its human rights violations."

For many countries, it is not clear why China's engagement should be rejected outright. Beijing's style and influence-seeking in multilateral institutions was at best described as ambivalent. It was noted that China does not show its strength in the UN ostentatiously but acts in very subtle ways. The projected image of a benevolent actor with "good intentions" is taken with a pinch of salt or, in diplomatic terms, "cautiously accepted but not fully believed."

## China presents itself as a partner to developing countries.

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### *What Global Partners Have to Offer*

China presents itself as a partner to developing countries at the UN level. When developing countries interact with China, they see a partner that delivers quickly on promises, and with no strings attached, and most politicians do not see the long-term costs of Chinese investments for their countries. Particularly for African countries, China is an attractive partner as it not only offers investments but also access to information and communications technology.

Even in Latin America, China is perceived as a less cumbersome partner with whom trade negotiations can take place without burdening issues such as climate change or human rights. Besides the increasing number of Latin American countries joining the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the number of Latin American countries formally cutting ties with Taiwan has also increased in the last few years.<sup>10</sup> One argument heard from permanent representatives of all regions has been the question of what the West can offer in addition to or instead of Chinese trade agreements and investments.

In Latin America, there is a feeling that the United States still considers the continent as its almost natural sphere of influence and therefore does not pay enough attention to it. In contrast to Europe, which has come up with a Global Gateway programme as an alternative to the BRI, the United States has not yet presented an initiative of its own to counterbalance the BRI internationally. While the EU might score on infrastructure investments, certainly in Latin America it falls short on trade. The painful and prolonged EU-Mercosur trade agreement negotiations have tainted relations and destroyed trust, as the agreement was seen by Mercosur countries not only as a trade project but also as a political one. When French President Emmanuel Macron blocked the agreement in its final stages due to former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's questionable environmental policies, EU member states were perceived as short-sighted and listening too much to their national pressure groups.

### *The Vacuum the United States Has Left Behind*

Permanent representatives from all regions underlined that the systemic rivalry has not only been fuelled by China's growing regional and global ambitions. It was made possible in the first place by an absent United States and a rather inward-looking Europe. In particular, the United States' disengagement from the world stage during Donald Trump's presidency and the US military repositioning are perceived as

having encouraged others to fill the gap. This could be China, but countries in the Middle East also eye Turkey's regional aspirations with suspicion. The fact that China has become a mediator in the Middle East and facilitated a rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran is also seen by diplomats as a sign of a changing world order.

### Take-aways and Points for Reflection

- The Western approach to multilateralism uses the concept of a rules-based order that implies accountability. Meanwhile, others primarily value the inclusiveness of multilateral institutions and the opportunity they offer to gather everybody around the table to seek compromises in negotiations. In order to manage expectations, it is necessary to be aware of the underlying tensions between the two approaches.
  - At the same time, it is necessary to dismantle the argument that the rules-based order is a Western concept. The universality of the values enshrined in this order needs to be promoted more effectively, in juxtaposition to Chinese narratives that apply the rule of law exclusively to inter-state relations and not to the state-citizen relationship.<sup>11</sup>
  - If we wish to maintain a global alliance for the principles of the UN Charter, we will have to better address the existential threats that other member states face. On issues such as food security, debt sustainability and reform of the global financial architecture, the West could show developing countries its engagement and support. In Africa, 57 per cent of countries now spend more on interest payments on their public debt (including their loans from China) than on health, 17 per cent spend more on interest payments than on education, and 60 per cent are already in debt distress.<sup>12</sup>
  - It is vital to correct the impression that the United States and Europe have become indifferent to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- The same applies to other conflicts where the West has provided mediation platforms in the past but subsequently abandoned them for various reasons.
- The West must maintain the momentum for international support for Ukraine but will have to mitigate increasing pressure to consider negotiations as an option. If support for Ukraine is coerced through diplomatic pressure, there may be collateral damage along the way.
  - We need to understand that our threat perception in relation to China is not shared by most countries in the Global South. They prefer a pragmatic approach towards China's new role.
  - Even those who share our values do not want to be pressurised into picking sides.
  - Europe has to define its role in the multipolar world and show a more prominent global foreign policy profile. EU relations with Latin America have been on a backburner for over a decade. A once prominent role in the Middle East Peace Process has given way to insignificance. EU-Africa relations have become a cumbersome "tick the box" exercise and need to be reinvigorated with a truly strategic dialogue, whereas in Asia the EU still has to enhance its political clout to match its economic power.
  - Last but not least, we Europeans must recognise that while we try to promote values-based multilateralism, the majority of countries, including the United States, see international relations as transactional, short-term and guided by national interests.

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- 1 UN General Assembly (UNGA) 2023: Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 23 Feb 2023, A/RES/ES-11/6, 2 Mar 2023, in: <https://rb.gy/csluu> [31 May 2023].
- 2 The quote used in the caption of this article is from one of these conversations.
- 3 The G77 group is a coalition of 135 states, mostly developing countries, which was founded in 1964 to strengthen their negotiating power and assert their economic interests. China participates in the group's meetings but does not consider itself a member. Group declarations are therefore made by the G77 plus China.
- 4 In addition, ICC arrest warrants and trials against heads of state have often been ignored (Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir was able to travel freely within Africa) or thrown out. The cases against William Ruto and Uhuru Kenyatta from Kenya had to be dismissed for lack of sufficient evidence.
- 5 Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget 2023: Congress Approved \$113 Billion of Aid to Ukraine in 2022, 5 Jan 2023, in: <https://bit.ly/3AjxhXS> [31 May 2023].
- 6 Congressional Research Service 2022: U.S. Assistance for Sub-Saharan Africa: An Overview, 30 Aug 2022, in: <https://bit.ly/3H4G1KN> [31 May 2023].
- 7 Congressional Research Service 2022: U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation: From the Mérida Initiative to the Bicentennial Framework, 12 Dec 2022, in: <https://bit.ly/43JW9fw> [31 May 2023].
- 8 EU Neighbours East 2023: Ukraine: EU agrees further military support under the European Peace Facility, 2 Feb 2023, in: <https://bit.ly/41KdaEA> [31 May 2023].
- 9 Mali's military junta, which called in the Wagner Group for military assistance, even voted with Russia on 23 Feb 2023.
- 10 In the last six years, Panama, El Salvador, Dominican Republic, Nicaragua and lately Honduras have abandoned their relations with Taiwan. Only seven Latin American countries now maintain relations with Taiwan: Belize, Guatemala, Haiti, Paraguay, St. Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines.
- 11 Ostheimer, Andrea Ellen 2022: The United Nations and Global Multilateral Organisations as a Playground for American-Chinese Rivalry?, in: *New Realities of Multilateralism*, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Panorama 1/2022, 14 Nov 2022, pp. 7-26, in: <https://bit.ly/3Wxaglo> [31 May 2023].
- 12 Kyte, Rachel 2023: Comment: Green shoots, but World Bank meeting leaves a mountain to climb on climate finance, Reuters, 19 Apr 2023, in: <https://reut.rs/3LmfGvz> [31 May 2023].