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Reimagining a Global Europe

LIZZA BOMASSI AND PIERRE VIMONT

INTRODUCTION

The idea of a global Europe is on the rise again in some European quarters—a feeling that the time is ripe for the European Union to have another try at acting as a global power. The most recent statements by the new European leaders who entered office in late 2019 underscore the need for Europe to assert itself as a genuine geopolitical player. The new president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has promised a new geopolitical role for her institution. The high representative for foreign and security policy, Josep Borrell, has prioritized the need for Europe to learn “to use the language of power.”¹ And French President Emmanuel Macron has been speaking for some time of the urgency for the EU to build up “European sovereignty.”²

It is tempting to see in these statements a new incarnation of an old and repetitive narrative. This story dates to the early days of the European venture, when the European Community—the EU’s forerunner—was struggling to broaden its economic realm. Years later,

Europe started to see itself as a credible global player: the union was buoyed by a consolidated single market, a new single currency, and a promising diplomacy; it was comforted by a fresh wave of enlargement; and it had bounced back from the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s and the deep internal divisions after the 2003 U.S.-led intervention in Iraq.

With a significant set of regulations and operational tools, the EU relished the prospect of becoming the normative power that would lead globalization to a better future. When the 2003 European Security Strategy stated without a wince that “Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure nor so free,” this assertion was unreservedly endorsed by all. It was testimony to the hubris of the moment.³

Yet reality soon brought these illusions crashing down. Wars in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine since 2014, financial upheaval from 2008 onward, and crises over Brexit and migration have upended the hope of Europe as a powerful global actor. It is not only that the multiplication of these setbacks caught the



EU off guard, with its integration process still very fragile. More importantly, in recent years the EU has also grappled with a genuine existential challenge. Confronted by a shifting United States, an increasingly domineering China, an ever more assertive Russia, and other active powers like Turkey, Brazil, and Iran, the EU has struggled to be seen as a relevant actor. The union has often appeared out of touch, crippled by its internal divisions and unable to react decisively.

The reasons for this poor performance are not new. Whatever progress the EU has laboriously achieved, the union today is still—on international matters—a player in search of an identity. Since the inception of European foreign policy, the union's members have never come to terms with what the EU should be aiming for and how it should meet this objective. Should the EU be an economic power dedicated to exerting its influence through market regulation and trade leverage? Or should it look to be a more creative political entity that can combine the soft power of a multilateral organization and the more hardheaded geopolitical instincts of a nation-state?

Adding to these hesitations, EU countries have shown a strong reservation to relinquishing their foreign policy competencies and allowing the Brussels-based institutions to speak and act on their behalf. In reality, EU members never genuinely bought into the set of institutions and rules that have multiplied over the last twenty years or so. Even the countries that envisaged Europe as a global player—or, as the French like to put it, a *Europe puissance* (power Europe)—were only ever prepared to support European external action if they inspired and controlled it. The simple notion of a single foreign policy painted with a firm federal brush was never going to fly.

THE MEANING OF GLOBAL EUROPE

Given this backdrop, and the challenges Europe faces on an increasingly transactional world stage, it is only natural to hear revamped calls for the EU to step up as a genuine global actor. Yet what does that truly mean? How realistic is it to expect the EU to break its habitual way of functioning to fill this void?

To answer these questions, it is useful to understand how the outside world perceives the EU's ambitions in this regard. Drawing on the expertise of Carnegie's other centers in Beijing, Beirut, Moscow, New Delhi, and Washington, DC, the authors evaluated six of the main priorities in the strategic agenda adopted in summer 2019 by the European Council, which brings together EU heads of state and government.⁴ These priorities are multilateralism, democracy, global trade, international security, climate change, and the digital sphere. The purpose was to examine how the EU's outside partners view the union in these six domains and, from that assessment, draw some salient conclusions for the new EU leaders.⁵

This review does not pretend to be scientific or match the accuracy of opinion polls. It represents, more humbly, a summary of the views of some Carnegie experts, with the intention of conveying the general feeling in the regions covered by the centers about the role and place the EU can legitimately aspire to.

Ambiguity Supreme

The resounding—and unsurprising—verdict of the EU's outside partners is that a strong Europe is missing from the international scene. The overall perception is that the EU's collective attention has been focused mostly on Europe's internal issues, leaving little space

to concentrate on much else. At the same time, there is a recognition that Europe is genuinely needed—and not just as a counterbalance to the United States. Yet this straightforward assessment is a far cry from any operative conclusion. Having stated a clear demand for more Europe, outside partners are not united on a common vision of what a more assertive EU should look like.

This call for more Europe is diverse. For Russia, if the EU aspires to the role of a credible and trustworthy global player, it must show it can move away from its long-held alignment with its U.S. ally and loosen the transatlantic partnership. For China, more Europe means forging a solid resistance to the current U.S. trade policy and greater cooperation on more sensitive areas like cybersecurity or climate change. India seeks a more forceful EU to relaunch an ambitious bilateral partnership, notably in the Indo-Pacific region. Middle Eastern countries rely on the European experience to help manage the transition to genuine free-market economies and more open and democratic societies. As for a greatly polarized United States, where conflicting quarters argue whether it is folding up much of its previous hegemony, the vision of the EU's future is mostly about holding the fort of Western values while the United States is busy trying to overcome its internal struggles.

This multiplicity of aspirations speaks for itself. These desires define an illusory EU that mirrors its outside partners' interests and represents their perceptions of the union. With the enduring absence of any genuine identity, Europe can easily be filled with the hopes and dreams of its many partners. But this is no substitute for a working agenda.

To make the challenge of identifying the EU's future direction even more intricate, Europeans have patiently shaped a rather different image of their own global role. From the start, Europe based its integration project on the ideological goal of eradicating any of the power impulses that had done so much harm to the continent in two world wars. It then gradually endorsed a set of values and guidelines fit more for a multilateral organization than for a full-fledged geopolitical player.

Taking on board the diverse wishes of the outside world requires more than just a rebranding exercise. It needs deep introspection. A mature Europe leaning toward a leadership role must accept that it will face enemies, not just friends, and that it may have to defend hard-core interests, not just generous principles.

An External View of a Global Europe's Six Priorities

What does a collective vision of a global Europe look like from the point of view of the demand side? And how can this vision be translated into an operational program? The picture that emerges confirms that the EU must develop a more flexible and nuanced view of responding to global challenges.

Multilateralism

Outside partners consider the EU the standard-bearer for multilateralism and, as such, a natural ally in this environment. But the verdict on multilateralism in its current form is resounding—even deafening—ambivalence. Many Europeans regard it as an end in itself, whereas for other powers it is at best a means to be employed for any number of competing agendas. Its credibility is repeatedly put to the test when nation-



states undermine the collective interest if doing so serves their purpose. In its worst form, multilateralism becomes a screen to hide behind, leading to indecision and inaction.

Multilateralism in its current incarnation is seen as antiquated and out of touch with today's globalized, transactional world. From the trade negotiations between the United States and China to the ongoing talks over the conflicts in Syria or Libya, multilateral organizations appear sidelined, outmaneuvered, and irrelevant—overtaken by events and left to deal with their aftermath. Yet as a tool, multilateralism also reveals its strengths, as illustrated by the EU itself in its long journey toward closer integration. Once clear boundaries and operational lines have been drawn, the EU has shown—with the competencies that the member states have given it—that a multilateral framework can be a force for good. This is nowhere more evident than in the EU's trade and economic sphere, where Europe's whole is stronger than the sum of its parts.

The lesson here is that Europe needs to update both its internal cohesion and its multilateral doctrine to be considered a credible architect for a revised and more consensual multilateral global order. That order should be based on a vision of common political values that the EU and its outside partners can share equally.

Democracy

It is on democracy, unsurprisingly, that the traditional debate on values is most palpable. Today, the state of democracy and human rights globally is poor. Many see a waning commitment to these values from the traditional bastions of the current democratic world order.

Yet this depiction hides a more nuanced picture. While executive-level support for democracy promotion in its more traditional homes has declined, its operational manifestation remains largely intact. Governments still

channel a considerable amount of financial assistance toward the technical level in this field. And various democracy initiatives, such as Sweden's Drive for Democracy, illustrate how individual EU member states have acted as champions of democracy promotion.⁶

This has sent a confusing message and led to different responses from different parts of the globe. Some have opted to approach this issue from a utilitarian perspective, either by providing purely technical assistance or by molding democratic models of engagement to the local context. Others perceive the Western democratic model as simply one of many different forms of governance. While Russia and China are not particularly keen for a European—or, for that matter, Western—leadership model, some countries in Asia, like India, and in South America and sub-Saharan Africa find some merit in the EU being involved in democracy promotion.⁷

But these countries see such investment as requiring a lighter touch and a deeper consideration of local specificities. It is by sharing Europe's own experience and adopting what the EU's outside partners often consider a less patronizing attitude that Europe is recognized as a useful partner. So, while there is space for the EU to lead in this field, it must choose to do so in a much more incisive yet nuanced way.

Global Trade

The EU's outside partners clearly recognize the union as an economic power. Yet a global player this does not make. Being a global leader means that economic strength must be complemented by political and military weight, which the EU is sorely lacking. This has left the EU vulnerable in a world that is increasingly witnessing the weaponization of trade and the resurgence of demagoguery. Countries apply traditional global norms and rules on trade inconsistently—a sort of “do as I say, not as I do” attitude. There is an overall perception that the United States is getting away with a lot of unfair practice because it can.

Europe's behavior is not excused here, either. There has been profound disappointment from some important allies, which have become concerned by China's growing presence on European soil and the way certain EU member states have responded with open arms to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, a major infrastructure program.⁸ This feeling has translated into disenchantment with the failure of the EU's multilateral framework to live up to its collective vision of sustainability, transparency, and responsible environmental stewardship. It should therefore come as no surprise that Russia and China have begun to toe the line of "no politics, just business" and promote more transaction-led trade.

The lesson here is that the EU cannot keep referring to the rule book. Individual member states have shown they can circumvent procedures when it suits their needs. So, the EU will have to get much more creative about playing in this space. Simply relying on one's strengths and technical competence can lead one to become complacent and overlook the manipulation of existing norms.

International Security

On security and defense, the key words are strategic relevance. Aside from a handful of EU member states, in terms of hard security, the union still lacks credibility in this field. Efforts in Brussels to shore up Europe's defense industries and upgrade its operational capabilities are observed not only with interest but also with hardly hidden skepticism. In the eyes of its partners, Europe's security guarantee remains firmly entrenched in NATO and—by extension—solidly attached to, and dependent on, the U.S. military. That weakens any significant effort toward security autonomy.

In this context, and with the United Kingdom due to leave the EU, NATO remains relevant for continental Europe's collective security.⁹ For Europe's outside partners, it is doubtful that—barring a devastating

shock to the system, such as the United States abandoning NATO—France's vision of a militarily capable and autonomous EU will become a reality for the foreseeable future. The reality is that aside from a few EU countries, on international security, Europeans must operate in a multilateral framework, where there is little room for maneuver. Outside partners lament a perceived European apathy toward the demise of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, from which the United States withdrew in August 2019, and a lackluster European response to the wars in Ukraine and Syria, which have only strengthened this narrative.

The EU must continue to pursue cooperation and be resourceful where it can bring real value.¹⁰ Investment in military capabilities and the development of a common strategic doctrine for a future EU security policy must continue—and must increase in preparation for the day when U.S. strategic patience runs out.

Climate Change

On climate change, the EU scores highly for being determined and showing real leadership in the face of adversity. The good news is that most nation-states recognize that this is not an area where one can go it alone. And while there remain skeptics on the causes of climate change, there is overall recognition that its physical manifestation is affecting all.

India is justifiably proud of its admirable track record on climate change; yet it must deal with the reality that over 40 percent of its labor force is employed in agriculture.¹¹ That is a serious vote bank for any politician. In this context, reconciling cleaner agriculture with industrialization is a political economy problem that trumps long-term growth.

China and Middle Eastern countries are eager to cooperate on the technical level, but the technology transfers and capacity building needed to make a more climate-friendly infrastructure operational could have



serious economic implications. The Russians recognize the importance of climate change because it is affecting some of their physical infrastructures. But they fear the narrative will be hijacked by overly politicized ideologies.

Clearly, the EU cannot tackle climate change on its own, nor can it build a fortress around its effects. The union is simply not influential or rich enough to make the world follow its lead. However, the EU does have enough legitimacy and leverage to give a sense of direction to the climate issue.¹² The overall message for the EU in this context is to persevere: find the areas where it can build support and stick it out. Leadership is sorely lacking in this space, and the EU's choice to fill that role is primordial.

Cybersecurity and Data Privacy

In the realm of cybersecurity and data privacy, again the EU scores highly. There is a strong consensus that the union has shown clear regulatory leadership in this space with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which gives EU citizens more control over their personal data, and the Network and Information Systems (NIS) Directive, which boosts the overall level of cybersecurity in the union. But this leadership status can be broadly broken down into three distinct elements where the EU has—more or less—true competence: social questions, economic issues, and hard security.

On the first two, the EU is considered a first mover, leading others to adapt. For example, there are countries that are deliberately emulating GDPR standards and companies that are adjusting their operational model to it because the EU is such a consequential economic player. In many ways, this was a masterstroke of the carrot-and-stick methodology: adjust and you can continue to play the game; don't and you'll face big fines. At the same time, the EU's pursuit of a more regulated approach contrasts with the U.S. emphasis on public-private partnerships. And while the jury is

still out on which approach will be more effective in the long term, outside partners are having to watch this evolution closely and adjust accordingly.

The litmus test for the EU will come during the implementation phase, which is just beginning. The new cadre of EU heads will be overseeing the major consequences of the GDPR and the NIS Directive over the next five years. This will involve a crossover of many different competencies in the EU institutions, and there are potential dogfights in the works with the member states, which retain ultimate jurisdiction.

On hard security, it is a slightly different picture. True competence in this area resides outside the EU, because only France, Germany, and the Netherlands have national security agencies with deep expertise on cybersecurity. Europe's leadership role and ability to have global impact therefore lie much more in cyber resilience, data protection, and the countering of influence operations—in other words, in defending an open society from misinformation campaigns.¹³

Key Threads

From these highly diverse initial assessments, three main conclusions prevail.

First, there is a general call from the EU's outside partners for a more assertive union. This demand may be an exaggeration, if not straight-up lip service, because a mere glance at the world stage suggests that many foreign leaders have limited sympathy for the EU's aspirations. Yet it is noteworthy that many partners recognize the need for a more robust European presence on the international scene.

But when detailing why that presence is missed and how it could be shaped in the future, outside partners paint a multifaceted picture: their conflicting interests with the EU, uncertainties about common objectives, and

doubts over mutual intentions compete and, eventually, cancel each other out. There is a definite demand for Europe, but that demand takes many forms.

Second, the outcome of these consultations sketches a vision of a future Europe that is obviously influenced by the differing interests and values of the EU and its outside partners. These partners shape for any future EU a trajectory that is essentially suited to their concerns and benefits. Yet for Europe, any effort to match these expectations is a distant goal. The more the EU tries to satisfy its partners' wishes, the more arduous its endeavors become to tailor a global role that is attuned to their vision. Europe is facing major challenges in which its own vision, as the champion of multilateralism and the promoter of high values, meets the reality of hard-core interests.

The EU's partners are not disembodied souls; they can be friends, but more often, they are rivals or challengers. They come with deeply entrenched interests that force Europe to shift from its current strategic blandness to a more lucid assessment of the ongoing power game. Out of the heavy compendium of the partners' demands comes the sober conclusion that the EU must make hard choices if it seeks to claim significant leadership. Aspiring to be a global actor requires playing the politics of power—a field not too familiar to the EU so far.

Finally, the narrative of Europe as a single actor with a united position and a clear set of objectives is not convincing to the outside world. More realistically, the EU's partners tend to portray the union as, first and foremost, a collection of individual states that are more or less worthy of consideration according to their size or political influence. This pragmatic approach results in the natural temptation for outside partners to reach out to individual members rather than to the more scrupulous collective body. The implication is that Europeans need to get their act together if they want outsiders to take them seriously.

THE CASE FOR A GLOBAL EUROPE

This multifaceted picture is not a categorical call for a global Europe. For most partners, the EU remains a mystery. The complexity of its organization and functioning makes understanding the union a difficult challenge. The natural response is to lobby individual EU members that are all too eager to oblige, rather than pass through the EU bubble.

If this loss of collective power is to be ended, more of the classic integration process may not be enough. In the past, EU members' lack of genuine commitment to a more consolidated and integrated European diplomacy has prevailed over most attempts at beefing up the instruments of EU foreign policy. The missing link so far has been a clear perception by European countries that the new would trump the old and that the nascent European foreign policy would deliver where traditional national diplomacies have shown their limits.

Past attempts to give the union more geopolitical clout have generally been inconclusive. In fairness, most of these efforts were undertaken by individual member states, rather than by the EU institutions. They therefore had limited impact on the collective mind-set of the whole union. No real mobilization in favor of a more integrated foreign policy has recently surged in the EU's collective thinking.

The low-profile, lowest-common-denominator approach that has prevailed to date lacks the necessary ambition to upgrade the system. This way of working is not going to cut it unless the union's members agree on a new mind-set and recognize the need for Europe to up its game and accept the implications of performing like a global actor. The EU must resolutely engage in assuming its responsibilities over the many global challenges—and lead when needed.



This implies a more agile, more fluid, and more mobile EU that can promote its interests and adapt its alliances to the diversity of its many partners. When defending its principles and values, this rebranded union must find a way of making its case without antagonizing those that do not share its positions. It must show lucidity, be more in tune with the new realities of the outside world, and listen to the diverse demands of different partners. In short, the EU must aim at being less messianic, more flexible, and fit to grasp the new challenges of the globalized world.

A REIMAGINED GLOBAL EUROPE

A reenergized mind-set must go hand in hand with improved efficiency. On this issue, there is already plenty of sound advice, but it is worth examining the indirect implications for the union's current functioning. Outside perceptions of the EU's organization offer some salient recommendations for how Europe could improve its act on foreign policy.

More Action, Sharper Focus

The one-size-fits-all nature of the EU's policies is one of the criticisms most often heard from outsiders. More action-oriented strategies and quicker delivery feature high on the list of demands. For Brussels insiders, these recommendations are familiar, and many attempts at implementing these proposals have been launched in the past—without much success. The new EU leadership needs to try again.

One way of overcoming past obstacles could stem from the fresh global ambition for Europe. If the EU's new leaders can succeed in injecting this upgraded narrative into the whole institutional network, it could stir innovative working methods and energy in an administrative system that is too often fraught

with the tyranny of precedent and overly binding legal rules. More political clout and a more strategic mind-set, attuned to global realities, can contribute to more efficient European diplomacy.

From that point of view, a new global strategy in the model of those published in 2003 and 2016 may not do the trick. Precious time and energy would probably be lost, to little profit. What is required for now is immediate action with a sharp, strategic focus. If Europe intends to live up to a new global profile, it will need to improve its strategic vision and inject it into action. Be it discussions of European security and its need to complement NATO, current crises like those in Syria or Libya, or the next multilateral negotiations on climate change, global leadership implies new responsibilities. In short, EU members and institutions need to come up with a common strategic vision they can promote on the international stage.

Improved Methods and Flexibility

Following on from more strategic action, a strong emphasis on better working methods seems the natural next step. The EU's outside partners depict it as a multilateral organization fraught with the usual flaws: excessive reporting lines, endless consultations among members, and cumbersome procedures. Accordingly, if the union seeks to perform as a real global player and wants to find ways of acting more decisively, it will have to show that it can adapt its processes to real life, particularly when it comes to managing high-intensity crises.

Processes for times of crisis exist: the rapid convening of ministerial meetings, options papers with clear-cut conclusions for ministers to discuss, the high representative's presence on the ground in a crisis-hit area, the mobilization of EU delegations in the region concerned, and contacts and dialogue with local

partners. Most of these devices are already in use, but the missing link is often fluidity—the ability to act fast, persevere beyond the initial effort, keep sight of the objective, and show the necessary agility to adapt to evolving circumstances.

Flexibility may be one of the answers in the EU's search for renewed efficiency. A flexible approach could encourage more informal meetings among leaders or ministers, with the purpose of fostering discussion of strategic objectives and corresponding actions. Flexibility can also be used to gather a group of like-minded European leaders who are ready to support an EU initiative and carry that cause outside Europe. To prevent any risk of fragmentation, these formats need to work in full transparency, with the consent of all and with direct engagement from the EU institutions.

More Ownership by the Member States

The underlying preference of the EU's outside partners for reaching out to individual members and those members' half-hearted commitment to European diplomacy mean that stronger engagement from European countries is indispensable to shore up EU foreign policy. No significant added value can be expected from the union if European countries do not share a sense of ownership over their common diplomatic offering.

Individual ministers must bear the responsibility of defending the EU position whenever necessary. EU member states that sit in the UN Security Council need to coordinate even more than in the past, if only to display a sense of growing unity. And union members should make it their mission to send their best-performing officials to the EU diplomatic service, with the objective of enhancing the expertise of the common institutions.

Progress on the path to a global Europe will only occur if and when the union's outside partners perceive it as having achieved what its members could not do individually. Europe as a global player will only come of age when all EU countries have the conviction that sharing their sovereignty brings genuine added value. Short of that awareness, any significant breakthrough will be a long time coming.

CONCLUSION

The EU Global Strategy, issued in 2016, was a first attempt at carrying the union into uncharted waters.¹⁴ It was a welcome effort to provide the EU with principled pragmatism and new, realistic orientations. But the results were sparse, and the delivery focused mostly on the defense sector.

Today, the EU needs to go further. It must promote multilateralism by taking on board, when compatible with its own interests, the claims of those unheard until now. It must defend democracy in a way that avoids intrusion and the accusation of patronization. It must seek security and stability through constant and innovative outreach to regional partners. And it must champion new approaches to confronting global technological challenges and the harm of climate change.

What is needed is a more down-to-earth mind-set from a union that is not in denial but determined to act. A bold, effective, international presence is what Europeans stand to gain by reimagining a global Europe.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lizza Bomassi is the deputy director of Carnegie Europe, where she is responsible for harmonizing Carnegie Europe's strategic and operational priorities and managing relations with Carnegie's global centers and programs as well as partner organizations in Europe.

Pierre Vimont is a senior fellow at Carnegie Europe. His research focuses on the European Neighborhood Policy, transatlantic relations, and French foreign policy.

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NOTES

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