

POLICY PAPER

Shaping Tomorrow: The EU's Role in Redefining Global Democratic Relations

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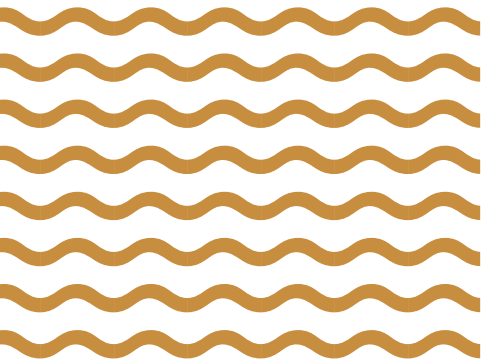
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INTRODUCTION



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The 28th Forum 2000 annual conference paid particular attention to the EU's relations with the Global South. With a new EU leadership team taking office, the Union is set to reevaluate the way it interacts with partners around the world. The emerging shifts in EU external relations will have a major impact on trends in democracy and autocratization. The EU has, in particular, promised to listen more to voices from the Global South and to do more to meet their aspirations. Against this backdrop, Forum 2000 asked experts from Asia, Africa, and Latin America to outline how they would like to see relations with the EU evolve in the future.

In the last several years, governments in many parts of the world have pushed back against EU policies and interests with increasing confidence and assertiveness. This has put the EU on the back foot in its efforts to support human rights and democracy. A commonly heard line is that the Union needs to pull back from pressing "its" values on other countries. Geopolitical competition, economic rivalry, and the need for cooperation on renewable energy and access to critical minerals have further added to this trend.

The three authors invited by Forum 2000 argue that the EU can and should rethink this drift away from democracy support. They agree that the EU needs to fashion relations with the Global South that are fairer and more respectful, and insist that support for democratic voices can be a way to achieve this objective. In terms of recommendations, they call on the EU to build democracy-related initiatives into security partnerships and trade policies, and to offer more support to the civic voices in the South currently suffering harsh repression. If the EU is genuine in its now much-repeated promise to listen more attentively to its global partners, it needs to acknowledge these calls. Forum 2000 offers this short collection of essays as a contribution to the EU's new external relations agenda — and to what will be a long path of rebuilding the Union's legitimacy as a democratic global actor.

THE EUROPEAN UNION'S APPROACH TO AFRICA



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The EU's multifaceted relationship with Africa ranges from economic engagement to development, security, and migration. However, this relationship is undermined by an imbalance of power that has ultimately inhibited African states from improving the living standards of their citizens.

To address this imbalance, these actors should aim to establish a mutually beneficial partnership. The EU must redesign its foreign policies and diversify its business portfolio with Africa. Unlike Chinese and Russian economic and political practices that lack transparency and disregard human rights, the EU's approach should engage with Africa as an equal partner in trade, the environment, and security. Transparency is crucial to preempt corruption practices and illicit financial flows (IFFs) in African and EU member states.

The EU is Africa's first partner in trade, foreign

Lack of Voice in the EU-Africa Relationship:

The lack of voice in the EU-Africa relationship further demonstrates this power imbalance. However, it can be addressed through honest and open dialogues with EU counterparts in Africa. These conversations should promote democracy, human rights, and transparency efforts that guarantee prosperity and freedom to African citizens throughout the continent.

According to the United Nations, Africa comprises 54 different nations. For this reason, the EU's policy approach must be tailored to each state based on these inclusive and transparent dialogues rather than assumptions. Because countries may have different challenges and priorities, it is important to understand the unique circumstances and needs of various African nations to cultivate constructive relationships. Otherwise, the EU's policy activities in a given country or region may exacerbate the problem rather than alleviate it.

EU member states must also insist upon anti-corruption and human rights standards that are comparable

investment, and development. In 2020, the EU was the largest trade partner for Africa with 28% of both exports and imports, ahead of China by 12% in imports and 20% in exports. Despite commerce with the EU, Africa is still considered an underdeveloped region of the Global South, thus begging the question: why?

Despite decades of EU trade relations, Africa remains one of the "poorest and least industrialized" continents in the world. In the absence of a strong anti-corruption policy, the EU's relationship with Africa benefits only certain groups, namely the ruling class of the African continent.¹ To address this disparity, the EU must change its business practices to ensure they are not just enriching a small percentage of powerful politicians while leaving hundreds of millions in poverty. This approach would also serve as a powerful contrast to China's investment in Africa which undermines local economies through debt traps.

to the standards implemented in their own nations. They absolutely cannot compromise on this point for the sake of advancing their own interests in Africa. An unequal or zero-sum approach would only continue to undermine economic development. Once again, this positive relationship would also help the EU distinguish itself from China and Russia's influence throughout the continent.

Finally, there is a growing middle class in Africa with purchasing power to buy goods and services produced in Africa and EU member states. According to the African Center for Technology Studies, "by that standard of measurement, Africa's middle class has grown by more than 3 percent per year since 1980. The AfDB [Africa Development Bank] study estimates that the new middle class may comprise as much as 35 percent of the total population of Sub-Saharan Africa, nearly 350 million people."² This growing middle class represents a significant opportunity for mutually beneficial economic partnerships between Africa and the EU.

¹ Dewei Che & Adams Bodomo, "China and the European Union in Africa: win-win-lose or win-win-win?," published in the Asia Europe Journal, 14 January 2024: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10308-023-00656-y#:~:text=In%202020,%20the%20EU%20was%20the%20largest%20trade>

² African Centre for Technology Studies, Africa New Middle Class, accessed on 10 September 2024: <https://www.acts-net.org/blogs/fore-sight-africa-blog/africa-new-middle-class#:~:text=By%20that%20standard%20of%20measurement,Africa%2C%20nearly%20350%20million%20people>

EU Interests, Democracy, and Competition with China

In addition to balancing its own economic and security interests, the EU must simultaneously strengthen relationships with African states that often have little regard for democracy and human rights (often as a result of Chinese and Russian influence). For example, several EU states have a trade partnership with Angola, a country in Sub-Saharan Africa. Unfortunately, successful international trade has not translated into prosperity for this African nation. The EU can alleviate this poverty by pursuing a policy of democracy, transparency, and anti-corruption. The Union should seek to reduce large-scale embezzlement of public funds and stop the illicit financial flow that moves from Africa to EU member states and other parts of the world.

Furthermore, in many African countries such as Angola, Mozambique, and Nigeria, the population is quite youthful. The previous generation was primarily concerned with gaining independence. Now, younger citizens want jobs, access to higher education, comprehensive health care, and a better quality of life. The EU's promotion

of democratic values resonates with these citizens who recognize that partnerships with China and Russia only benefit the political elite and hinder widespread prosperity and the promotion of human rights.

Additionally, targeted sanctions and aid should guarantee that the EU is promoting the same values in Africa that it promotes within its member states. The EU must extend this campaign to states like Angola that are suffering under kleptocratic and authoritarian regimes. Thus far, most of the Union's contributions go toward projects related to Malaria, HIV/AIDS, and clean water, and only a small portion is channeled to democratic aid. Regarding sanctions, the process is quite daunting on all ends. The Global Magnitsky Act is quite complex, making it difficult for civil society organizations to request sanctions and for the EU to implement them. Ultimately, the EU must ensure it is promoting democracy, transparency, and human rights in this region and reevaluate measures that are incongruent with these values.

STRENGTHENING RELATIONS BETWEEN THE EUROPEAN UNION AND LATIN AMERICA



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The diplomatic relationship between the European Union (EU) and Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) emerged from Spanish influence and a shared history. In recent decades, these relations have followed a pendulum motion, as they are swayed by the approaches of other global regions, such as China or the United States. Subsequently, these outside approaches remind the EU not to neglect the region.

According to the European Parliament, the Union “has an extensive network of agreements with twenty-seven of the thirty-three countries in the region. Economic ties are also strong: the Union is the primary investor in the region, its third-largest trading partner, and the largest contributor to development cooperation. Together, the Union and LAC countries represent over a third of the United Nations member states and form a driving force in favor of a strong multilateral system based on norms.”³

On June 7, 2023, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European Commission adopted a Joint Communication titled “A New Agenda for Relations between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean.” This resolution aims to strengthen relations and renew the EU-LAC partnership

Electoral Observation Missions (EOM)

The EU’s Electoral Observation Missions (EOMs) have been essential in ensuring transparency and credibility in electoral processes across Latin America. Since the 1990s, the EU has deployed numerous missions to assess and monitor elections in countries with transitioning democracies or instability. These EOMs provide objective reports on elections, make recommendations to improve the electoral processes, and urge local authorities to implement reforms. These missions

by focusing on six priority areas:

- A renewed political partnership;
- Strengthening the common trade agenda;
- The Global Gateway investment strategy to accelerate fair green and digital transitions and address inequalities;
- Joining forces for justice, citizen security, and the fight against transnational organized crime;
- Working together to promote peace and security, democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and humanitarian aid;
- Building a dynamic people-to-people partnership.

Following the EU-CELAC Summit on July 18, 2023, EU foreign-policy chief Josep Borrell remarked: “After eight long years since the last summit, we had to acknowledge that the centuries-old inertia of our old friendship had lost momentum (...) the sense of community, rooted in intense historical, personal, cultural, social, and economic ties, has been tested in the new geopolitical environment.”⁴ It is important to evaluate the EU’s presence in Latin America and determine whether its initiatives have truly promoted democracy, strengthened democratic institutions, and supported civil society.

also lend legitimacy to results when conducted in an appropriate framework, thus strengthening democracy in the region. However, the EU’s influence through EOMs is limited by highly polarized political contexts and authoritarianism. Indeed, the EU has been restricted in certain cases from observing all stages of the electoral process. Similarly, the Union has been criticized by local actors who distrust foreign interference.

³ European Parliament. Latin America and the Caribbean. 2024. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/176/latin-america-and-the-caribbean>

⁴ Borrell, J. (2023) *EU-CELAC: A Strategic Partnership for New Prosperity*. Foreign Policy. Available at: <https://www.politicaexterior.com/ue-celac-una-asociacion-estrategica/>

Funding for Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

The EU allocates substantial resources to support civil society organizations (CSOs) in Latin America. These organizations play a vital role in strengthening democracy because they promote citizen participation, defend human rights, and hold governments accountable. The EU funds projects that protect human rights, empower minority groups, and support anti-corruption efforts. These funds enable local CSOs to conduct monitoring, advocacy, and training activities; together, these programs foster long-term capacity building. Here, it should be noted that “Latin America is the region with the highest number of displaced, refugee, asylum-seeking, or stateless people per capita in the world: 20 million, accounting for one-fifth of the global total.”⁵ These populations, in particular, benefit from much EU support.

Capacity-Building Programs for Democratic Institutions

The EU implements capacity-building programs that reinforce the independence of democratic institutions and improve governance in Latin America. These programs focus on fundamental areas such as justice, transparency, and anti-corruption. The EU also supports projects that enhance the ability of judicial systems to operate independently and fairly. For example, in Colombia, the EU has funded projects that support legal reforms and promote transitional justice. The Union also encourages accountability and transparency in parliaments and other oversight bodies.

Once again, the effectiveness of these programs is affected by a lack of political will in certain countries whose governments refuse to implement institutional changes. Disparities in resources and capacities among nations may also hinder the uniform implementation of programs across LAC. Trends of integration, interregionalism, and a noticeable decline in liberal democracy present additional challenges.

The EU must identify a path toward regional democracy and stability through a strategic and coordinated approach

The EU's support has facilitated dialogues between these organizations and local governments and has allowed CSOs to better defend vulnerable populations. By empowering the civil society sector, the EU has helped cultivate a culture of human rights in LAC and placed pressure on governments to implement democratic reforms. Nevertheless, progress is inhibited by local regulations that hinder CSO work and limit EU funding; this obstacle is particularly common in countries with more authoritarian tendencies. Similarly, some governments perceive foreign support for CSOs as interference, thus prompting reprisals against these groups and restrictions on their operations.

that strengthens relations and leverages opportunities for international collaboration. Since 1999, regular summits have been held between the EU and LAC to strengthen bi-regional relations. The 2004 Guadalajara Declaration identified social cohesion as a key part of this partnership. Beginning in 2010, the EU has launched initiatives such as the Global Gateway Strategy, an action that seeks to increase the EU's geopolitical relevance and promote international cooperation in fields such as sustainability and digitalization. Due to political and economic differences among Latin American countries, regional integration is similarly crucial to effective collaboration with the EU.

In 2025, the fourth EU-CELAC Summit will be held in Colombia. According to Juan Jose Timmermans, it is “an opportunity to rethink strategies and seek to not only survive in this bipolar world but also prosper (...) it could represent a milestone in the bi-regional relationship, amplifying its influence on the global stage (2024).”⁶

⁵ Borrell, J. (2023) *EU-CELAC: A Strategic Partnership for New Prosperity*. Foreign Policy. Available at: <https://www.politicaexterior.com/ue-celac-una-asociacion-estrategica/>

⁶ Timmermans, J.J. (2024) *Latin America and the European Union, Partners in a Changing World: The IV CELAC-EU Summit as an Opportunity*. Fundación Carolina.

THE EU IN THE RISING INDO-PACIFIC REGION



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Even though the European Union (EU) has enjoyed significant strategic and economic status in addition to international goodwill, this institution has been rather late in recognizing the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific (particularly a rising Asia) region. In 2016, the EU's Global Strategy (EUGS) asserted the Union's focus on Asia, stating there was a "direct connection between European prosperity and Asian security."⁷ However, this strategy served to deepen the EU's trade and investment relationship with China, alone.⁸ To this day, the EU has had limited success in achieving comprehensive partnerships with Asian nations other than China.

Nevertheless, the EU is still viewed in a positive light by key countries such as Australia, Japan, South Korea, India and other member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Moreover, "The State of Southeast Asia Survey 2023"⁹ found that nearly 43% of the region's respondents preferred the EU as an alternative partner over Japan, the United Kingdom, and India. Nations in this region are frustrated by the rivalry between the United States and China, and they find the EU's positions on climate change, human rights, the rule of law, and territorial integrity to be far more credible. The survey also found that many Southeast Asians have a greater confidence in the EU as a champion of free trade, rules-based order, and international law.

India and South Asia

Indeed, India and the EU are natural allies and committed democracies. The EU was one of the first political blocs to recognize India's growing potential as a regional behemoth and a critical partner in Asia. For this reason, the EU signed a strategic partnership agreement with India in 2004 and has renewed this accord several times since. In 2020, the EU very publicly launched the "EU-India Strategic Partnership: A Roadmap to 2025." Later, the EU-India Leaders' Summit (Porto, Portugal) held in 2021 called for affirming shared interests.

Despite high expectations, the EU-India relationship has been largely confined to trade and culture;

In recent years, the EU has attempted to capitalize on its positive image in this region by taking visible steps to improve its cooperation with ASEAN countries. In 2020, the EU officially became a strategic partner of ASEAN, a development that allowed for the successful EU-ASEAN Summit to be held the following year. Although there has been significantly more cooperation regarding trade and security between the EU and ASEAN, any success has been dampened by China's presence in the region.

Now, the new EU leadership has the opportunity to elevate the EU's relationships with ASEAN countries during a time when many of them are entangled with authoritarian actors. A major policy step that the new EU leadership can take is completing the long-pending Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with decisive countries in the larger Indo-Pacific region. As Josep Borrell recently noted, free trade agreements will help de-risk the economy and diversify supply chains, particularly from China. Such trade agreements would significantly deepen cooperation with key democracies like India, Thailand, Indonesia, Japan, and South Korea. FTA could be a launching pad for partnerships in other vital areas such as maritime, critical technology, climate change, and democratic governance.

similarly, no concrete action has been taken by the EU regarding this partnership since 2020. The European Parliament recently acknowledged this snail-paced progress, asserting that "the EU-India relationship is yet to reach its full potential."¹⁰ Nevertheless, there has still been tangible progress in the areas of strategic and security cooperation. Over the last few years, India's engagements with the EU have intensified through frequent participation in multilateral forums like the G7 and G20 and robust bilateral deals with France, Germany, Italy, and others. To maximize these successes, India and the EU should seek to implement more structural shifts in their partnership. As European

⁷ "EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific," *European External Action Service*, April 19, 2021.

⁸ Gloria Sicillia and Emily Benson, *Navigating Tides: The European Union's Expanding Role in the Indo-Pacific*, CSIS Analysis. March 5, 2024.

⁹ <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/The-State-of-SEA-2023-Final-Digital-V4-09-Feb-2023.pdf>

¹⁰ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2024-0033_EN.html

Commission President Ursula von der Leyen rightly asserted, there “is significant opportunity for Europe and India to launch a more far-reaching partnership, rooted at the same intersection of trade, technology, and security.”¹¹ Extending the much delayed Free Trade Agreement would be a game changer in this relationship because it would foster a greater level of trust between

New Delhi and Brussels and accelerate cooperation on a range of issues, including maritime, security, climate change, critical minerals, and technology transfer. Most importantly, a free trade agreement between these two actors would counteract China’s growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region by addressing supply chain issues.

Scope for Reinvigorating Democracy Support

There are many possibilities for cooperation between the EU and India, and democracy building is now more important than ever in light of growing threats from authoritarian actors.¹² Accordingly, the EU-India Leaders’ Summit (Porto, Portugal) in 2021 encouraged states to strengthen shared interests and shared “principles and values of democracy, freedom, rule of law and respect for human rights.”¹³ In the past, India and much of South Asia have opposed the promotion of democracy by external powers as a result of the mistreatment this region endured under colonialism. Attitudes toward the EU have only begun to grow more positive over the last few years. Today, the EU’s efforts to strengthen democratic institutions and processes face less resistance than those of the United States. It now appears that EU nations maintain a greater degree of trust in this region, as evident from a recent survey.

Additionally, nations in the Indo-Pacific are currently facing authoritarian threats from all sides; such geopolitics force democratic nations to collaborate on a range of topics from human rights to international law. By assisting these states, the EU can foster its image of legitimacy and harness popular support. Therefore, the Union should take a more proactive role in addressing China’s flagrant violation of freedoms in Hong Kong and Xinjiang. For example, the EU can support popular revolts against the military in Myanmar. However, it is important to note that some of the major challenges to democracy promotion in the Indo-Pacific Region stem from the right-wing turn of politics and populism in the EU. To counteract this development, democracies in both the EU and Indo-Pacific must engage more deeply with questions relating to democratic values and international responsibility.

¹¹ <https://ecfr.eu/article/rebooting-eu-india-relations-how-to-unlock-post-election-potential/>

¹² Amrita Narlikar, The EU-India Partnership, ORF Brief, 2023. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/scripting-a-third-way-the-importance-of-eu-india-partnership>

¹³ Joint Statement - EU-India Leaders’ Meeting, 8 May 2021 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/05/08/joint-statement-eu-india-leaders-meeting-8-may-2021/>

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