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# **Europe's Strategic Imperative: Advancing Sustainability for Global Stability**

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## 1. Summary

*Europe's long-term security depends not only on military strength, but also on global stability shaped by sustainable development and effective multilateralism. From the outset, Donald Trump's second presidency has placed additional strain on an international system already under pressure, further weakening key pillars of the rules-based international order. Geopolitical divisions continue to paralyse the UN Security Council on critical issues.*

*In this increasingly fragmented landscape, the EU must advance a dual security imperative: strengthening its defence capabilities while tackling the root causes of instability beyond its borders.*

*This policy note outlines six strategic priorities for the EU to advance security through sustainability: (i) implementing the UN Pact for the Future; (ii) helping finance global sustainability through more innovative and coordinated mechanisms; (iii) shaping a strategy for EU engagement with the Global South that reflects geopolitical realities and mutual interests; (iv) delivering on the promise of Global Gateway by addressing operational shortcomings and sharpening its strategic focus; (v) rethinking the SDG framework beyond 2030 to sustain global development momentum; and (vi) winning the battle of narratives through stronger, more strategic communication and credible engagement.*

*These priorities are examined against the backdrop of growing geopolitical fragmentation and structural vulnerabilities that shape both global stability and Europe's strategic outlook.*

## 2. INTRODUCTION: WHY SUSTAINABILITY MATTERS FOR EUROPEAN SECURITY

Multilateralism is under siege, and Europe is feeling the consequences. Donald Trump's return to the White House has accelerated the US retreat from global cooperation, triggering deep uncertainty across the international system. Abrupt cuts to foreign aid, symbolic withdrawals from key institutions, and a transactional foreign policy posture have fractured long-standing alliances and weakened collective responses to shared challenges.

If the US were to retreat even further from the rules-based international order—as many fear it might—the risk is not just weakened cooperation but systemic unravelling. Europe would not only face greater threats in such a world, but also have fewer trusted partners to respond with. This question is no longer hypothetical.

As geopolitical rivalry intensifies and global governance frays, the EU's security depends not only on military deterrence, but on its ability to stabilise the international system through sustainability. The erosion of multilateral norms, combined with systemic shocks—from climate disruption to mass displacement—is generating new threats that no army alone can deter.

Europe's security posture must reflect this new reality. Strengthening defence capabilities is necessary—but insufficient. The EU must also tackle the deeper drivers of instability through global partnerships, investment in sustainable development, and credible leadership within a reimagined multilateral order. In this context, engagement with the Global South becomes not just a strategic priority, but a geopolitical imperative.



### 3. EUROPE'S DUAL SECURITY CHALLENGE

#### *A Shifting Alliance*

As the US retreats from global leadership, the EU faces growing pressure to assume greater strategic responsibility—not only for conventional defence but also for addressing the broader forces driving global instability.

Donald Trump has announced his intention to end both military and economic support for Ukraine's defence against Russia, placing the full burden of support on Europe. He has questioned the US commitment to NATO, further undermining transatlantic trust. In a symbolic and strategic shift, he entered direct negotiations with Russia—bypassing both Kyiv and European allies. These moves have strained transatlantic relations and underscored the need for Europe to accelerate its pursuit of strategic autonomy.

#### *Retreat and Repercussions*

This transatlantic shift is part of a broader US retreat from global engagement. Trump's drastic cuts to US foreign aid, along with withdrawals from the Paris Agreement, the World Health Organisation, and the UN Human Rights Council, have eroded collective responses to shared challenges. His Executive Order to review international organisations and treaties involving the US—based solely on alignment with US interests—casts further doubt on America's long-term commitment to multilateralism.<sup>1</sup> Such actions have heightened the risks for Europe.

#### *Global Pressures*

In addition to challenges stemming from the US, Europe faces a range of security threats, including China's influence, instability in the Middle East, cyber threats, and the rise of populism within the EU.

As transatlantic security evolves, the EU recognises the need to strengthen its ability to deter conflict through credible defence readiness. Key actions include sustaining support for Ukraine to reinforce deterrence, increasing defence spending—most notably through the €800 billion ReArm/Readiness 2030 Europe initiative—and developing the European defence industry through coordinated procurement and demand planning. In parallel, the EU is enhancing pan-European cooperation to improve capabilities, with a focus on increased munitions production and strategic assets, such as airlift and intelligence systems.<sup>2</sup>

#### *The Other Frontline*

But as the EU bolsters its military capabilities, it must confront a deeper, more diffuse threat landscape: instability driven by unsustainable development. Fragile states, resource scarcity, food insecurity, and climate-induced displacement are fuelling regional instability with direct consequences for European security. Meeting this challenge requires more than military readiness—it demands sustaining investment in sustainable development and enhancing global governance.

#### *Security's Dual Track*

Together, these challenges point to a dual security imperative: Europe must strengthen its capacity to deter conventional threats while addressing the deeper drivers of instability through investment in sustainable development and global cooperation.



#### 4. REVITALISING MULTILATERALISM

##### *Europe's Multilateral Challenge*

Multilateralism has long been central to Europe's global influence, enabling the EU to promote stability and address international challenges. Committed to a rules-based international order—with the UN at its core—the EU views multilateral cooperation as a defining feature of its external engagement. Yet, this approach faces pressure from US retrenchment, geopolitical rivalries, institutional gridlock, and the rise of assertive regional powers.

Key global institutions, including the UN, IMF, and WTO, are under growing reform pressure to adapt to 21st-century realities and reaffirm their relevance and effectiveness. Rival governance models, such as the BRICS and alternative institutions, such as the New Development Bank, are gaining momentum.<sup>3</sup>

The UN Security Council, in particular, has become emblematic of institutional paralysis—unable to act on global crises because of deepening divisions among its permanent members. Concerns are mounting that the US may further disengage from global governance structures, accelerating the erosion of the multilateral order and undermining efforts to uphold international norms.

##### *The Burden of Leadership*

In this context, the burden of leadership is shifting—and Europe can no longer assume that the US will serve as the international system's stabilising anchor. To respond to growing global fragmentation, the EU must join forces with partners to maintain and adapt the multilateral order.

At the Summit of the Future in September 2024, world leaders reaffirmed the urgent need to renew global governance and endorsed the UN Pact for the Future, intended to drive far-reaching institutional reform.<sup>4</sup> The EU backed this agenda and took a leading role in advancing a more effective and inclusive multilateral system. The Pact enshrines key commitments—including Security Council reform, accelerated implementation of the 2030 Agenda, enhanced digital cooperation, and greater youth participation—reflecting a shared recognition of the need for systemic transformation.

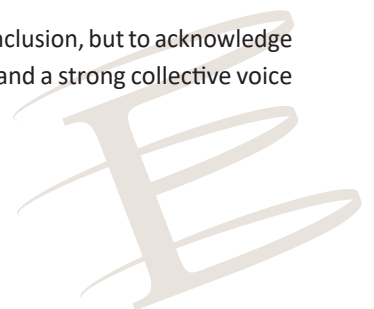
But progress at the Summit fell short of the of the ambition set out by UN Secretary-General Guterres, who has called for a fundamental renewal of global governance.<sup>5</sup> Despite steps forward, the outcome remained modest against the scale of the challenges.<sup>6</sup>

##### *Reform or Retreat*

Multilateralism now stands at a crossroads. Traditional approaches fall short. The international community must preserve its core principles while ensuring that multilateral cooperation advances to meet today's complex realities.

Paradoxically, meaningful reform depends on the very cooperation that is hardest to secure. Navigating this tension requires a clear-eyed assessment of the available options, and an understanding that progress will emerge through a process of iterative learning, adaptation, and engagement.

Efforts to sustain and renew multilateralism must engage the Global South—not as a gesture of inclusion, but to acknowledge the shifting global power dynamics.<sup>7</sup> With growing demographic weight, economic influence, and a strong collective voice



in institutions such as the UN, the Global South can play a central role in shaping the future of multilateral cooperation.

The legitimacy of reform efforts—those led or supported by the EU—will depend in part on forging more equal partnerships with countries of the Global South and developing a deeper understanding of their diversity, interests, and expectations. While full consensus may not always be possible, the EU must advance reform with those willing to move forward.

## 5. EUROPE AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH IN A MULTIPOLAR ERA

### *What's in a Name?*

The term “Global South” is widely used to describe a broad and diverse group of countries that often align on key positions in global affairs. While the term is politically useful, it remains contested—encompassing states with vastly different geographical, political, economic, and cultural contexts. It is not a geographical label, but rather a political construct shaped by shared histories and structural power asymmetries. Leaders such as India's prime minister and Brazil's president have invoked it to underscore common interests and forge alliances.

While there is no universally accepted definition, many associate the Global South with the 134-member Group of 77 (G77), which represents developing countries at the UN. China, despite its economic power, has aligned itself with the G77 and is seeking a leadership role within the Global South.<sup>8</sup>

Many countries in the Global South share legacies of colonialism, economic marginalisation, and a strong focus on development. While their diversity demands tailored engagement—there is no universal approach—they often converge on four underlying features that shape their international outlook:

### *Shared Ground*

First, there is deep dissatisfaction with the existing international order, which many view as skewed in favour of Western interests. This dissatisfaction fuels demands for a more equitable distribution of power in global governance, including long-overdue institutional reform.

Second, these countries express discontent at the West's failure to meet key commitments—most notably promises to make global institutions more inclusive and representative and the lack of progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Third, many Global South governments favour multi-alignment—engaging with multiple powers without forming exclusive strategic ties. India's simultaneous engagement with Russia, the US, and other partners exemplifies this approach.

Fourth, there is growing confidence in the legitimacy of alternative development models. Rather than importing Western frameworks, many countries seek solutions that reflect their own economic and social contexts.

Together, these perspectives shape how the Global South approaches multilateralism and development. Climate justice, for example, is a broadly shared priority—rooted in calls for equity, historical responsibility, and greater support for adaptation. This worldview also informs criticism of unfulfilled Western commitments and amplifies demands for a more balanced global system.



### ***Europe's Choice***

For the EU, this environment makes deeper engagement with the Global South urgent. These countries are becoming influential as their economic and political weight grows. If the US continues to retreat from multilateral cooperation, building resilient partnerships with the Global South will be essential to sustaining global governance and avoiding a vacuum that rivals can exploit. The BRICS countries overtook the G7 in their share of global GDP (measured in purchasing power parity) in 2018, accounting for 35% of global output in 2024, compared to 30% for the G7.<sup>9</sup>

Strengthening cooperation with key Global South partners and regional organisations, such as the African Union and ASEAN, is vital to maintaining the EU's global relevance. The December 2024 EU–MERCOSUR political agreement marks a step in the right direction. Deeper political and economic ties with these partners can help the EU build coalitions around shared priorities—including trade, security, and climate action.

Despite its strategic importance, Europe's engagement with the Global South faces significant challenges—chief among them a growing erosion of trust. Many countries accuse the EU of double standards, citing its unified support for Ukraine in contrast to its divided response to the war in Gaza. Palestine carries deep symbolic weight across the Global South, reflecting broader historical grievances.

In an increasingly fragmented global landscape, the EU's ability to engage the Global South as co-shapers of international cooperation—rather than passive recipients—is essential to sustaining its global influence.

### ***Potential of Perceptions***

Yet despite tensions, external perceptions of the EU remain largely positive—providing a valuable foundation for rebuilding trust and renewing engagement. Recent global surveys show that the EU is widely viewed as a constructive and capable global actor—an image the Union can leverage to deepen engagement with the Global South.

A November 2024 survey by the European Council on Foreign Relations across 24 countries found that people around the world see the EU as a major power, able to deal with the US and China on equal terms. Strikingly, belief in the EU's global influence is often stronger outside Europe than within it. While Europeans remain sceptical of their own strategic weight, publics in countries such as India, Indonesia, and Kenya are more confident in the EU's role on the world stage.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, a 2023 Pew Research Center survey—also covering 24 countries—found that views of the EU are generally favourable, including in key Global South countries. For instance, 65% of respondents in Kenya and 45% in Indonesia held positive views of the EU, although many remain neutral or unengaged.<sup>11</sup> These findings suggest that, despite visibility gaps, the EU is well positioned to build trust and expand its influence.

Europe must also recognise that Global South countries are not simply seeking aid or rhetorical solidarity. Many of them are looking for fairer partnerships, opportunities for economic growth, and a greater voice in global decision-making. With US commitment in doubt, many may look to Europe—if it offers inclusive and transparent leadership and communicates a clear vision of cooperation.

Ultimately, if the EU aims to uphold a rules-based international order in an era of US retrenchment, its partnerships with countries in the Global South must become more strategic, more equal, and more resilient. This requires investing not



only in the right priorities but in sustained, values-based political engagement grounded in mutual respect and long-term commitment. The alternative is a continued drift toward a fragmented world in which rival powers shape norms and institutions to their own advantage. Deep EU engagement with the Global South is a strategic imperative for the future of multilateralism.

## 6. COMPETING INFLUENCES: CHINA, RUSSIA, AND THE EU'S ROLE

### *Rivals on the Rise*

Europe's efforts to deepen cooperation with the Global South are unfolding in a competitive geopolitical landscape, where the expanding influence of China, Russia, and other actors is shaping partner expectations and complicating engagement. While Russia prioritises security cooperation, China has positioned itself as an economic powerhouse through large-scale infrastructure financing across Africa and Latin America.

A central element of China's global strategy is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has channelled substantial investment into regional infrastructure. Since 2013, China has provided over 100 billion USD to Africa alone, financing projects in transport, energy, telecommunications, and other sectors.<sup>12</sup> Several of these projects adopt Chinese technological standards, raising concerns about long-term dependency and strategic influence.

China and Russia are leveraging multilateral platforms as alternatives to Western-led institutions to expand their global influence. In 2024, the BRICS bloc expanded to include Egypt, Iran, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates, followed by Indonesia's accession and the addition of a broader group of 'partner' countries in early 2025. This growing membership highlights the BRICS's emerging role as a forum for economic and political cooperation beyond the Western sphere.<sup>13</sup>

Although the BRICS remain a diverse coalition, they provide a platform for China and Russia to promote governance models that diverge from Western frameworks. For many countries, joining the BRICS is less about rejecting the West than about broadening strategic options and pursuing multi-alignment.

The group's rising profile reflects a shift in global power dynamics—and presents a strategic challenge the EU must confront with resolve. If the United States continues to scale back its international role, these dynamics are likely to intensify—further weakening traditional institutions and deepening competition over influence, standards, and values.

### *Europe's Global Play*

To navigate this landscape, the EU must define a role that aligns with partner priorities while countering perceptions that it is advancing a purely Western agenda. Positioned as a transparent, values-based alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the EU's Global Gateway aims to strengthen the Union's global influence by supporting sustainable development, democratic governance, and more resilient supply chains.

In December 2024, President von der Leyen tasked Commissioner Jozef Síkela with advancing Global Gateway as the EU's flagship instrument for international partnerships, describing it as "the most attractive and integrated offer to our partners." She had previously emphasised its importance at the 2023 Sustainable Development Summit, highlighting it as a key tool for mobilising private capital and accelerating progress on the 2030 Agenda, in response to the UN Secretary-General's call for greater ambition.<sup>14</sup>



Launched in 2021, the initiative aims to mobilise €300 billion by 2027 to support investment in five key sectors: digital infrastructure, energy, transport, health, and education. It aligns with the long-term development goals of partner countries and reaffirms the EU's commitment to fair, rules-based economic engagement—offering a model grounded in transparency, high standards, and sustainability.<sup>15</sup>

Most of the 264 selected flagship projects are now underway,<sup>16</sup> and the Team Europe approach has gained traction by enabling EU Member States to coordinate investments more strategically. But implementation has been slow, and significant operational challenges remain. In a context of intensifying geopolitical rivalry and declining Western coherence, the credibility of Global Gateway will depend on its ability to deliver visible, tangible results—and to position the EU as a consistent and trusted partner in an increasingly contested development landscape.

Yet credibility depends on more than delivering projects. For many partners, it also hinges on how Europe balances its values and interests—particularly when engaging with governments that reject Western models. In this context, the EU must confront a growing strategic dilemma: how to uphold its principles while forging the pragmatic partnerships needed to sustain multilateral cooperation.

This challenge lies at the heart of the EU's ongoing effort to reconcile its values with its strategic interests.

## 7. RECONCILING VALUES AND INTERESTS

The EU has a long history of engaging with political systems that do not share its values. From the Southern Neighbourhood to Central Asia and beyond, its foreign policy has often required interaction with regimes that challenge its liberal democratic ideals. This reality has compelled the EU to navigate a careful balance between advancing its interests and upholding its principles.

The 2016 EU Global Strategy introduced the concept of principled pragmatism to guide external action in an increasingly complex world.<sup>17</sup> It proposed a middle path between naïve idealism and cynical realpolitik—acknowledging that the EU must engage globally while remaining anchored in its core values. Yet nearly a decade later, the EU still struggles to apply this concept consistently across its foreign policy. Tensions between normative commitments and strategic interests persist, and there is no blueprint for translating principled pragmatism into practice.

This experience highlights the need for a case-by-case approach—one that upholds core values while recognising that different contexts require tailored tools, partners, and strategies. The EU must assess each situation on its own merits, determining where and how to engage without compromising its credibility as a values-based actor.

Striking this balance demands more than diplomatic finesse. It calls for clearer operational guidance, stronger institutional coordination, and a sustained commitment to long-term partnerships. Where alignment on human rights and democratic principles is possible, the EU should support and deepen it. Where it is not, the Union should nevertheless pursue engagement—guided by its values and anchored in transparency, accountability, and shared interests.

Reviving principled pragmatism requires renewed political commitment and greater conceptual clarity. It must shape policy, guide resources, and anchor the EU's engagement with both major powers and fragile states.



Translating this concept from abstraction into practice will be challenging—especially where EU values are seen as a barrier rather than a bridge. Yet by approaching engagement with humility, consistency, and strategic patience, the EU can hope to rebuild trust and strengthen its role as a credible and resilient global partner.

## 8. THE SECURITY-SUSTAINABILITY NEXUS

Reconciling values and interests also demands a broader conception of security—one that addresses the root causes of instability and connects development, resilience, and peace. As noted above, the EU's security cannot rest on military force alone. Today's threats extend far beyond armed conflict: economic instability, climate change, pandemics, and technological disruption transcend borders and destabilise regions of strategic importance to Europe, including its immediate neighbourhood.

### *Beyond the Battlefield*

The EU's response must integrate sustainable development with traditional defence. Security and development are mutually reinforcing—neither can advance without the other.

Where security falters, investment declines, growth stalls, and instability spreads. In fragile regions, conflict undermines development and deepens economic hardship. Protecting critical infrastructure and countering cyber threats are essential for resilience, while protracted conflicts drain resources and hinder progress.

### *Security through Development*

In turn, sustainable development fosters peace by generating economic opportunities, strengthening social cohesion, and promoting political inclusion. Robust public services—particularly in health and education—help prevent crises and build trust in institutions. Together, security and development form the foundation of global stability and the protection of human rights.

### *Climate and Conflicts*

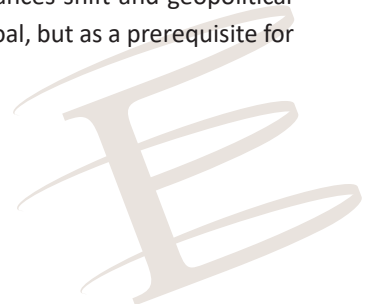
In recent years, the EU has increasingly recognised the link between sustainable development and security, with climate security emerging as a particularly prominent example.<sup>18</sup>

The Pact for the Future reaffirms the UN's view that sustainable development, peace and security, and human rights are “interlinked and mutually reinforcing.” As the Pact puts it: “We cannot have one without the others.”<sup>19</sup>

Addressing the UN Security Council in February 2025 on the maintenance of international peace and security, Secretary-General Guterres reinforced this message, stating: “Sustainable peace requires sustainable development.”<sup>20</sup>

### *Stability Needs Sustainability*

Sustainable development is not optional—it is a global imperative. Developing countries are calling for accelerated progress on the 2030 Agenda, as they stand to lose the most if it falls short. As global security alliances shift and geopolitical rivalries intensify, policymakers must view sustainable development not as an aspirational goal, but as a prerequisite for lasting stability.



## 9. COUNTRIES IN CRISIS

The connection between inadequate sustainable development and insecurity is evident in the deepening crises affecting many developing countries. Economic fragility now threatens not only their national progress but also regional and global stability.

In the early 21st century, policymakers anticipated a new era of growth. Many developing countries experienced rapid economic expansion, increased international integration, and a growing share of global GDP.

But early optimism has given way to a more fragile and uneven development trajectory. Since the 2008 financial crisis, growth has slowed, investment has stagnated, and productivity gains have remained limited. Instead of narrowing the development gap, many low- and middle-income countries are falling further behind. While wealthier nations have largely recovered from shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic—benefiting from greater fiscal capacity—poorer countries continue to grapple with rising debt and severely constrained fiscal space.<sup>21</sup>

In 2023, the total external debt of low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) reached US\$8.8 trillion.<sup>22</sup> For the poorest among them, this burden has become unsustainable, severely limiting their capacity to deliver even basic public services. In many cases, debt servicing now exceeds combined government spending on health and education, while capital outflows surpass official development assistance—further deepening fiscal strain and undermining development progress.

This financial pressure presents a serious threat to the 2030 Agenda. Current projections indicate that 622 million people could be living in extreme poverty by the end of the decade, with even more affected by hunger and malnutrition. Geopolitical realignments and shifting donor priorities are compounding these challenges. In an increasingly fragmented international system, collective responses are more difficult to mobilise—intensifying the consequences of inaction.

Europe cannot remain insulated. Widespread financial fragility and unmet development needs in the Global South risk fuelling migration pressures, disrupting trade flows, and undermining regional stability—all with direct implications for Europe's economic and security interests. If left unaddressed, this widening gap could entrench geopolitical divides, erode trust in international cooperation, and create openings for rival powers to reshape global norms and expand their influence in regions of strategic importance.

## 10. EU DEVELOPMENT POLICY IN TRANSITION

The European Union, a leading advocate of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is reorienting its development policy. Although it remains the world's largest aid donor, it is increasingly reallocating funds toward broader policy objectives—many of which still qualify as official development assistance (ODA) under current OECD criteria. Other regions around the world are adopting similar approaches.

This shift is driven by fiscal constraints and an increasing emphasis on strategic objectives that extend beyond traditional development goals. In her mission letter to the Commissioner for International Partnerships, Jozef Síkela, President von der Leyen reaffirmed the EU's commitment to development and poverty eradication. At the same time, she acknowledged that the Union had adopted “a more assertive approach in aligning its interests with its partnerships in an increasingly contested and unstable world”.<sup>23</sup>



Emerging priorities—such as aid to Ukraine, humanitarian assistance, and climate finance—now take precedence, while spending on refugee-related support has surged. As a result, fewer resources are available for core objectives like poverty reduction, undermining efforts to advance sustainable development.

This reorientation reflects broader fiscal pressures, as EU member states reassess aid commitments amid rising security concerns. Development budgets are increasingly strained, compounded by reduced contributions from the US and the EU's preparations for negotiations on its post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework.

Many EU countries continue to fall short of NATO's defence spending target of 2% of GDP, even as former President Trump has called for raising the benchmark to 5%. European defence spending reached record levels in 2024, with budgets increasing by more than 11% in real terms.<sup>24</sup>

Growing concern surrounds the possibility that rising defence expenditures are diverting resources away from development cooperation. A recent estimate by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) suggests this trend could result in a 31% reduction in official development assistance (ODA) between 2024 and 2029.<sup>25</sup>

This reorientation is likely to raise concerns among partners in the Global South about the EU's long-term commitment—especially at a time when the United States is also retreating from its role in international development leadership.

## 11. A STRATEGIC SYNTHESIS: SECURING EUROPE THROUGH SUSTAINABILITY

This strategic synthesis begins with the recognition that, although multilateralism is under pressure, preserving it is essential—as it provides the very foundation for meaningful reform. Given the challenges of securing broad international cooperation, the EU's multilateral approach should be guided by overarching principles rather than a rigid roadmap. This policy note proposes five such principles:

*Realism* requires acknowledging the EU's limitations amid global power shifts that have produced a multipolar order marked by intensifying geopolitical rivalry. *Pragmatism* should guide efforts to achieve progress in targeted areas where consensus is possible. *Persistence* is essential to sustain engagement despite delays and setbacks. *Flexibility* will enable the EU to adapt to shifting geopolitical dynamics and explore alternative formats such as minilateralism. *Ingenuity* can enhance the EU's impact by leveraging resources, partnerships, and digital tools in innovative ways.

Together, these principles reinforce the EU's ambition to help shape a more inclusive, responsive, and effective multilateral order. They should be understood as part of a longer-term, adaptive process—one that demands flexibility, persistence, and political judgment, recognising that progress may vary across different areas. The EU should pursue these priorities simultaneously where possible, seizing political openings to promote security through sustainability, guided by a spirit of renewal shaped by continuous learning, strategic adaptation, and gradual progress.

### 11.1 Implementing the Pact for the Future

In line with recent European Council conclusions,<sup>26</sup> the EU should prioritise translating the Pact's commitments into outcomes—particularly by accelerating progress on the 2030 Agenda and helping to close the global financing gap. This acceleration, a core element of the Pact for the Future, seeks to keep the 2030 Agenda at the heart of global policy. While the Summit of the Future delivered only a modest boost to governance reform, it produced

key outcomes, including the integration of future generations into UN decision-making and an expanded UN role in digital governance.

The Pact for the Future sets out 56 measures to strengthen multilateralism across development, security, technology, digital cooperation, and human rights. The UN Secretariat has translated these into 363 sub-actions, over 80 per cent of which are to be implemented by UN Member States, with the remainder led by the UN itself, international financial institutions (IFIs), and other relevant actors.<sup>27</sup>

Delivering on the Pact for the Future will require both strategic vision and institutional capacity. To ensure effective follow-up, the EU should designate a dedicated team within the European External Action Service to coordinate implementation across EU institutions, Member States, and external partners—working in close alignment with the United Nations. The aim should be to ensure that implementation proceeds as an ongoing process, rather than a one-off exercise.

As part of its mandate, the coordinating team would track and evaluate progress, ensure alignment with key EU strategies—such as the Green Deal and the Digital Agenda—and serve as a focal point for international financial institutions. This focused approach would provide the continuity, oversight, and leadership needed to deliver results.

Key milestones in 2025 include the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (June–July in Seville) and the Second World Summit for Social Development (November in Qatar), followed by additional high-level meetings, leading to the Heads of State Review in 2028.

The EU must engage proactively in these forums—building alliances, advancing financing solutions, and championing fairer global governance. Mobilising investment and working closely with partners, including those from the Global South, will be essential to turning commitments into tangible progress.

### 11.2 Financing Global Sustainability

Delivering on the ambitions of the Pact for the Future requires more than political will—it demands credible financial commitment. For the EU, aligning its financial strategies with broader strategic objectives is essential to reinforcing its role as a credible global actor. Yet despite growing needs, the fiscal space for new development commitments is narrowing, as defence and security imperatives increasingly shape budgetary priorities.

A robust financing strategy remains critical to implementing the Pact, with the Financing for Development Conference serving as a key milestone in efforts to close the funding gap and advance the 2030 Agenda. Secretary-General Guterres has underscored the scale of the challenge, citing an annual shortfall of \$4 trillion—surpassing the \$2.5 trillion spent on global military expenditures last year.<sup>28</sup>

Despite pressing financing needs, many donors have remained reluctant to increase development funding. During the preparatory meetings, the EU refrained from announcing higher levels of ODA, instead emphasising the importance of using existing resources, instruments, and partnerships more efficiently.

The EU aims to mobilise both public and private finance at national and international levels and has called for contributions from a broad range of stakeholders. It also promotes enhanced cooperation among key institutions—including the UN,



international financial institutions (IFIs), the WTO, the Paris Club, the Financial Stability Board, the OECD, and the G20—guided by the principles of coherence, effectiveness, and complementarity.

Rather than proposing new structures, the EU favours strengthening existing frameworks, such as the Paris Pact for People and Planet and the Hamburg Sustainability Conference.<sup>29</sup> By optimising current resources and enhancing global coordination, the EU can continue to support sustainable development—even in the absence of major new funding. This approach reflects a broader trend among donors toward prioritising alternative financing mechanisms over increases in public contributions.

The US decision to reduce foreign aid has cast a shadow over conference preparations. It has rejected the notion that national success depends on increased donor funding and has pushed to limit the outcome document to a “concise, voluntary, and non-binding” text.<sup>30</sup> This position has further strained the multilateral consensus on financing and risks undermining the credibility of collective action.

In this context, the lack of new funding underscores the urgency of prioritising innovative financing solutions and deepening international cooperation. Fostering partnerships, improving efficiency, and leveraging private capital will be essential to driving progress. The EU, with its institutional weight and longstanding commitment to multilateralism, should take a leading role in securing a constructive conference outcome. In today’s environment, simply stabilising current development cooperation levels could already constitute success.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, available funding is unlikely to match the scale of the needs.

While key decisions—such as debt restructuring and aid allocation—ultimately rest with developed countries, genuine progress will also depend on trust, cooperation, and leadership from partners in the Global South. Their full engagement is essential to building effective and inclusive global solutions that reflect shared priorities and responsibilities.

### 11.3 Shaping a Strategy for Engagement with the Global South

The EU should pursue a coherent and forward-looking approach to engagement with the Global South—strengthening its global influence, enhancing policy coherence, and reinforcing its credibility as a reliable partner. If well-executed, such a strategy would serve EU interests by bolstering multilateralism and advancing cooperative responses to global challenges. Through partnership with the Global South, the EU can help shape a more inclusive, rules-based international order that fosters stability, sustainable development, and equitable growth.

To move beyond ad hoc policymaking, the EU’s strategy must reflect the realities of a multipolar world, acknowledge historical sensitivities, and adapt to diverse regional dynamics. As the recent expansion of BRICS demonstrates, many countries are seeking diversified partnerships. In this context, the EU must position itself as a credible and equal partner—offering added value through its inclusive development model, strong sectoral expertise, and steadfast commitment to the rules-based international order and multilateral cooperation.

The strategy should clearly articulate objectives, set out the means and methods of implementation, and define how the EU differentiates itself as a trusted, long-term partner. It must also reflect the EU’s evolving geopolitical role and respond to intensifying competition for influence in key regions.

Addressing these shifts requires more than operational adjustments—it calls for a renewed vision of the EU’s global role. The 2016 Global Strategy is outdated in light of the geopolitical shifts shaping the multipolar order. Yet rather





than waiting for a new overarching framework, the EU should begin integrating fresh thinking into its approach to the Global South.

Anchoring this engagement within a broader geopolitical perspective will help ensure alignment with EU external action objectives and reinforce partnerships at both global and regional levels. A hybrid approach—combining forward-looking ambition with pragmatic adaptation—will allow the EU to make steady progress while laying the groundwork for a future global strategy. Shaping such a strategy will require the EU to determine how it can sustain multilateralism in the event of further US disengagement—and with whom it must collaborate to defend it.

To succeed, the EU's approach must address several interrelated dimensions, including:

- The EU's role in a multipolar world: How can the EU strengthen its strategic autonomy while deepening global and regional partnerships?
- Building trust and credibility: How can the EU pursue a principled and coherent foreign policy, especially towards the Global South?
- Sustainable development and economic cooperation: How can the EU balance security concerns with long-term investment and reshape trade, investment, and infrastructure partnerships?
- Multilateralism and global governance: How can the EU contribute to making global institutions more inclusive and representative?
- Technology and digital partnerships: How can the EU support digital transformation and innovation that drive equitable and sustainable development?
- Strategic communication and narrative: How can the EU strengthen its messaging, counter disinformation, and build lasting trust by presenting a credible alternative to competing global models?
- Balancing values and interests: How can the EU engage with authoritarian regimes while upholding its commitment to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law?
- Internal coordination and adaptability: How can the EU improve coherence between its institutions and in working with Member States, while adapting to diverse regional contexts?

#### 11.4 Delivering on the Promise of Global Gateway

As outlined earlier, Global Gateway is the EU's flagship instrument for fostering international partnerships amid intensifying geopolitical competition. To fulfil its potential, the EU must address two key challenges.

First, persistent implementation shortcomings must be resolved. Reviews have highlighted the need for more timely and comprehensive information, greater transparency in project selection, stronger private sector engagement, and better coordination across Team Europe. Civil society and other stakeholders have also criticised the initiative for insufficient attention to local contexts and a lack of inclusiveness in decision-making.

Second, the strategic orientation of the initiative remains contested. Can Global Gateway function as a multi-purpose instrument—aligning EU and partner interests across sectors such as energy, transport, climate, education, and health—while also promoting good governance in contexts shaped by authoritarian or hybrid regimes? What are the implications for development cooperation focused on poverty reduction? Could this traditional objective be sidelined?





To address these concerns, the EU must act on both fronts: strengthening project implementation and sharpening Global Gateway's strategic direction. Only by doing so can the initiative fulfil its potential as a transformative force in global development.

The EU must also improve how it communicates the geopolitical vision underpinning Global Gateway—highlighting mutual benefits, local ownership, and democratic values—while clearly distinguishing it from state-led initiatives such as China's Belt and Road. Framing the initiative as a platform for equitable partnership will be essential to building lasting trust.

### 11.5 Beyond 2030: Rethinking the SDG Framework

While delays in implementing the 2030 Agenda have received significant attention—and efforts to accelerate progress are underway—there has been insufficient focus on development cooperation beyond the target year.

A case in point is President von der Leyen's mission letter to Commissioner Sikela, which tasks him with promoting the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals, but makes no mention of the preparatory work needed for the post-2030 period—a responsibility the Commission must address within its current mandate. This omission is striking given that the Pact for the Future sets September 2027 as the moment when the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development will consider how to advance sustainable development by and beyond 2030.

As the world's largest development donor and a strong advocate of multilateralism, the EU can—and should—play a leading role in shaping the post-2030 agenda. Doing so will require both internal reflection and coordinated engagement with Member States and global partners. A well-prepared EU position will be essential to navigate competing interests and ensure a credible voice in the debate. Waiting until 2027 risks ceding influence to others and weakening the EU's strategic standing.

Three options exist: extending the current goals—of which fewer than 20% are on track—likely with some modifications; developing an entirely new framework for development cooperation; or accepting the possibility that no successor framework will emerge at all.

At a stakeholder meeting during last year's Summit of the Future, participants noted that most governments favoured the first option.<sup>32</sup> But this raises a fundamental question: why renew a framework that has struggled to deliver? More importantly, what assurances exist that an updated version will attract the scale of funding Secretary-General Guterres has repeatedly called for—so far, without success?

Designing a new framework for development cooperation would be an ambitious undertaking—particularly in a geopolitical climate that makes global consensus more difficult to achieve. Yet both this option and the possibility of having no framework at all warrant serious political attention. Avoiding the discussion would carry its own risks—for global cooperation and for the EU's credibility as a forward-looking actor.

With a wide range of stakeholders involved, both within the EU and internationally, coordinated and strategic engagement on the post-2030 agenda must begin now.



### 11.6 Winning the Battle of Narratives

With competing narratives shaping the world, the EU must make communication a central part of its external action. The starting point is a simple but often overlooked insight: the EU's offer and its communication must be mutually reinforcing. It is not enough to make a strong offer—the EU must explain it, own it, and adapt its message to the expectations of its partners, notably in the Global South.<sup>33</sup>

Today, the EU is competing both on offers and on narratives. Other powers are promoting more state-driven or transactional models that resonate in many parts of the world. To stand out, the EU must both deliver high-quality, values-based partnerships and communicate them clearly and forcefully.

Under the Team Europe approach, the EU should improve communication coherence across its institutions—including EU Delegations, national diplomatic missions and agencies—by coordinating messages to present a unified stance. Stronger partnerships with like-minded countries and active engagement in multilateral frameworks will help amplify the EU's voice. Meeting the growing demand for strategic communication will also require better coordination and a significant increase in resources and capacity.

Countering disinformation must be part of this effort. Russian and Chinese narratives distort the EU's actions and intentions, often framing the EU as an unreliable or hypocritical actor. A strong counter-narrative is essential—not based on confrontation, but on credibility and transparency. This includes financial support for independent media and public-interest broadcasting in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, helping to build local media ecosystems that promote pluralism and democratic values.

Strategic communication is not just about branding—it is about building trust, legitimacy, and long-term relationships. Effective engagement requires the EU to understand its actions' impact, listen to feedback, and adapt its messaging to local realities. Too often, the EU's complex institutional set-up and cautious messaging style have limited its impact abroad. Clearer, more confident storytelling—grounded in results and common interests—can help the EU project itself as a reliable, forward-looking partner.

To match its global ambitions, the EU's communication must grow from a supporting function to a strategic asset. The EU must invest in a communication strategy that is proactive, not reactive; decentralised, yet coherent; and grounded in both principles and pragmatism. Delivering results is essential—but so is making those results visible, meaningful, and connected to a broader vision of shared progress.



## 12. CONCLUSION

Europe's security depends not only on military strength, but also on global stability shaped by sustainable development and effective multilateralism. Promoting sustainability is not just a moral duty—it is a strategic necessity, as instability beyond Europe's borders affects its own prosperity and security.

The EU must pair investment in defence with a renewed commitment to global cooperation, sustainable development, and climate resilience. If Europe does not lead, others will shape the global order in its place.

Revitalising multilateralism, engaging the Global South, aligning finance with strategic priorities, and shaping a credible narrative are essential—and interdependent. Together, they are central to strengthening both global sustainability and European security.

The challenges ahead are immense, and the international environment will remain volatile. There are no easy answers. In this context, the EU must treat the search for effective responses—including how to sustain multilateralism if the US retreats further—as a process of iterative learning, adaptation and engagement.

In a contested and fast-changing world, the EU cannot wait for ideal conditions. It must act where space exists, even amid uncertainty. Progress will be uneven—but with vision and resolve, the EU can strengthen its role as a credible global actor.



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