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BLOG — POST

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In today's world, is the European Union destined to abandon its values and multilateralism in its foreign policy?



On 9 March, speaking to European Union ambassadors gathered in Brussels, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, suggested a fundamental reorientation of the European Union's foreign policy. Firstly, with regard to multilateralism, which, beyond the usual diplomatic niceties, seems now largely outdated, and secondly, in the way we engage with our external partners, which should in future be guided primarily by the Union's interests. Many of the observations on which the Commission President bases her argument are well-founded. The conclusions she draws from them, however, raise more questions than they actually provide answers. Let us review them.

Firstly, can and should the European Union acknowledge the death of multilateralism and international law? In a sense, it is already doing so in practice due to the inaction resulting from the lack of consensus amongst its Member States on a vast number of issues, in an area that remains subject to the unanimity rule.

The flagrant and repeated violations of international law, United Nations resolutions and even the rulings of the International Court of Justice by Benjamin Netanyahu's Israeli government have so far elicited no strong reaction from the EU or most of its member states.

Nor has the European Union taken any action to protect the International Criminal Court (ICC), despite it being based on its territory, and its judges, particularly those from Europe, against the extraterritorial sanctions imposed by Donald Trump following the indictment of Benjamin Netanyahu for crimes against humanity. Yet since 1996, the European Union has had a 'blocking statute' specifically designed to counter such measures by prohibiting European companies from complying with such sanctions.

Nor did the Union deem it necessary to legally condemn Donald Trump's violations of international trade rules last year, or the operations he launched this year in complete disregard of international law, first in Venezuela and now against Iran.

There is, of course, no doubt that international law and multilateralism are today severely weakened by the repeated attacks from figures such as Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu. It also seems clear that it is unrealistic to expect a simple return to the status quo ante in the near future. That status quo ante was, moreover, far from impressive in itself: if multilateralism is so weakened today, it is also because it had failed to truly demonstrate either its effectiveness or its fairness over the preceding decades.

Established before the great wave of decolonisation in the 1950s and 1960s, the current multilateral frameworks do not, in particular, accord the countries of the Global South a place commensurate with what they represent today, whether in the Security Council, the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank... And it is one of the major mistakes made by Europeans to have dragged their feet in undertaking this reform of multilateralism during the 1990s and 2000s.

I • The Union cannot abandon multilateralism

The EU, which is itself a form of multilateral body, was built entirely on the concept of law and the rule of law. The aim was to put an end to the excesses that had led European countries to spread war and desolation across Europe and indeed the entire world for five centuries, ultimately culminating, in a sort of apotheosis, in the horrific tragedies of the two world wars of the 20th century.

Unlike France, the United Kingdom, Spain, Portugal or Germany, Russia, China and the United States have never truly renounced their imperial ambitions. It is not surprising that they are now at the forefront of the destruction of an international order based on respect for borders and the non-use of force. But Europe, for its part, cannot return to that tragic history. The European project can only exist if it defends the rule of law against force, and justice against arbitrariness.

That is why the European Union cannot abandon multilateralism. It cannot start trying to play in the same league and by the same lack of rules as Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin or Benjamin Netanyahu. Not only because it lacks the means, particularly military ones, and would certainly lose, but above all because it would lose its soul and its *raison d'être*. And it would probably not survive.

II • The EU must unite and lead the reconstruction of multilateralism

The European Union urgently needs effective international law and multilateralism. If the old multilateral institutions have become too dysfunctional and obsolete, the EU's policy cannot simply be to take note of this. It can and must take the lead among those who wish to rebuild them on new foundations suited to today's world. This is what Mark Carney, the Canadian Prime Minister, suggested in particular through his proposal for an alliance of middle powers, to which the European Union has so far given no follow-up.

This rebuilding of multilateralism is all the more necessary given that we can only hope to tackle the major problems currently threatening the very survival of the human race – such as climate change and, more broadly, the ecological crisis – within a global framework. This is certainly the least of Donald Trump's or Vladimir Putin's concerns, but it absolutely cannot be so for Europe. Following the United States' withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, the European Union – which has set an example to the whole world with the adoption of the Green Deal – now bears a paramount responsibility for safeguarding collective multilateral action against global warming.

III • Should we abandon the Union's values in favour of its own interests?

Furthermore, the Union's foreign policy and the bilateral relations we maintain with our external partners have, until now, always included a strong emphasis on commitment to democracy, freedoms and fundamental rights. In theory, these values were supposed to determine the extent of our engagement with these partners, as is the case, for example, with the Association Agreement between the European Union and Israel, which is supposed to be conditional upon that country's respect for fundamental human rights.

There has always been a tension between the 'values' dimension and the 'interests' dimension in the EU's relations with its external partners. This balance, which is always difficult to strike, is constantly the subject of difficult political debates. This has been the case in particular for many years regarding relations with the Chinese communist dictatorship, given in particular its actions in Tibet and Xinjiang. This is an issue that has led to several MEPs and think-tank researchers facing sanctions from the Chinese authorities. Furthermore, an excessive emphasis on this 'values' dimension has at times been perceived by our partners as a form of neo-colonial interference, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. And this has sometimes been an obstacle to the development of our relations with certain countries.

In the current context, should we now abandon this dimension and, in turn, enter transactional bilateral relations conditioned solely by our own interests? Given the gravity of the threats facing the European Union due to the de facto alliance between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, we will probably have to be less choosy than in the past regarding our potential partners.

IV • We must indeed develop our relations with the countries of the South

Europe's strategic autonomy cannot mean self-sufficiency, unless we are prepared to accept a colossal loss of purchasing power for Europeans. If we wish to reduce our excessive dependence on both China and the United States, it is indeed necessary to develop our economic relations with the rest of the world, both to find markets for European goods and services and to secure suppliers within the value chains of European companies. In this context, the European Union was right, for example, to seek to forge closer economic ties with India, even though Narendra Modi is in reality an authoritarian leader who relies on a detestable ideology to increasingly undermine India's democratic character and the freedoms of its people.

However, the development of trade and trade agreements cannot, on its own, be enough to consolidate Europe's geopolitical position. The recent history of our relations with both the United States and Russia has amply demonstrated this.

Whilst there are contradictions between Europe's values and interests, there are also synergies that should not be squandered by trying to play in the same league as Donald Trump. Whilst Europe remains an important market, what gives it its standing in the world today is, as everyone knows, neither its technological lead nor its military clout. This may change in the future, but the road ahead will inevitably be a long one. What makes Europe still attractive to the world today is, to a significant extent, its character as a peaceful region, having renounced all imperial ambitions, combining a high level of social solidarity with an equally high level of individual and collective freedoms, as well as a constant concern for the quality of the environment.

V • Values also serve our interests

And it would be a mistake to believe that this model is attractive only to the inhabitants of developed countries. The Iranian men and women taking to the streets against the mullahs, the young Nepalese and Bangladeshis who have risen in recent months, those who brought about the Arab Spring, and the Chinese students who were massacred in Tiananmen Square also dreamed of having the same rights as we do.

Democracy may well be in retreat across the world, but the people's aspiration for greater freedom remains strong, particularly among the younger generations, and Europe can and must support this aspiration whilst also drawing on it to counter the empires that threaten its social, ecological and democratic model. If we were to stop championing our humanist and democratic values loud and clear, if we were to abandon integrating them into our foreign policy, we would in fact weaken Europe's position in the world.

We must therefore, more than ever, be mindful of the signals we send out. Thus, the 'Fortress Europe' migration policy, which is effectively at odds with all European humanist values, has played a major role in alienating African countries from Europe and pushing them to align themselves instead with Russia and China, particularly in the Sahel.

Similarly, if Europe were today, in the name of its short-term interests, to scale back its ambitions regarding the energy transition and the fight against climate change – as is to be feared – this would have a very negative impact on its geopolitical influence amongst the countries of the Global South.

Finally, the European Union's tolerance towards Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right government has profoundly undermined the credibility, in the eyes of the rest of the world, of Europe's stance on the illegitimacy of Vladimir Putin's actions in Ukraine and has sapped all the support Ukraine could have hoped for from the Global South against Russian aggression.

Our inability to condemn the blatant violations of international law by Israel or the United States in the region has also prevented the Union from playing a role both in resolving the Gaza conflict and, today, in the conflict engulfing the Gulf. Yet European diplomacy had been at the forefront of the two-state solution in Palestine since the 1990s and a driving force since the early 2000s in developing the JCPOA, the Iranian nuclear deal concluded in 2015. It is often said that Europe thrives in crises, but on the geopolitical front, the EU has, on the contrary, taken a step backwards in recent years, particularly in Africa and the Middle East...

VI • Moving away from double standards

Looking ahead, trade agreements alone cannot be enough to loosen the stranglehold that Vladimir Putin on one side and Donald Trump on the other are gradually tightening around us. We also need a foreign policy that is better aligned with our humanist and democratic values.

Contrary to what is currently happening, Europeans – at both EU and Member State level – must also agree to put more money on the table, both for development aid in the traditional sense and to provide greater support to countries in the Global South to adapt to climate change and accelerate their energy transition.

Finally, there is one last area where clarification is urgently needed if the Union is to equip itself with a foreign policy worthy of the name: the European institutional framework, which is currently completely dysfunctional.

Since her appointment in 2019, Ursula von der Leyen has sought to build a 'geopolitical Commission'. She has constantly sought to position herself at the forefront of the European Union's foreign and security policy. And she has largely succeeded in becoming the preferred interlocutor for our main foreign partners. Yet, unlike most other areas of public policy, foreign and security policy remains, according to the Treaties, an exclusive competence of the Member States.

These areas are simply coordinated at European level, subject to the requirement of unanimity, by, on the one hand, the permanent President of the Council – currently Portugal's António Costa – and, on the other, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, the Estonian Kaja Kallas, who chairs the Councils of Ministers for Foreign Affairs, Defence and Development. In theory, therefore, they should be the primary points of contact for foreign leaders on matters of foreign and defence policy.

VII • A damaging institutional squabble

However, to effectively fulfil the role conferred upon them by the Treaties, the President of the Council and the HR/VP face a double handicap. The first of these handicaps stems from the unanimity rule. They can only speak on a subject if the 27 Member States have reached agreement beforehand. This is rarely the case, particularly on issues that would nevertheless require a strong and swift response. If they do so anyway, they risk an immediate reprimand from the heads of state and government or their foreign ministers. Consequently, they remain very, indeed overly, cautious until consensus is reached. Whereas the President of the Commission is not subject to this constraint: she can speak out quickly because she is not directly accountable to European heads of government.

Furthermore, the President of the Council and the HR/VP have no control over either the EU budget or the Commission departments that manage key issues for the Union's foreign policy, such as migration, trade, industrial policy, development aid... In short, everything that constitutes the concrete, tangible substance of a foreign policy worthy of the name. It is the European Commission that holds these keys, and therefore its President.

This is why, ultimately, it is she who has de facto taken the lead in European foreign policy. Why not? But this institutionally precarious situation is currently creating constant and significant tensions, on the one hand between the Commission President, the President of the European Council and the HR/VP, and on the other hand between the Commission President and the Heads of State and Government, who refuse to be stripped of the prerogatives theoretically granted to them by the Treaties. This also contributes to maintaining confusion among the Union's external partners.

In the face of the dangers threatening the Union, this institutional squabbling and the waste of energy it entails are detrimental, as are the deadlocks resulting from the unanimity rule. Yet it is difficult to see how these major dysfunctions, which today threaten the very survival of the Union, could be resolved without amending the Treaties. Yet for the moment, no one is proposing to take this step.

Beyond these persistent institutional difficulties and the tensions, they provoke, there are also doubts as to whether the shift in the Union's foreign policy that Ursula von der Leyen wishes to bring about is truly capable of strengthening Europe's geopolitical position.