KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

Power, Pragmatism, and Partnerships: The EU's Global Strategy One Year into the von der Leyen II Commission

Olaf Wientzek, Louis Bout, Nicole Linsenbold, Sven Nicolay

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At the beginning of her new mandate, Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, formulated the ambition to leverage "the EU's power and partnerships". In an increasingly dangerous world, the EU needed to be "more assertive in pursuing its strategic interests".[1] Since the EU elections and the subsequent start of a new European Commission in December 2024, the EU has tried to shift its policies towards a more strategic and pragmatic approach with global partners. This has impacted not only on its foreign and security policy but also on its trade and external climate policies. However, this turn has been made considerably more difficult by changes in the geopolitical environment which are occurring at a much faster pace than the EU would like. Several actors, including some with which the EU maintains formal partnerships, are actively seeking to undermine the EU's role as a geopolitical actor. Certainties – not least the transatlantic partnership – on which the EU has always been able to rely in the past have been shaken to an extent that few foresaw in 2024. As a result, the EU has appeared to be either a secondary player or even a mere bystander in many conflicts, including some in its wider neighborhood. This has earned the EU its share of public ridicule. The actual picture is however more complex: the EU has at times succeeded in taking some steps to become a more assertive player at the global stage.

This analysis aims to highlight some of the key evolutions of the EU's policy towards the EU's non-European partners since the start of the second von der Leyen Commission in December 2024. When analyzing the EU's partnership policy, the focus lies often on the transatlantic relationship, Russia's aggression against Ukraine and EU enlargement. This text will instead outline trends of the EU's relations with other partners, competitors and rivals around the globe.

1 https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648_en?filename=Political%20Guidelines%202024-2029_EN.pdf

Background

While this analysis will not focus on the EU's support for Ukraine, developments in the defense agenda or the transatlantic partnership, changes in these areas cannot be fully ignored as they shape global perceptions of the EU's capacity to act. Key decision makers in the EU are aware that the strength of the EU is also judged by its ability to deal with Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine: In this context, the European Commission has sought to place deterrence, preparedness, strategic coherence and security-oriented partnerships at the centre of EU foreign policy. This includes the operationalisation of the EU's long-term commitment to Ukraine, which now stands at €177.5 billion across instruments, including €63.2 billion in defense support, and the development of a more structured framework that links military assistance, sanctions enforcement, resilience measures and reconstruction planning.[2] The debate about whether the EU and its member states are doing everything necessary continues, not least because national contributions vary significantly. Nevertheless, by committing €90 billion in support for Ukraine's budgetary and military needs over the next two years, the European Council took a crucial decision in December 2025 to ensure Ukraine's capacity to act. EU institutions and a majority of EU Member States are acutely aware that the fate of the EU and its global credibility are inextricably linked to Ukraine's fate.

At the same time, the EU under Defense and Space Commissioner Andrius Kubilius has worked to reposition the defense and space portfolio as a core contributor to the EU's external credibility. The Defense Readiness Omnibus seeks to speed up joint procurement, streamline cross-border transfers, and simplify permitting, enabling the EU to translate its foreign policy into real capabilities, cut reliance on non-European suppliers, and boost NATO interoperability. However, structural constraints persist. The Omnibus offers opportunities for cooperation but does not compel it, and Member State sensitivities regarding national sovereignty in defense procurement still limit the scale of cross border programmes. The Security Action for Europe (SAFE) instrument, designed to mobilize up to €150 billion in loans for urgent capability investments, reflects an ambition to raise European readiness. Under Kubilius, the European Commission has also advanced an ambitious agenda on space, reflecting the growing strategic relevance of satellite resilience, secure communications and situational awareness. The proposed EU Space Act, launched in June 2025, aims to reduce regulatory fragmentation and strengthen the European space economy. These steps matter for foreign policy because space assets underpin navigation, threat monitoring and crisis response. Yet progress is slowed by dependence on external launch providers, uneven national investment and the absence of a consolidated military space effort.

2 State of play: EU support to Ukraine

Enhancing the EU's partnerships with the world

Overall, the EU's approach has combined clearer political messaging toward China, increased engagement in the Indo-Pacific and the attempt to deepen partnerships with countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, partners in the Middle East, Latin America, Central Asia and the Gulf. While in many cases the EU could already build on existing frameworks and instruments, it has equally tried to reinvigorate partnerships that have been difficult or neglected in the past years. The EU's High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Kaja Kallas has emphasized that the EU's policy was about "building partnerships and not dependencies".

New impetus for established partnerships...

One of the key priorities was to give new impulse to the partnership with the EU's neighbors in the **Mediterranean**. The creation of a separate directorate general (DG MENA) and the appointment of Dubravka Šuica as Commissioner for the Mediterranean formalized a strategic rebalancing toward the Southern Neighbourhood.

Many discussions of the European Council, Foreign Affairs Ministers meetings and debates of the European Parliament (EP) have focused on the armed conflict in **Gaza** which followed the terrorist attack of Hamas in October 2023. Overall, the EU's role on Israel and Gaza in 2025 has been marked more by division and limited influence than by strategic agency. The Union has largely been a bystander to diplomatic efforts led by the United States and regional actors. Divergent Member State views on Israel's military conduct, ceasefire demands, humanitarian access and the conditionality of EU engagement have constrained the EU's ability to act. These fractures have been mirrored, and in some cases amplified, within the EP, where debates have been highly polarised and have exposed deep normative and political cleavages. As a result, EU action has remained focused on humanitarian assistance and rhetorical positioning.

The EU's struggle to make a difference in the Middle East conflict has somewhat overshadowed the EU's specific attempts to re-engage with its Southern Neighbourhood. The **Pact for the Mediterranean**, launched in Barcelona on 28 November 2025, intends to reframe the EU's Southern Neighbourhood policy around the notion of a "Common Mediterranean Space" and a more interest driven, operational form of partnership. The Pact's ambition is to anchor EU engagement in initiatives that generate tangible benefits while reducing vulnerabilities. It concentrates around three pillars. Firstly, the people pillar aims to translate education and skills into employability and more orderly mobility. Secondly, the economic pillar prioritizes the enabling conditions for investment and job creation. The flagship here is StartUp4Med, envisaged as a regional mechanism to improve access to finance, identify regulatory bottlenecks. With the Trans-Mediterranean Renewable Energy and Clean Tech initiative the EU aims

to invest in solar, wind, and hydrogen, turning the Mediterranean into a powerhouse of clean energy. Thirdly, the security pillar is designed to make cooperation more structured and measurable. It proposes a regional peace and security forum to coordinated on maritime security, hybrid threats, foreign information manipulation, sanctions circumvention, and critical infrastructure protection. Migration management is embedded in a whole-of-route logic that combines action against smuggling networks with returns and readmission cooperation and with scaled up Talent Partnerships to create more orderly legal pathways. The Pact foresees a dedicated Action Plan in the first quarter of 2026. At the same time the EU attempted to deepen the relationship with particularly like-minded partners as demonstrated with the first ever EU-Jordan summit in January 2026 whereby both parties sent a signal that they intend to deepen their partnership – particularly through increased economic cooperation.

2025 was an important year for **EU-Africa-relations**: The 7th joint summit of the African and European Union on November 24/25 in the Angolan capital Luanda3 marked the 25th anniversary of the strategic partnership between the EU and the AU. Both sides were eager to strengthen their existing relations in a manner that does justice to the roles and expectations of both sides. Overall, the summit succeeded in sending out initial positive signals for such a recalibration – not least due to the attendance of several EU heads of state and government including the German Chancellor Friedrich Merz. The summit declaration commits to stronger economic and raw materials cooperation, including support for the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfcFTA) as well as energy transition with the promise to supply at least 100 million people with clean electricity by 2030. Existing differences – including on the issue of migration or dealing with democratic backsliding – have however not disappeared overnight. The joint declaration acknowledges the "unspeakable suffering" inflicted on "millions of men, women, and children through the slave trade, colonialism, and apartheid" – a first for a summit declaration. At the same time, Brussels is aware of the enormous diversity of its African partners and tries to address it with a differentiated toolkit, attempting a new form of trade and investment partnership with South Africa through the Clean Trade and Investment Partnership (CTIP). Still, the EU remained a bystander regarding the conflicts of the continent: the EU (or at least France's diplomatic presence) remains unwelcome in the Sahel. The EU equally had no significant influence in its attempt to prevent the brutal escalation of the conflict in Sudan. While the EP and several member states criticized the destructive role of Rwanda in the renewed fighting in the Eastern DR Congo, member states did not manage to find a consensus on tough sanctions against Kigali.

The EU has pursued a more pragmatic and interest-driven engagement with **Asian** partner countries. This is shaped primarily by the goal of reducing critical dependencies and anchoring partners more closely to the EU's economic and security framework and the aim of partnering with the mostly multilateral oriented partners. The EU has (re-)started

3 KAS country report December 2025: 7. AU-EU-Gipfel – Neustart für eine Partnerschaft auf Augenhöhe.

trade negotiations with several Southeast Asian countries, signing a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with Indonesia on September 23, 2025, after nine years of negotiations. The EU is also pushing for a rapid conclusion of talks with Malaysia and Thailand in 2026 or 2027, as well as with the Philippines. At the same time, the EU's internal regulatory agenda - particularly the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) and the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) (see more below) - has received criticism i.a. from India, Indonesia and Malaysia, underlining the tension between the EU's sustainability ambitions and its external partnerships. Despite these tensions, the EU's first-time presence at the 47th ASEAN Summit in October 2025, through European Council President António Costa, signaled growing mutual recognition of the EU as a strategic partner in the region. Thematically, alongside its traditional focus on economic, digital and green policies, the EU appears to intend to broaden its engagement in the realm of security policy. In practice, EU action in the security domain is most likely to concentrate on countering foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) and on safeguarding critical maritime infrastructure. This evolving focus was also reflected in the EU-Indo-Pacific Ministerial Summit held in November 2025. The meeting placed a strong emphasis on maritime security and the protection of critical maritime infrastructure, with the announcement of a new EU initiative in this area. The conclusion of Security and Defense Partnerships with Japan and the Republic of Korea in early November 2025 further underscored the EU's renewed commitment to its Indo-Pacific strategy.

Since the beginning of the second von der Leyen Commission, the upgrade of the **EU-India** relation was a visible priority: Bringing the entire College of Commissioners to India on February 27-28, 2025, Ursula von der Leyen sent a clear signal to deepen strategic, security, and trade ties with the country. The visit aimed to establish a new strategic agenda, boost the EU-India Trade and Technology Council (TTC), and advance negotiations for a free trade agreement. The EU agreed to conclude both a trade deal as well as a defense and security partnership during an EU-India summit on 26/27 January 2026. Few observers had anticipated the possibility of such a quick conclusion but the strong mutual political will and the tariff pressure by the US on both sides facilitated an agreement that was limited in scope - especially regarding sensitive agricultural products - but rich in symbolic and political importance.

Given that many Latin American countries are considered as like-minded supporters of a rules-based international system, **EU-Latin American** relations are considered as increasingly important. The EU-CELAC summit in November 2025 in Colombia could however hardly be considered a success: The "Declaration of Santa Marta" itself became a diplomatic must-do, the number of participating EU heads of states was disappointing – also due to attempts of the Colombian president to use the summit as a campaigning event. However, the successful adoption of the Mercosur agreement was always considered as a far more important indicator for the partnership. Following the initiative of Commission president von der Leyen to conclude the negotiations in 2024 despite strong resistance i.a.

from France, EU member states approved the agreement in January 2026 with qualified majority – not without previous postponements, farmers protests and political frictions. While this allowed von der Leyen to sign the agreement in Paraguay in January 2026, the EP's subsequent decision to refer the agreement to the European Court of Justice has immediately called this success into question. While at the time of writing, provisional application of the agreement seems likely, the chaos surrounding the adoption of the agreement risks fueling doubts about the predictability and reliability of the EU among other trade partners. In the shadow of the "Mercosur saga", following nine years of negotiations, the EU and Mexico concluded a modernised version of their partnership on January 17, 2025. On September 3, 2025, the European Commission formally proposed the agreement for adoption by the Council, with both sides hoping for a signature before summer 2026.

Australia continues to be considered as a crucial like-minded partner by the EU; the trade discussions that failed under the last Commission have therefore been restarted. In 2025, the EU member states have equally tasked the European Commission to negotiate a security and defense partnership with Australia.

...and re-engagement with new (or neglected) partners

At the same time, the EU has tried to upgrade the engagement with other partners with whom engagement had been less intense (for a variety of reasons). The mandate given by the European Council in 2025 to negotiate bilateral Strategic Partnership Agreement with all six **Gulf Cooperation Council** states, reflects a clear upgrade of relations and the EU's recognition of the crucial international role many of the Gulf states play: Formal negotiations were launched with Qatar in Doha on 6 December 2025 and with the United Arab Emirates in Abu Dhabi on 11 December 2025. The EU's goal is to advance comprehensive frameworks covering energy, AI, economic diversification and crisis management. Formal negotiations with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman had not yet commenced by the end of 2025, despite intensified preparatory engagement, particularly with Riyadh.

Throughout 2025, the EU has taken steps to re-engage with **Syria** under the transitional authorities led by President Ahmed al-Sharaa. The EU has combined re-engagement with a deliberate wait-and-see approach, reflecting uncertainty over the durability of the new leadership and the direction of Syria's internal power balance. Engagement has focused on expanding humanitarian assistance, scaling up early recovery support (i.e. at the 9th international conference on Syria in March 2025), and reopening technical and political channels aimed at stabilization. In May 2025, the Council of the EU lifted all economic restrictive measures against Syria, with the exception of those based on security grounds. At the political level, 2025 has marked a tentative shift toward conditional and sequenced engagement, including the proposal for a "strategic partnership" of the EU with Syria by Commissioner Šuica and a visit of

Commission President von der Leyen in January 2026.

The EU has equally intensified engagement with **Central Asia**, particularly through the first ever EU-Central Asia summit in Samarkand on 3 and 4 April 2025.4 The meeting sent a strong political signal to enhance relations between both sides focusing on issues of economic cooperation, connectivity and raw materials. Council president Costa stressed that the summit would mark "the beginning of a new dimension" of relations and would "not be a one-off". The question of sanction circumvention for Russia with the help of Central Asian countries remains however a difficult issue. Despite the increasing economic ties between the EU and its Central Asian partners, Brussels will continue to compete with a strong Russian influence, as well as an increasingly growing role of China.

An increasingly icy relationship with China – and struggling to contain the axis of upheaval

In 2025, the EU and China celebrated 50 years of diplomatic relations but overall, it was a sobering anniversary[5]: While a gradual escalation over trade and critical raw materials had been anticipated, recent developments - particularly China's export controls - caught many by surprise. The EU's Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) and the recalibration of the EU's Global Gateway initiative can be seen as direct responses to these growing vulnerabilities. The 25th EU-China Summit illustrated both the depth of tensions and the limits of disengagement: no major breakthroughs were achieved at the summit and divisions remained - particularly on trade, market access, human rights, and China's support for Russia's war against Ukraine. The results were limited: a joint climate statement and a commitment to seek solutions to the impact of Chinese export controls on rare earths. The adoption of the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment which has been stalled since China sanctioned Members of the European Parliament in 2021, is not on the agenda for the time being, despite the lifting of those sanctions, with the feeling being that the deal would no longer be favourable to the EU. Meanwhile plans are being made to propose phasing out Chinese-made equipment from critical infrastructure. At the same time, the US's increasingly confrontative stance towards the EU has slowly led to the resurgence of voices arguing in favour of a stronger partnership with Beijing. China is aware of this and has started a veritable charm offensive in the EP after the lifting of sanctions against several of its members. The EU's attempts to forge a common policy towards China is complicated by very different positions by member states.

While the EU continued to cut its ties and reduce its dependencies from the Russian aggressor and took measures to make sanction circumvention more costly for third states, it has struggled to comprehensively address other actors of the axis of upheaval. The EU's handling of the Iran-Israel conflict in June laid bare the limits of its crisis diplomacy. While reaffirming

4 KAS report: The Samarkand summit: A renewed dynamic in Central Asia-EU-relations, April 2025.
5 KAS country report: 25th EU-China Summit in Beijing, July 2025.

Israel's right to exist and to its security, the EU called for de-escalation and a return to the nuclear agreement yet remained largely confined to the sidelines. The January 2026 designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization, following the mass killing of protestors in Iran, however sealed the fate of the long-time EU policy towards the regime. Venezuela followed a similar script: despite rejecting Maduro's sham re-election, the EU failed to articulate a decisive common response to his removal by the United States in January 2026.

Development cooperation in full transformation towards Global Gateway

One of the most remarkable tendencies has been the continued transformation of EU development cooperation towards interest-based partnerships - with the EU's infrastructure initiative Global Gateway as primary instrument. During his first year in office, the responsible Commissioner for International Partnership Jozef Síkela made several prolific visits to various regions in order to sign agreements on Global Gateway projects, i.a. all Central Asian countries, the Pacific (Vanuatu, Fiji and Papua-New Guinea), Namibia (focusing on green hydrogen & raw materials), Zambia (on one of the flagship projects, the Lobito corridor) and Costa Rica. After a bumpy start in the first three years, the Global Gateway initiative has somewhat picked up steam: At the Global Gateway Forum in October 2025, Commission President von der Leyen declared that the EU had fulfilled the target of mobilizing €300 billion and was now aiming for €400 billion by 2027. Some observers have informally questioned the numbers, claiming some of the projects were merely rebranded. The initiative is facing several criticisms: lack of coordination with partner countries, bad communication leading to low visibility, lack of complementarity with strengths of European businesses, lack of general strategy and underwhelming coordination with member states. In the past months, the Commission has tried to address some of these criticisms, by for example creating an Investment Hub to facilitate the involvement of businesses. Despite the initiative's shortcomings, the high-level participation from numerous third countries at the Global Gateway Forum in October 2025 demonstrated that many partner countries (particularly from the African continent) remain interested.[6]

This turn towards pragmatism is likely to continue in the future: the proposal for a regulation of the European Commission for the new Global Europe Instrument which will fund the external priorities of the EU in the next Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034, published in July 2025 equally represents the paradigm shift and places greater emphasis on the EU's own interests. For the first time, the proposal includes the possibility to suspend aid in the case of a lack of cooperation of a partner country against illegal migration. At the same time, the new instrument emphasizes the importance of mutually beneficial agreements with partner countries.[7]

6 More on the Global Gateway Forum under the following link: New impetus for pragmatic partnerships, KAS MNED country report, October 2025.

7 More on the first regulation of the Global Europe Instrument: https://www.kas.de/en/country-reports/detail/-/content/more-flexibility-less-control

More discrete democracy support but crucial in the humanitarian sphere

A defining external factor has been the withdrawal of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which proved more radical than many observers had anticipated. This had a destabilizing effect on existing democracy promotion ecosystems, including structural financing on which many EU-funded projects indirectly relied on. For the EU, this has created both a window of opportunity for increasing engagement and a more challenging operational environment. However, the EU is aware that even with greater financial resources (which it lacks), it would be unable to fill the gaps left by the US in that field. At the same time, the EU itself has pursued a more cautious approach towards democracy support outside Europe: it has been more hesitant to openly criticize problematic developments in partner countries, including electoral malpractices. The European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Commission only reacted in the most blatant cases of abuse and violations: officials in Brussels and in the field sometimes argue that political diplomacy behind closed doors was the most efficient way to approach problematic developments. There are several reasons for this change of approach: some diplomats argue that regular criticism in the past rarely led to improvements and has at the same time led to pushback. The EU also did not want to alienate partners it considers crucial at a geopolitical level. The EP has at times remained the only outspoken voice of the EU against democratic backsliding and against repression worldwide.

At the same time, the EU continues to be one of the last providers of democracy support particularly in its immediate neighbourhood. However, several indications show that the EU may weigh its commitment to democracy more cautiously against other objectives in the future. The conclusions of the numerous above-mentioned summits have mostly applied very cautious language on democracy and elections. Despite a lot of emphasis by the EP, experts and civil society, the EU's democracy shield, published by the European Commission in November 2025, focuses primarily on enhancing the internal democratic resilience of the EU. Finally, the first draft of the Global Europe Instrument emphasized the importance of democracy support but does not allocate a fixed sum to it (yet).

In 2025, the EU remained a key humanitarian actor worldwide, spending roughly €2 billion with half of it spent in the MENA region and Sub-Saharan Africa. During the European Humanitarian Forum in May 2025, the European Commission announced an initial humanitarian pledge of over €2.3 billion for 2025 to address urgent global crises focusing particularly on Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the humanitarian situation across the Middle East, and the crisis in Sudan. While global needs for 2025 have reached €47.4 billion with more than 300 million people in need[8], can be expected to reliably maintain its engagement but unable to increase it significantly: For 2026, the EU initially allocated €1.9 billion of humanitarian aid.

8 https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2025-enarfres

A renewed trade ambition by the European Commission

From the very beginning of its new mandate, the European Commission pursued an ambitious trade agenda in the new legislature. The most prominent examples are the conclusion of talks with Mercosur and India. As announced in 2024, the European Commission has been pushing for limited, sometimes even sectoral "trade-only" agreements in order to speed up discussions. The current trade negotiations with South-East Asia all follow this pattern. The rapid conclusions with Indonesia, India, the expected conclusion with Mexico and the pressure from the EU side to conclude agreements with i.a. Malaysia and Thailand also demonstrate a preference of speed over scope. While the agreement with Australia will likely be more ambitious, the Commission equally pushes for a quick finalization of the talks. The trade tensions with the US, that even led to discussions about the first-time use of the EU's strongest trade defense instrument - the anti-coercion instrument - however overshadow the EU's trade policy and are one reasons for its turn towards a more pragmatic approach in the past year. At the same time, it is noteworthy that the EU, historically a strong supporter of the WTO, had to agree to a trade deal with the United States that may be inconsistent with WTO rules, reflecting the broader challenges facing multilateralism.

Despite the overall proactive strategy on trade agreements, the EU has equally emphasized the importance of economic security and the resilience of its value chains. In its *"economic security doctrine"*, presented on Wednesday 3 December, the European Commission declares to make more proactive use of all the tools that can serve its economic interests, from trade defense and competition to European funding programmes. In the future, the European Commission will take greater account of economic security issues when deciding upon trade defense instruments or competition cases. Beyond the EU's borders, the Commission also wants to strengthen cooperation with close partners on economic security. In particular, it wants to work on developing standards in this area to build resilient value chains.

Mixed signals on EU climate ambition, push for raw material partnerships

Overall, the last year demonstrated clear shift in tone and practice across EU climate policy. The EU has tried maintaining a difficult equilibrium between its own image as a leader on climate action and its attempts to soften or delay some of the more controversial climate legislation. While the overarching ambition of climate leadership remains intact, the Commission has increasingly prioritized competitiveness, administrative simplification, deregulation and geopolitical realism. This recalibration reflects growing pressure from businesses, member states but also international partners, as well as a more challenging global environment. Rather than dismantling core elements of the European Green Deal, the Commission has attempted to adjust and simplify its implementation in order to safeguard economic viability and political support. Since

February 2025, the Commission has, under the slogan "Clean Industrial Deal" presented several initiatives to simplify existing legislation rather than to reopen substantive policy debates. These also concerned some of the climate legislation that has a strong impact on global partners, such as CBAM which was introduced to prevent carbon leakage. After a transitional phase lasting from 2023 until the end of 2025, the mechanism entered full implementation in the beginning of 2026. Following extensive stakeholder feedback during the transitional period, the Commission proposed amendments to CBAM which, after agreement with the Council and the Parliament in October 2025, were formally signed. The core goal was to exempt primarily smaller importers by increasing exemption thresholds. Despite these adjustments, this instrument is still seen critically by many EU partner countries, who perceive it as a protectionist trade instrument rather than a measure to promote decarbonization. Another key legislation that has been heavily criticized by partners but also European businesses, is the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR): It requires companies to ensure that agricultural commodities such as palm oil, beef or coffee placed on the EU market have not contributed to deforestation. In early December 2025, the Commission bowed to pressure from the EP and the EU member states: it postponed full implementation to December 2026 and launched a review process in early 2026. This already marks the second one-year delay of the legislation.

Securing access to critical raw materials has emerged as a key challenge for the EU's climate and industrial transition. The energy transition requires large quantities of raw materials, and developments in 2025 have demonstrated how vulnerable the EU remains to China's dominant position in many critical raw material supply chains. In response, the EU has relied on instruments such as CRMA and the RESourcEU initiative. The CRMA aims to diversify supply, boost European mining and processing, create added value in partner countries and reduce dependency on China. The Commission has signed 15 memoranda of understanding (MoUs) and strategic partnership agreements with resource-rich partner countries, however only one of those was signed in 2025 (with South Africa). Despite these efforts, partner countries and stakeholders have criticized the EU for overpromising and underdelivering, particularly with regard to increasing processing capacities in mining countries. Dependency on China remains high, and promised value creation in partner countries has materialized only slowly. In 2025, the CRMA has been reinforced by the RESourcEU Action Plan, officially adopted in December 2025. It attempts to work toward a coordinated EU approach to stockpiling critical raw materials, a target to reduce dependencies by 50% by 2029, and a commitment to mobilize €3 billion in 2026 to support short-term alternative supply projects. Some critical voices within the EU have stated that the Commission efforts are too late, and that the RESourceEU Action Plan falls at risk of overpromising and underdelivering. An important signal was however the announcement at the end of January 2026 to negotiate the formation of a new alliance on critical minerals with the United States and Japan.

At the global level, COP30 once again highlighted both the EU's leadership role and its internal constraints. Ahead of the conference, the EU's 27

member states struggled to find consensus on updated Nationally Determined Contributions. Shortly before the start of COP30, the EU approved a legally binding 2040 climate target, committing to an 85 % reduction in emissions compared to 1990 levels. With the United States absent from COP30 in 2025, additional responsibility fell on the EU and other more climate-ambitious countries. The conference's main outcome, the "Global Implementation Accelerator", was agreed only in the final hours after resistance from major oil and gas producing countries. Together with the UK, the EU through EU Climate, Net Zero and Growth Commissioner Wopke Hoekstra played a crucial role in the draft of a minimal compromise emerged after bilateral talks with Saudi Arabia's chief negotiator.

The European Parliament – a principled actor or a "loose cannon"?

The role of the EP in foreign policy is often underestimated, given that it is still largely perceived as a matter of member states. This superficial view overlooks not only the decisive role of the EP on trade agreements and its budgetary powers but also its ability to apply public pressure. The EP has confirmed its role as the most outspoken actor against democratic backsliding and human rights abuses be it in China, Venezuela, Tanzania, Uganda, Iran or the situation in the East of the DR Congo – sometimes to the displeasure of the Commission, the EEAS or individual member states. The EP's increased fragmentation after the 2024 elections and the strengthening of parties right of the political center have however left their mark. The EP is not a monolithic actor and has been particularly divided on the stance towards Israel and Gaza across partisan (and sometimes national) lines.[9] Resolutions related to Venezuela remained equally contentious with the Socialists, the Greens and the far left adopting a softer stance towards the Maduro regime. The high fragmentation of the EP has also led to the EP being less predictable not only on some controversial foreign policy issues but equally on trade: Despite several concessions – including safeguard clauses for agricultural goods – the EP decided in January 2026 to refer the Mercosur agreement to the European Court of Justice to the dismay of a majority member states and the European Commission.

9 The majority of the EPP has followed a relatively pro-Israeli line but the vote on the humanitarian situation in Gaza and the question of recognizing the State of Palestine has split the group

The hard transformation into a "gentle giant"

The past year, the EU has tried to adapt its policies to adjust to a hostile geopolitical environment. To quote Commissioner Kubilius:

> *"In a world of giants, we too must become giants. A gentle giant that promotes international law and cooperation. But a strong giant all the same.[10]"*

Turning the EU – previously often derided as a foreign-policy dwarf - into this giant takes time. Time which the EU does not have. The fruits of some of the important steps that have been taken in the past year in the area of security and defense will only be seen in mid- or even long-term. In the meantime, the EU remains a somewhat easy target for criticism for its half-heartedness, disunity and in some cases lacking relevance. This criticism is sometimes cheap. Some of it is however painfully on point. The past year has further exposed the limits of the EU's institutional architecture. Divergent national positions on China, the Middle East, Venezuela, and free trade continue to constrain the EU's ability to shape a unified external posture towards partners, competitors and rivals outside Europe. While expectations for a more assertive foreign policy have grown, delivery still depends on the political will of Member States, including in areas such as sanctions enforcement and crisis diplomacy. Some Member States remain cautious about escalation risks, while others resist expanding EU action in domains they consider national competencies. Unfortunately, this disunity is also fueled by hostile external actors that recognize that through targeted disinformation and misinformation they can stall decisions that would make the EU a stronger foreign policy actor. The resulting blockade has rightfully reignited the calls for moving towards majority voting or the creation of a European Security Council. Ad-hoc solutions found to pass over the resistance of one member state as was done in the context of the support for Ukraine are important but probably not sustainable for the future.

At times, neither member states nor EU institutions have shown the necessary mindsets for the EU to become a geopolitical giant: The haggling around the adoption of the Mercosur agreement has demonstrated the inability of various actors to put the common European instruments before national short-term wins. Moments like these unfortunately undercut the EU's credibility as a reliable partner.

The past year has, however, not been entirely bleak. While the actual scope of the trade deal with India is less spectacular than the branding "megadeal" implies, the geopolitical signal is a strong one. The finalization of the Mercosur agreement could equally have played that role if the referral to the Court of Justice does not prohibit provisional application. On both agreements, the European Commission and particularly its president demonstrated the necessary political leadership. The determination with which the EU is pushing forward trade negotiations with important third countries is equally encouraging, the same is true

10 Speech of Commissioner Kubilius at the EDA Annual Conference, 28 January 2026

for the attempts to look for plurilateral alliances in specific policy fields (raw materials, security). The summits of the past year and even the Global Gateway Forum demonstrated that the EU remains an attractive partner for many countries. Several initiatives under the Pact for the Mediterranean look promising. The EU's credibility hinges upon quick and thorough implementation of these promises and of the strengthening of defense capabilities and concrete measures to boost competitiveness.

Above all this loom not only the uncertainties of the transatlantic relationship but also the ambition of an authoritarian China that some EU governments continue to underestimate. The EU will have to manage an extremely difficult equilibrium to become a "gentle giant". On the one hand, increasing deterrence, improving its ability to forge common interests and showing the determination to use the economic, diplomatic and military means to pursue these interests. On the other hand, it should not completely abandon its own normative power: its commitment to a rule-based international order but also its continuous support for democracy and climate ambition worldwide will continue to be a crucial part of its appeal. An approach, in which partnerships are formed solely based on (short-term) benefits, may seem attractive at first glance. But in uncertain times, the value of a predictable, dependable, and normative bloc for countries seeking reliable partners to help shape a more stable world should not be underestimated.

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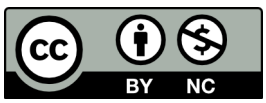
Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, European Office Brussels
Avenue de l' Yser, Ijserlaan 11
1040 Brussels - Belgium

Contact:
Dr. Olaf Wientzek
Programme Director
Multinational Development Policy Dialogue (MDPD)
Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.
Avenue de l'Yser 11/ IJzerlaan 11
1040 Brussels

Edited by:
Caro Verbruggen
Project Assistant
Multinational Development Policy Dialogue (MDPD)
Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.
Avenue de l'Yser 11/ Ijzerlaan 11
1040 Brussels



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