ecdpm

DISCUSSION PAPER No. 389

Perceptions of the EU's international cooperation: Navigating troubled waters

By Pauline Veron

May 2025

The EU faces a rapidly shifting global order marked by geopolitical rivalry, economic uncertainty, climate risks and the return of great power politics. In this context, it has positioned itself as a stable, values-driven partner, while promoting its strategic interests more assertively. Drawing on candid interviews with senior diplomats and experts from Africa, Asia and Latin America, this paper explores how the EU's international cooperation is perceived by its partners in the Global South. It reveals a clear tension between how Europe sees itself and how it is increasingly viewed by others.

Many still see the EU as a highly relevant global actor, appreciated for championing human rights and sustainable development – especially amid US withdrawal under the second Trump administration. Yet, its credibility is waning. Perceptions of hypocrisy, double standards and post-colonial attitudes persist, and initiatives such as the Global Gateway are often seen as top-down and lacking consultation or tangible benefits.

In an era where partner countries are diversifying alliances and asserting more agency, the EU must adapt. A more pragmatic, honest approach – one that acknowledges trade-offs, listens beyond governments and accepts 'constructive disagreement' – is essential. The EU must also improve coherence between its values and interests, and between rhetoric and delivery. With major summits and a new financial cycle ahead, the EU has a timely opportunity to redefine itself as a credible geopolitical partner. But to do so, it must move from projection to reflection – and from declarations to meaningful action.

Table of contents

List of boxes

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Andrew Sherriff for his peer review and very valuable feedback. Additionally, we extend our appreciation to all the interviewees who took the time to participate and frankly share their valuable insights.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not represent those of ECDPM or any other institution. Any errors or omissions remain the responsibility of the author. For comments and feedback, please contact Pauline Veron at pv@ecdpm.org.

Acronyms

AU	African Union
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (original members of the grouping, which has since expanded)
CBAM	Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism
CELAC	Community of Latin American and Caribbean States
CRMA	Critical Raw Materials Act
EC	European Commission
EEAS	European External Action Service
EU	European Union
EUDR	EU Deforestation Regulation
FfD4	Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development
JETP	Just Energy Transition Partnership
MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework
NDICI-Global Europe	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument
US	United States

Executive summary

The European Union (EU) operates within an increasingly complex and unpredictable global environment characterised by geopolitical rivalries, economic instability, rapid technological advancements and intensifying climate concerns. In this context, it has positioned itself as a stable and values-driven partner, even as it pursues its strategic interests with greater assertiveness. However, understanding how the EU's international cooperation is perceived – in terms of coherence, reliability, underlying motivations and alignment with its stated principles – is crucial for sustaining its credibility on the global stage.

Following on from our 2024 research exploring the EU's changing international cooperation landscape based on interviews with European officials, this paper analyses how the EU's international cooperation is viewed by its partners in the Global South, through off-the-record interviews with senior diplomats and experts from Africa, Asia and Latin America.

The interviews reveal that the EU is still widely regarded as a key partner, especially against the backdrop of USAID cuts under a second Trump administration. The predictability and breadth of its engagement across sectors are widely appreciated. Its leadership in green technologies, sustainability and digital transformation is also recognised. However, its credibility faces serious challenges. Several factors in particular are negatively affecting the EU's perception as an international cooperation partner.

First, **geopolitical tensions, especially competition with China**, significantly influence the EU's approach to international cooperation, yet many countries in the Global South prefer to maintain diverse alliances and reject being forced into binary choices. The EU's pursuit of strategic autonomy, particularly in reducing dependency on China, is perceived as potentially alienating partners who prioritise pragmatic, issue-based engagement. Rather, the EU's strength lies in playing to its distinct added value rather than trying to outcompete others on their terms.

Second, interviewees highlighted the **contrast between Europe's relative global decline and its paternalistic approach**, although this perception varied across regions. Many noted that Europe's colonial legacy still influences its relationship with Africa, while some Latin American partners characterised their relationship with the EU as more 'horizontal' and 'equal,' albeit not free of tensions. Furthermore, the EU's conditionalities on democratic processes and elections were perceived by some as increasingly disconnected from local realities.

Meanwhile, trade and climate policies were often interpreted as unilateral and protectionist, fueling mistrust among partners.

Third, **concerns about double standards and inconsistencies** were raised. The EU's response to international conflicts and migration issues is often seen as uneven, undermining its claims as a normative power. This **gap between stated values and practical actions** fuels scepticism, especially concerning governance and democracy promotion. Yet, despite the criticisms, the EU's commitment to norms and values remains appreciated, as respect for human rights and international law is declining globally.

Finally, interviewees expressed concerns about the **gap between the EU's promises and actual delivery**. Grand initiatives such as the Global Gateway strategy are often seen as lacking genuine consultation and failing to translate into concrete, locally relevant projects. To shift perceptions, the EU must urgently demonstrate tangible added value, including by simplifying procedures, equipping the Global Gateway with the right instruments and aligning with partner interests and needs. Without this shift, the initiative will not make up for the EU's loss of credibility and trust.

Ultimately, the interviews point to a growing gap between how the EU sees itself and how it is viewed by others. With a relatively new EU political leadership, there is still time for a necessary course correction. For the EU to maintain relevance and rebuild trust, it must adopt a more pragmatic, honest approach. Reconciling its strategic interests with the needs and aspirations of its partners, while improving the coherence between its values, rhetoric and delivery, is essential for fostering solid partnerships in an era of increasing global uncertainty. Major summits and a new financial cycle provide timely opportunities for the EU to reset and redefine itself as a truly credible and equitable geopolitical partner.

1. Introduction

The EU faces an increasingly volatile and unpredictable global landscape marked by geopolitical competition, war, economic sluggishness, rapid tech shifts and escalating climate risks. While Europe sees this environment as disorder – the end of the post-Cold War order – many governments in the Global South view it as an opportunity to reshape the global system (Garton Ash et al. 2023; Yuhan 2024). The return of the Trump administration adds to the complexity, creating both challenges and openings for the EU to assert itself as a more stable, reliable partner (Sherriff 2025).

This paper explores how the EU's evolving international cooperation[1] is perceived by its partners, drawing on off-the-record interviews[2] with senior diplomats, researchers and analysts from Africa, Asia and Latin America. These regions, often collectively referred to as the 'Global South', are asserting more agency and diversifying their partnerships in a multipolar world. UN voting patterns on Ukraine and reactions to the Gaza conflict have underlined the urgency for the EU to better understand these diverse perspectives (de Hoop Scheffer et al. 2024).

This paper deliberately considers the EU not just as a donor, but as a political and economic partner – in line with the evolving reality where traditional development models are increasingly contested, both by partner countries and within Europe. The interviews reveal that while the EU remains largely reliable and important, its cooperation is undermined by its own geopolitical positioning, lingering historical legacies and perceived double standards. The EU tends to see itself as a global force for good and a multilateral champion. But partners frequently describe it as "hypocritical, self-serving, and post-colonial" (Islam 2024a).

Its talk of "equal partnerships" – recently reframed as "mutually beneficial partnerships" (von der Leyen 2024; Van Damme 2025a; Sabourin et al. 2024) – has lost credibility as the EU becomes more assertive in defending its own priorities, from migration management to commercial interests. The shift to a more economically driven foreign policy, visible in trade, regulation and infrastructure initiatives like the Global Gateway strategy, confirms this strategic repositioning. Earlier ECDPM analysis based on interviews with European officials laid out this transformation (Sherriff and Veron 2024); this paper flips the lens, offering the view from partner countries instead.

[1] International cooperation policies not only include the EU's development cooperation policies, but also its foreign, trade, climate, digital policies as well as 'softer' aspects such as scientific exchanges.

[2] A dozen interviews were carried out between December 2024 and April 2025.

Understanding how the EU's cooperation is perceived – in terms of coherence, reliability, motivation and alignment with its stated principles – is critical. This paper brings forward these perceptions from across Africa, Asia and Latin America to challenge and inform the EU's external engagement. If the EU wants to remain influential and relevant in a multipolar world, it must urgently reach out more proactively to its partners across the world and adapt its policies accordingly – not just in rhetoric, but in practice.

2. The EU: Still relevant, but under scrutiny

Despite mounting criticism, the EU is still widely regarded as a key partner – particularly for its focus on human rights, climate change and international law. As one interviewee noted, "the EU is very relevant because it is everywhere." In Africa, it remains the top multilateral partner, valued for both the predictability and breadth of its engagement across sectors. In a fragmented world, the EU offers a counterweight to over-reliance on China or the United States (US).[3]

Interviewees highlighted continued hopes for the EU, especially in light of geopolitical shifts like the return of a Trump-led US. An African researcher noted that "the EU is the only partner that, in the eyes of civil society and the authorities, remains a source of hope." Others pointed to the reaffirmation of multilateral values in events like the South Africa-EU summit in March 2025.

The EU's leadership in green technologies, sustainability and digital transformation was also praised. Initiatives like the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) under the Global Gateway strategy[4] were seen as aligned with national green energy ambitions, offering technological know-how and expertise. Additionally, the EU's recognition of the importance of human capital development – particularly in education, training and health – was welcomed, with calls for even stronger involvement, resonating with past ECDPM research (van der Meer et al. 2023).

However, enthusiasm is tempered by major weaknesses. A recurring complaint was the **gap between EU promises and delivery**. While headline figures for initiatives like the JETP and the Global Gateway are impressive, many noted the absence of concrete, locally relevant projects (see also section 2.4). Bureaucratic hurdles and a regulatory-heavy approach make EU funding hard to access and often mismatched with partner needs (Teevan et al. 2022).

[3] See ECDPM work on this: https://ecdpm.org/work/eu-china-global-south-perspectives-african-countries.

[4] The Global Gateway strategy is an EU flagship initiative launched in 2021. It aims to mobilise €300 billion by 2027 for global infrastructure and connectivity investments (see section 2.4).

The EU's cooperation is also perceived as becoming more interest-driven. Geopolitical and geoeconomic advancements over the past years (including the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's war in Ukraine, growing tensions with China, Israel's Gaza war and most recently, the Trump 2.0 administration) and the changing shape of European politics have pushed the EU to take "a more and more assertive approach to aligning its interests with its partnerships in a more contested and unstable world" (European Commission 2024; Teevan 2024; Teevan et al. 2022; Hauck et al. 2024; Balfour et al. 2024). This new direction aligns with broader European foreign policy shifts. Interviewees echoed ECDPM's previous findings (Sherriff and Veron 2024) that EU cooperation is increasingly shaped (both in framing and practice) by:

1. **Geopolitical competition**, especially with China.

2. **Domestic political priorities**, such as migration or regulations such as the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) seen as prioritising European concerns.

3. **Sustainability as a core focus**, which often imposes disproportionate burdens on partners.

The new EU framing of "economic foreign policy" (von der Leyen 2024), however, has not yet filtered through to partners. Partners noted an increasing use of blended finance, noting the challenges[5], as well as a shift from traditional grant aid to **conditional financing tied to EU priorities**, such as sustainability and governance. One interviewee described this shift as reducing flexibility for countries needing more adaptive funding. Another reflected that "beneficiaries used to have more latitude to focus the EU's engagements on their own priorities" – a situation that started to change with programming of the 11th European Development Fund (2014-2020) and was exacerbated with the introduction of the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI-Global Europe) in 2021.

Some noted that these shifts are merely formalising a self-interest that has long been present. The perception that EU programming is "unidirectional" – top-down and driven by member states' inward-looking interests – is seen as eroding the EU's DNA and commitment to the principles of multilateralism.

Another issue that was raised regarded the fact that while the EU and its partners may have similar priorities (for instance, regarding climate change or migration), they do not address it in the same way. Lastly, partners expressed concern over

[5] For instance, the fact that private financial institutions are often reluctant to take on risky projects, and if an investment is perceived as unsafe or uncertain, securing private sector participation becomes difficult.

neglected sectors like agriculture, health, culture, education and water access – areas they feel are overlooked amid the EU's growing focus on green and economic agendas.

All of these factors led to one interviewee stating that the EU used to be a much more reliable and appreciated partner. International partners view the EU through multiple, often overlapping lenses, leading to varied and sometimes contradictory perceptions depending on the specific role the EU is playing and the context of the interaction. The following subsections will delve deeper into the factors negatively affecting the EU's perception as an international cooperation partner.

2.1. Competing narratives, missed connections: How partners see the EU in a shifting geopolitical order

The geopolitical context featured prominently in nearly all interviews, shaping how the EU's international cooperation is perceived.[6] The rise of China and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was widely seen as intensifying "Europe's nervousness." Interviewees noted the EU's pursuit of strategic autonomy – particularly reducing dependency on China – as a defining factor in its external engagement.

However, viewing international cooperation through a competitive lens risks alienating partners. Many countries prefer a pragmatic, issue-based approach – a "more fluid and flexible 'mix and match'" (Islam 2024a) or "à la carte arrangement" (Garton Ash et al. 2023) – and reject the EU's perceived demand to "choose" between the EU and China. This binary framing was seen as disrespectful of countries' non-alignment, with one interviewee warning that "by ignoring Africa's interests and agency, the EU is shooting itself in the foot."

Several interviewees underscored long-standing economic ties with China (Bonini 2025), echoing earlier ECDPM research that found that framing the Global Gateway as a better alternative to Chinese initiatives is counterproductive (Di Ciommo et al. 2024). Notably, one interviewee remarked that while the EU competes with China, "China does not look to the EU as a competitor." China's narrative of "having made it" and sharing that experience was seen as convincing.

There was a perception that the EU is "desperate to recover former allies," though one interviewee argued **the EU should seek "partners" rather than "allies."** Given today's geopolitical complexity, the EU is unlikely to build partnerships offering both full political alignment and economic benefits (Garton Ash et al. 2023).

[6] This was also the first factor noted by European interviewees in our research published in 2024 (Sherriff and Veron 2024).

Russia's war on Ukraine was seen as a political wake-up call for the EU, with many in the Global South wanting the war to end swiftly – even if that means Kyiv losing territory (Garton Ash et al. 2023).

Globally, the EU is not widely viewed as a hard power, nor as a major geopolitical actor. Yet, China and Russia do not rival the EU on soft power (Garton Ash et al. 2023), and interviewees from Africa and Latin America said they feel closer to Europe culturally and linguistically, valuing the EU's human rights stance and "moral entity" status (see also Shikwati et al. 2022). Yet, cooperation with China was associated with "fewer barriers, more confidence, more resources" – and faster, more flexible funding.

In this highly competitive landscape, the EU's strength lies in playing to its distinct added value rather than trying to outcompete others on their terms.

2.2. Partnership vs. paternalism: The quest for equality?

Interviewees made clear that concerns about the EU often stem not from *what* it does, but *how* it engages. Several highlighted that Europe's colonial legacy continues to shape its relationship with Africa (Teevan et al. 2022), creating a sense that Africa is still "obliged" to work with Europe. Some European countries assume that "because they know Africa, cooperation should be easier". The degree of perceived neocolonialism was highly dependent on a country's income level and historical ties to Europe.

Perceptions varied by region. Latin American partners described a more "horizontal" and "equal" relationship with the EU, though not without tensions. One interviewee described the dialogue as "traditionally constructive and positive," while another found the EU "a bit patronising" with a "we-know-best attitude" – notably in the organisation of summits.

The EU's resistance to adapting its approach despite a changing global environment was a recurring critique. Interviewees pointed to the contrast between Europe's relative decline and continued arrogance, calling out the EU's failure to reflect on its limitations. One person warned against the EU's continued use of a "divide and rule" mindset (Langan and Price 2025), urging a shift away from "converting" African countries to European values. While Europe's value-based policies are appreciated by African policymakers, they are often also seen as paternalistic (Shikwati et al. 2022). The Global Gateway's framing as a "value-based offer" centred around democratic values and high standards drew skepticism, especially in African contexts where partners asked, "whose values are

being promoted?"[7] This narrative has become harder to sustain amid accusations of double standards, such as those linked to the war in Gaza (see also section 2.3) (Friends of Europe 2023).

Interviewees contrasted the EU's abstract rhetoric with China's tangible results: "A road completed in record time by the Chinese is a value in the perception of Africans and more concrete than abstract European projects to promote democracy, human rights or sustainability." (Shikwati et al. 2022).

Skepticism toward the EU's push for "good governance" and liberal democratic models was also evident, with some highlighting cultural, religious and local sensitivities. Some viewed the EU's conditionalities related to elections and democratic standards as increasingly out of touch, with one interviewee bluntly stating, "it doesn't make the EU look any better if it is always stressing its values."[8] Still, perspectives varied. An interviewee from Asia, for instance, saw democratic values as the EU's key strength. **Recognising that such contradictions can coexist is essential for effective engagement.**

The EU's emphasis on the rules-based order and the global commons is often perceived as reinforcing inequality. Recent policies aimed at securing access to raw materials or fostering climate goals are viewed as "extractive diplomacy," despite EU claims of supporting local value chains (see Box 1) (Medinilla et al. 2025; Ammar 2025).

Box 1: The EU's 'turbulent' regulations

Several interviewees described the EU's Green Deal regulations – such as the EUDR, the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), the Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA), and the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive – as "turbulent," protectionist, and costly for African exports (Möller 2025; Byiers and Medinilla 2024). These measures were seen as undermining development

[7] This echoes research done by Carnegie Europe (Balfour et al. 2022).

[8] Other research has shown how the EU tends to be seen as an actor prescribing patterns of behaviour and that the promotion of values such as human rights and democracy are perceived to have hegemonic and imperialist tendencies (Gadd and Engström 2024). It is worth noting however that post-colonial criticisms are sometimes manipulated by politicians from the Global South for populistic reasons (Ofori 2025).

and reflecting a unilateral, "me first" approach – far from the spirit of strategic partnership (Byiers and Medinilla 2024).

Perceptions of inconsistency between the EU and its member states added to the frustration. Some member states, particularly around the EUDR, were seen as more "practical" and "flexible," prompting some partners to favour bilateral cooperation over engagement with the EU as a whole (Adolphsen et al. 2025).

One interviewee warned that trust is at risk if economic policies remain inconsistent and poorly aligned with partner needs. While the EU does consult on paper, partners have not been given adequate time to adjust to new rules.

This sentiment is echoed in wider research: CBAM and EUDR have drawn sharp criticism from major emerging economies like Brazil, Indonesia and South Africa – the very partners the EU is courting in its broader geopolitical strategy (Adolphsen et al. 2025; Weinhardt and De Ville 2025).

Several interviewees also urged the EU to recognise Africa as a strategic and equal partner and a geopolitical agent instead of a recipient. Some noted a deterioration in the relationship: "The EU does not even pretend to take joint decisions anymore." However, the EU's growing honesty about its own interests was welcomed as "less patronising" and a helpful way to "temper expectations." This aligns with feedback from an ODI dialogue, which found that more honesty about the drivers, nature and limits of development cooperation would build trust (Aly et al. 2024).

The bitterness toward the EU's posture remains deeply rooted, amplified by broader frustration with the global development architecture – most recently highlighted by the dismantling of USAID, seen by some as exposing the system's colonial underpinnings (Ingram 2025).

2.3. When values clash with practice: Perceptions of EU double standards

The EU continues to present itself as a global champion of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. However, many interviewees described a disconnect between the EU's stated values and its actions – a "do as I say, not as I do" attitude that has eroded trust and credibility, particularly around its commitment to international law (Islam 2024b; Kumar 2024).

Criticism from the Global South – long wary of selective adherence to the rules-based order – has intensified since the wars in Ukraine and Gaza

(Hasselbach 2024). The Ukraine war, described by one African interviewee as a "positioning conflict between Russia and the EU," was raised in nearly all interviews, underlining its significance in partner perceptions.

The EU's response to the conflict in Gaza was widely seen as inconsistent with its stance on Ukraine (Karaki et al. 2024; Islam 2024a; Gwyn Jones 2023; Yuhan 2024). While the EU firmly condemned Russia's invasion and promoted Ukraine's right to self-determination, it has been accused of failing to uphold international humanitarian law in the Middle East. Indonesian defense minister Prabowo Subianto Djojohadikusumo noted: "Western governments apparently have one set of principles for Ukraine and another set of principles for the Palestinians." (Hasselbach 2024).

Beyond this, many view Europe's focus on Ukraine – over other conflicts, such as the one in Sudan – as evidence of double standards (Garton Ash et al. 2023). Some partners expressed frustration that the EU institutions bring up Ukraine in unrelated meetings, such as those on climate. As India's foreign minister put it, Europeans apparently believe that "Europe's problems are the world's problems, but the world's problems are not Europe's problems." (Hasselbach 2024).

Long before Ukraine, inconsistencies were already visible – particularly in EU **migration and asylum policies**. Pushbacks, border securitisation and uneven refugee treatment (for instance, Syrians in 2015 vs. Ukrainians in 2022) have cast doubt on the EU's normative credibility (Gadd and Engström 2024).

Partners also see contradictions in how the EU treats **governance and democracy** abroad (Nogueira Pinto 2024; Bisong 2023; Khan 2024; Africa Confidential 2025). Despite rhetoric on human rights and democratic values, interviewees noted selective responses to coups or democratic backsliding, and a tendency to prioritise stability over principles (Van Damme 2025b; Youngs et al. 2023). This erodes the EU's legitimacy, compounded by domestic policies within EU member states that contradict its external narrative (Gadd and Engström 2024). Finally, perceived double standards in climate action have also eroded trust in the EU's leadership (Möller 2025).

European officials often attribute these accusations of double standards to misinformation campaigns – particularly from Russia or China in regions like the Sahel (Yuhan 2024). But as several interviewees and experts note, dismissing all criticism as propaganda ignores the real damage caused by inconsistencies. As Sophie Eisentraut of the Munich Security Conference explains, "Western countries face a dilemma: They fear that being self-critical about their own inconsistencies will play into the hands of their global rivals. However, on the other hand, if they

ignore the criticism, they will be justifiably seen as self-righteous." (Hasselbach 2024).

One interviewee pointed out that no country is immune to contradictions: "No country has the monopoly of double standards." But when the EU holds others to high standards, its own inconsistencies become more visible – and strategically damaging.

Ultimately, these perceptions suggest that double standards are not just a reputational issue, but a strategic liability. Upholding values consistently – even when inconvenient – is critical to rebuilding trust, sustaining influence and forging credible, resilient partnerships.

2.4. Global Gateway: High ambitions, low trust

Perceptions of the Global Gateway strategy revealed deep skepticism. While partners broadly welcomed the EU's pivot to more economically focused cooperation – moving beyond the limitations of traditional aid – and supported the strategy's emphasis on infrastructure and connectivity, doubts about its credibility and execution dominated in the interviews.

The Global Gateway was widely described as a "public relations exercise" with no fresh funding or clear operational direction. "Most people laugh" when it is mentioned, one interviewee noted. Others dismissed it as "a new label for old ways of doing things", "a propaganda", a "European fetiche", a "totemic brand", "a hollow totem," or "a fast reaction to fight the BRI but without money." Someone mentioned that it came late and was patched together in a flawed manner, while several noted that many Global Gateway projects pre-date the initiative. Delays in disbursement and implementation have further eroded trust.

Many were unconvinced that the Global Gateway represents a genuine shift from past EU cooperation. One interviewee saw it merely as an "attempt" to be more transactional and to enable large-scale investment – still very much a work in progress (see also Di Ciommo et al. 2024).

A core concern was the **lack of consultation with partner countries**, echoing earlier ECDPM findings (Teevan et al. 2022). Several diplomats expressed frustration that projects were announced before any engagement – "China consults," one of them noted, but "the EU puts the cart before the horse." This reinforced the perception of a top-down, "we know best" mindset. Others challenged the exclusive use of European agencies to implement the Global Gateway, asking whether African actors might be better placed to assess project relevance.

Perceptions of the Global Gateway varied regionally. In Latin America, it was seen more as a "seal of guarantee" to attract other investors – not a cooperation initiative but a "business-led initiative". In Africa, expectations of financial support were higher (Tadesse Shiferaw 2023), and interviewees questioned how the Global Gateway differs from NDICI–Global Europe. One described the Global Gateway as the strategy and NDICI as its core funding tool.

Looking ahead, several interviewees called for a **clearer and more convincing narrative: not just about what the Global Gateway is, but why the EU is doing it** – particularly in fragile states (Hauck and Desmidt 2024; Teevan and Bilal 2023). One person argued that the strategy should have been introduced as "work in progress," rather than as a polished alternative to China. Framing it in opposition to the Belt and Road Initiative has made the Global Gateway "about them, not about us [partner countries]," a strategic misstep that undercuts its relevance (see also Di Ciommo et al. 2024).

In many ways, the Global Gateway reflects the broader issues plaguing EU external action: lofty branding disconnected from delivery, confusion around funding, limited partner ownership, and a struggle to turn ambition into credible, on-the-ground results. Without addressing these shortcomings, the strategy risks becoming a symbol of unfulfilled promise rather than a strategic asset.

Box 2: The EU as donor: Reliable but stretched

Perceptions of the EU as a funding partner vary by region and relationship. Some interviewees praised the EU's substantial and predictable financial support – especially amid global cutbacks – citing its seven-year budget cycle, the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) as a strength. But others highlighted its limited scale compared to China's Belt and Road Initiative, which was seen as faster, more flexible and able to mobilise large sums quickly. The EU's complex and slow funding mechanisms were seen as a barrier to trust.

Concerns were raised about likely reductions in external funding in the next MFF (2028–2034).[9] Interviewees acknowledged shifting EU priorities and declining development budgets. Despite the NDICI-Global Europe earmarking a minimal amount of funding for sub-Saharan Africa, inflation and the war in Ukraine

[9] See ECDPM work on the MFF: https://ecdpm.org/work/inside-eus-long-term-budget-multiannual-financial-framework-explained.

have stretched the EU budget, resulting in a funding cut and a disproportional diversion of reserves intended for new needs and emergencies towards Ukraine and the Middle East. This came despite the fact that, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, EU delegations had been instructed to reassure the partner countries that financial commitments to Africa would remain unchanged (Van Damme 2025b).

The Ukraine war and focus on defence and economic security were widely recognised as reshaping EU spending – and frustrating partners. "If the war was solved, perhaps the EU could free some energy," one interviewee remarked. While some accepted the existential nature of the war for Europe, they stressed the broader cost of deprioritising cooperation and multilateralism.

The US withdrawal from traditional development roles was also flagged as increasing pressure on the EU to step up. Yet few interviewees believed the EU could fill the resulting financial gap. That said, as this and other ECDPM research show, the EU's credibility does not depend solely on how much it funds – but also on how it engages and delivers as a partner (Sabourin et al. 2023; Jones et al. 2025).

3. The EU's balancing act in its international partnerships

3.1. Reconciling listening to partners with the EU's strategic interests

European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen's 2024–2029 political guidelines acknowledge the "need to listen and respond better to the concerns of our partners." (von der Leyen 2024). Yet, as Richard Youngs rightly notes, "the key issue is for the EU and European governments to work out how to combine their commitment to listen more to others with their core strategic interests." (Youngs 2024). In today's realpolitik world, listening alone will not enhance the EU's geopolitical standing – especially given partners' growing frustration with the EU's double standards and top-down approaches.

While the EU is often more consultative than others, including the US,[10] many still perceive its partner engagement as superficial – a "tick-box exercise." As reflected in feedback on initiatives like the Global Gateway, **consultation without real influence does little to build trust or credibility.**

The challenge ahead lies in reconciling partner concerns with the EU's evolving ambition to become a harder geopolitical actor. This requires **honestly acknowledging that tradeoffs between EU interests – especially around security and competitiveness – and partner priorities are inevitable.** A vague promise to "listen and respond better" will not suffice. It is indeed highly unlikely in the current environment that the EU would suddenly be led by its partners' concerns in its international cooperation (Sherriff and Veron 2024; Youngs 2024). However, there is still room for further exploration of mutual interests.

The EU often already knows what its partners want – whether on climate, migration or health (Youngs 2024). The issue is not awareness, but **how to align those demands with its own strategic goals**. Doing so will require better coordination and engagement between EU headquarters and in-country delegations and member state missions, including deeper understanding of different perspectives and societal dynamics beyond government counterparts.

As one interviewee put it, "when interests, principles and values align, then we do see the EU's added value." This may call for a **more pragmatic, flexible, and compartmentalised approach** – recognising partners' red lines (de Hoop Scheffer et al. 2024), avoiding unnecessary conditionalities and focusing on areas of genuine shared interest. Only then can the EU rebuild trust and reposition itself as a relevant, reliable partner.

3.2. Defining one's value proposition in an era of diversification… on both sides

Today's geopolitical reality drives both the EU and its partners to diversify. The EU seeks reliable supply chains and strategic allies; partner countries aim to maximise economic benefit by engaging with a broader range of players. In this landscape, the EU must clearly articulate its interests, acknowledge those of its partners (recognising that they make geopolitical and strategic calculations too)

[10] The EU indeed engages more directly with national stakeholders and its aid programming traditionally involves political and policy dialogues between EU delegations and national authorities, resulting in publicly accessible documents (for instance, joint programming documents, multiannual indicative programmes and action plans), which is not the case for the US, for example. Yet significant critiques remain on how influential and meaningful these EU consultations actually are (Pinyol Puig 2025).

and define the specific political and economic value it brings to each bilateral relationship.

This means **moving beyond global messaging and visibility to country-specific definitions of mutual interest** (Sabourin et al. 2023). Seeking regional and thematic tailoring and tangible wins *before* communicating on them would be more effective. The recent South Africa–EU summit was cited as an example of success driven by pragmatism and perceived "win-win" outcomes – helped by both sides' desire to hedge against an unpredictable US.

Doing this well requires the EU to **acknowledge internal contradictions** – for example, between its goals on irregular migration and labour mobility – and to be open about them. According to one interviewee, embracing this complexity would make the EU appear "less patronising and hypocritical," enabling more honest, mutually beneficial partnerships, even where political views diverge. The concept of **'constructive disagreement'** has been promoted as one way forward in the context of a strained EU-African Union (AU) relationship (Marangio and Mattheis 2024), while the **'agreeing to disagree' principle** of the BRICS group (originally comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) was also highlighted as a useful way to **pursue shared goals while respecting diverse views**. As South Africa's president Cyril Ramaphosa put it, BRICS is "an equal partnership of countries with differing views but a shared vision for a better world." (Naidu and De Carvalho 2025).

The EU must also recognise where it holds a competitive edge – and where it does not. Perceptions vary widely by country: some EU member states are seen as better at co-creating and fostering ownership than others (for instance, in the Sahel, where France faces particular scrutiny). Leveraging the comparative strengths of specific member states, and drawing a division of labour accordingly, could help rebuild trust and improve impact on the ground in a context of shrinking resources.

Ultimately, the interviews point to a **pressing need for greater self-awareness in EU external action**. As one person put it, "Europe needs to be more pragmatic. The world is not perfect, and neither are we."

Box 3: Global Gateway at a crossroads: From rhetoric to results

The Global Gateway faces serious implementation challenges – namely slowness, bureaucracy and limited alignment with partner priorities. The gap between high-level branding and the complex, sluggish reality on the ground is eroding the strategy's credibility. EU and member state officials are well aware of these shortcomings and, in private, often express strong frustration.

To shift perceptions, the EU must urgently demonstrate tangible added value. That means cutting through bureaucracy and equipping the Global Gateway with the right instruments to deliver real, visible benefits (Bilal and Klasen 2025; Jones et. al 2025). Without this shift, the initiative will not make up for the EU's loss of credibility and trust.

Ultimately, the Global Gateway's impact on the EU's perception and influence in the world (one measure of success among others) will depend on abandoning a top-down, EU-centric approach in favour of one genuinely aligned with partner needs. The next three years will serve as a key test of the EU's ability to adapt its partnership model to global realities – and to act on the feedback partners have consistently shared.

3.3. Navigating diverging perceptions of the EU

This paper has shown that partners can simultaneously value the EU's commitment to norms and values and resent the conditionalities attached to them. Contradictory perceptions of the EU coexist – and that does not make any one perspective less valid. Perceptions are shaped by history, geography and context. This explains why, for example, the Global Gateway has been received very differently in Africa compared to Latin America – a trend echoed in broader ECDPM research (Sabourin et al. 2023).

Richard Youngs captures this challenge well: "Listening to others is unlikely to bring much clarity to EU decisionmaking but rather reveal a cacophony of contrasting views and expectations of European policies." (Youngs 2024). These contrasts include the divide between government and non-government actors, whose views on democracy, human rights, migration and security can vary significantly. Taking on board both sets of voices is difficult, but necessary. Doing so requires **acknowledging the inherent tensions between the EU's interests and**

its normative ambitions, and accepting that full alignment will rarely be possible. **Recognising this complexity can, paradoxically, help clarify the EU's direction.**

Ultimately, the diversity of views should not discourage the EU from broadening its engagement. Improving the EU's global standing depends not only on listening to partner governments but also on a more creative engagement with civil society, local communities and leaders, and other non-state actors. Ignoring the very people its external policies are meant to serve will only deepen the credibility gap.

4. Conclusion

"In an era of fragmentation, looking outward may be as important as looking inward." (Medinilla et al. 2025). This paper explored how the EU's evolving international cooperation is perceived by its partners. While the EU remains a relevant and, in many ways, appreciated actor, it has lost credibility and trust in recent years. A growing gap exists between how the EU sees itself – and the values it promotes – and how it is viewed by others. With a relatively new EU political leadership, there is still time for a necessary course correction.

In today's multipolar and volatile global environment, the EU's internal and external agendas are increasingly intertwined. Development cooperation can no longer be treated as separate from the EU's geopolitical ambitions. Partners understand the EU's strategic interests – but what they critique is the inconsistency and perceived hypocrisy in how those interests are pursued (de Hoop Scheffer et al. 2024). Misalignment between values and behaviour comes with a political cost.

Addressing these contradictions – between values and interests (Jones et al. 2025), between its focus on 'mutually beneficial partnerships' and its patronising attitude, and between rhetoric and practice – requires deeper self-reflection and strategic coherence. Recent initiatives like the Competitiveness Compass, the Clean Industrial Deal, and the AI Continent Action Plan suggest the EU is adapting to new geopolitical realities. **What is still missing is a coherent vision of the kind of global actor the EU wants to be – and a consistent way of pursuing that vision** (Islam 2024). If its approach is seen as transactional, self-interested, or selectively principled, the EU risks undermining its soft power and long-term global influence.

To build credible, strategic partnerships, the EU will have to better connect its trade, investment, development, migration and climate agendas, among others. This also demands greater coordination between EU institutions, member states and financial actors (Adolphsen et al. 2025; Medinilla et al. 2025). A wider

reflection is needed to assess whether the institutional architecture for EU external action is 'fit for purpose' when it comes to developing and sustaining robust international partnerships. The roles of the Council of the EU, the European Commission (including the various directorates-general) and, last but not least, the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the EU delegations also needs to be reimagined and recalibrated.

The Von der Leyen 2.0 Commission has committed – at least on paper – to creating "long-term, mutually beneficial partnerships" as part of its economic foreign policy (European Commission 2024). To deliver, the EU must move beyond framing its engagement as competition and a supposed 'European superiority', and instead focus on consistent, respectful dialogue that genuinely integrates Global South perspectives.

The coming year offers real opportunities to reset. The upcoming summits with the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) and the AU (Van Damme 2025c), the fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD4) and the next MFF negotiations and ensuing strategic pre-programming and programming of its external action resources provide key moments for the EU to demonstrate it is serious about building genuine partnerships. But these will only matter if followed by action, not just announcements. Now is the time for the EU to decide whether it wants to be a credible strategic partner – or risk being seen as just another power saying one thing and doing another.

References

Adolphsen, O., Könneke, J. and Schenuit, F. 2025. The International Dimension of European Climate Policy: A Strategy for Integrating the Internal and External Dimensions. Berlin: SWP – Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. (Accessed: 14 May 2025).

Africa Confidential. 2025. Panicked by the far right', Brussels spends billions on migration control in West Africa. Vol 66 No 8. Published 18th April 2025.

Aly, H., Gulrajani, N. and Pudussery, J. 2024. Donors in a Post-Aid World Dialogue Series Dialogue #1: Crafting a new rationale for northern donorship. London: Overseas Development Institute. (Accessed: 14 May 2025).

Ammar, S. 2025. Green hydrogen, old colonialism. Africa Is a Country. 13 May 2025.

Balfour, R., Bomassi, L. and Martinelli, M. 2022. The Southern Mirror: Reflections on Europe From the Global South. Carnegie Europe.

Balfour, R., Baroncelli, E., Bomassi, L., Csernatoni, R., Goldthau, A., Grevi, G., Hoeffler, C., Jones, E., Prakash Nair, P., Ülgen, S. and Youngs, R. 2024. Geopolitics and Economic Statecraft in the European Union. Carnegie Europe.

Bilal, S. and Klasen, A. 2025. Scaling up Global Gateway: Boosting coordination in development and export finance. ECDPM Discussion Paper 385. Maastricht: ECDPM.

Bisong, A. 2023. The Failure of European Policy on Africa and Migratory Movements. IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2023.

Bonini, E. 2025. The EU arrived too late and poorly in Latin America; now pays the price of China's strong presence. EUnews. 27 March 2025.

Byiers, B. and Medinilla, A. 2024. The EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism and developing countries: Threats, opportunities and strategic responses. ECDPM Discussion Paper 380. Maastricht: ECDPM.

De Hoop Scheffer, A., L. Jagtiani, S., Kausch, K., Mohan, G., Quencez, M., Tausendfreund, R. and Weber, G. 2024. Pivotal Powers 2024: Innovative

Engagement Strategies for Global Governance, Security, and Artificial Intelligence. GMF Report.

Di Ciommo, M., Veron, P. and Ashraf, N. 2024. The EU and China in the Global South: Perspectives from African countries. ECDPM Discussion Paper 373. Maastricht: ECDPM.

European Commission. 2024. Ursula von der Leyen's Mission Letter to Jozef Síkela, Commissioner for International Partnerships. Brussels, 1 December 2024.

Friends of Europe. 2023. Press release | Ukraine vs. Palestine: EU's double standards under scrutiny at State of Europe. 9 November 2023.

Gadd, K., and Engström, V. 2024. EU delegations as intermediaries of perceptions of the EU: A view from the MENA region. Mediterranean Politics, 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2023.2291740.

Garton Ash, T., Krastev, I. and Leonard, M. 2023. Living in an à la carte world: What European policymakers should learn from global public opinion. ECFR Policy Brief.

Gwyn Jones, M. 2023. 'Double standards' undermine EU legitimacy in Global South: Human Rights Watch chief. Euronews. 26 October 2023.

Hasselbach, C. 2024. Are Western double standards undermining the global order? DW. 21 September 2024.

Hauck, V., Sabourin, A. and Jones, A. 2024. The mid-term evaluation of NDICI-Global Europe: Is the instrument fit for purpose? ECDPM Commentary. 21 May 2024.

Hauck, V. and Desmidt, S. 2024. The EU's attention to fragility: Priority or afterthought? ECDPM Commentary. 30 October 2024.

Ingram, G. 2025. Global South perspectives on US development assistance changes and future directions. Brookings Commentary. 25 February 2025.

Islam, S. 2024a. Europe and the Global South. How to gain influence and credibility in a complex world. Madrid: Real Instituto Elcano.

Islam, S. 2024b. Europe's Gaza betrayal has broken the trust of millions of people in the global south. The Guardian. 10 April 2024.

Jones, A., Veron, P., Sabourin, A. and Karaki, K. 2025. Towards NDICI-Global Europe 2.0: Reforms for a new era of EU partnerships. ECDPM Discussion paper 387. Maastricht: ECDPM.

Karaki, K., Teevan, C., Medinilla, A., D'Alessandro, C., Slater, J., Tadesse Shiferaw, L., Vijverman, P., Desmidt, S. and Ramadan, W. 2024. The cost of Europe's divisions in the Middle East. ECDPM Briefing Note 187. Maastricht: ECDPM.

Khan, H. 2024. From Tunis to Cairo: Europe Extends Its Border Across North Africa. Sada Commentary. 9 April 2024.

Kumar, C. 2024. The EU Africa migration agenda – driving a new migration partnership forward. ODI Expert comment. 24 May 2024.

Langan, M. and Price, S. 2025. African diplomats in Brussels oppose the colonial logic of Europe's premature free trade deals. LSE blog. 10 February 2025.

Marangio, R. and Mattheis, F. 2024. "Je t'aime, moi non plus": cognitive biases in the AU-EU relationship. EUISS Brief.

Medinilla, A., Teevan, C., and Karaki, K. 2025. The art of the deal: Securing Europe's economic future through strategic alliances. ECDPM Commentary. 26 March 2025.

Möller, A. (ed.). 2025. Europe in the world in 2025: Navigating a perilous world with realism and ambition. Outlook paper. Brussels: European Policy Centre. (Accessed: 14 May 2025).

Naidu, S. and De Carvalho, G. 2025. BRICS Expansion: Redefining Global Structural Power in a Changing World Order. Policy Insights 160. Johannesburg: South African Institute of International Affairs.

Nogueira Pinto, T. 2024. Between a rock and a hard place: the EU's transactional approach to migration. Mixed Migration Centre. 16 January 2024.

Ofori, M. 2025. I Will Not "Nurse a Feeling of a White Woman": Populism and Transgressive Politics in Postcolonial Africa. Howard Journal of Communications, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/10646175.2025.2463447.

Pinyol Puig, G. 2025. US vs. EU development approach: One is dead, what's next for the other? ECDPM Commentary. 12 March 2025.

Sabourin, A. and Hunter, J. 2024. How are the EU and African countries working together on mutual interests? ECDPM.

Sabourin, A., van der Meer, K. and Jones, A. 2023. The new EU development policy shifts in practice: Views from Kenya and Cameroon. ECDPM Discussion Paper 358. Maastricht: ECDPM.

Sherriff, A. and Veron, P. 2024. What is driving change in Europe's international cooperation agenda? Part 1. ECDPM Briefing Note 175. Maastricht: ECDPM.

Sherriff, A. 2025. Turmoil in USAID and the challenge for the EU's response. ECDPM commentary. 12 February 2025.

Shikwati, J., Adero, N. and Juma, J. 2022. The Clash of Systems? African Perceptions of the European Union and China Engagement. Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom.

Tadesse Shiferaw, L. 2023. The EU-Africa partnership: One step forward, two steps backwards. ECDPM Commentary. 13 March 2023.

Teevan, C. 2024. Von der Leyen 2.0 and a shifting approach to EU international partnerships. ECDPM Commentary. 19 July 2024.

Teevan, C., Bilal, S., Domingo, E. and Medinilla, A. 2022. The Global Gateway: A recipe for EU geopolitical relevance? ECDPM Discussion Paper 323. Maastricht: ECDPM.

Teevan, C. and Bilal, S. 2023. The Global Gateway at two: Implementing EU strategic ambitions. ECDPM Briefing Note 173. Maastricht: ECDPM.

Van Damme, P. 2025a. The EU's competing strategic interests in Africa: Priorities for the next MFF. ECDPM commentary. 19 March 2025.

Van Damme, P. 2025b. The NDICI-Global Europe mid-term review exercise in sub-Saharan Africa: Lessons for the future. ECDPM Briefing Note 192. Maastricht: ECDPM.

Van Damme, P. 2025c. How (not) to prepare for the next AU-EU summit. ECDPM commentary. 7 May 2025.

Van der Meer, K., Domingo, E. and Veron, P. 2023. The EU, geopolitics and human development: Insights from Zambia, Kenya and Guinea. ECDPM Discussion Paper 340. Maastricht: ECDPM.

Veron, P. and Sherriff, A. 2024. What is driving change in Europe's international cooperation agenda? Part 2. ECDPM Briefing Note 176. Maastricht: ECDPM.

Von der Leyen, U. 2024. Political Guidelines for the next European Commission 2024-2029. Brussels: European Commission.

Weinhardt, C. and De Ville, F. 2025. How the EU's geoeconomic shift is adversely affecting developing countries. ECDPM Commentary. 14 January 2025.

Youngs, R., Farinha, R., Tadesse Shiferaw, L., Wilén, N., Portela, C., Haastrup, T., Olakounlé Yabi, G., Chacha, M. and Cheeseman, N. 2023. Crafting an EU Strategy for Coups. European Democracy Hub.

Youngs, R. 2024. "Listening to Others" as European Foreign Policy? Strategic Europe Commentary. 3 December 2024.

Yuhan, M. 2024. EU needs to acknowledge the end of Global South compliance with Europe-centered world order. Global Times. 27 February 2024.

About ECDPM
ECDPM is an independent 'think and do tank' working on international cooperation and development policy.

Since 1986 our staff members provide research and analysis, advice and practical support to policymakers and practitioners across Europe and Africa – to make policies work for sustainable and inclusive global development.

Our main areas of work include:

- EU foreign and development policy
- Migration and mobility
- Digital economy and governance
- AU-EU relations
- Peace, security and resilience
- Democratic governance
- Economic recovery and transformation
- Climate change and green transition
- African economic integration
- Sustainable food systems

For more information please visit www.ecdpm.org

This publication benefited from the structural support by ECDPM's institutional partners: The Netherlands, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg, and Sweden.

ISSN1571-7577

ecdpm

HEAD OFFICE
SIÈGE
Onze Lieve Vrouweplein 21
6211 HE Maastricht
The Netherlands *Pays Bas*
Tel +31 (0)433 502 900

BRUSSELS OFFICE
BUREAU DE BRUXELLES
Avenue des Arts 44, 1040
Brussels *Bruxelles*
Belgium *Belgique*
Tel +32 (0)2 882 50 08

info@ecdpm.org
www.ecdpm.org
KvK 41077447